



# Hold Me Down

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**Category:** Romance, M-m Romance

**Description:** IT SEEMED LIKE BOTH OF THEM FINALLY FOUND A RISK THEY WERE TOO AFRAID TO TAKE.

Dave had resigned himself to never getting everything he wanted from Travis, but what he got was still amazing, so he considered his life to be pretty great. At least, until a stupid stunt resulted in an injury that forced him to confront the limits of his independence.

Travis would die for Dave without a second thought, and yet it was living with him now that challenged Travis in some unexpected ways. As if his boss losing patience with him and forcing him into therapy wasn't enough to mess with his head.

In the end, a crisis that stopped them both in their tracks could be exactly what they needed to look at their lives—and their life together—in a new light... if they let it.

Featuring: best friends with benefits, roommates, work partners and life partners in everything but name, bodyguards afraid of their feelings, struggling with an injury, and realizing how much you could gain by letting go.

**Total Pages (Source):** 61

## CHAPTER ONE

Travis pushed Dave against the elevator wall.

"Once we get home, I'm gonna fuck you so hard, you'll walk bowlegged for a week."

It was after ten, they were done with the Lanvester assignment as of half an hour ago, and Travis wanted to get home, release some of the adrenaline pumping through his veins, and then sleep for at least nine solid hours.

He'd even settle for seven. It would still be a marked improvement over the last few weeks.

"Or you're gonna crush me by falling asleep on me," Dave told him, even as he tilted his head back in what he surely knew was a pretty damn enticing manner.

Travis wanted to lick him all over. The smell of him, stronger now as Travis nosed right under Dave's jaw, was enough for Travis's dick to take notice.

As usual.

And wasn't it nice to have a best friend who was also a great fuck?

Dave picked that moment to push his hips forward, brushing their hardening cocks together, and, damn, scratch that, having a friend like that was fucking amazing.

Unfortunately, the elevator started moving, and since neither of them had pressed a

button to go anywhere, it meant someone was about to get an eyeful if they didn't move.

Travis pulled away slowly and leaned against the opposite wall of the elevator right before the door opened on the parking level to show Kalei there, jacket thrown over his arm and a phone in his hand.

Dave straightened from his slump and raised his eyebrows at their former platoon commander and current boss.

"Weren't you heading home?"

Kalei shook his head. "Still have things to do, but if Vic didn't see me leave, he wouldn't have left, either, so I had to pretend." He pointed with his phone at Dave, then at Travis. "Donottell him that."

Travis exchanged looks with his partner, because what else were they going to do, here? Kalei might be fond of saying Travis and Dave didn't have an off switch these days when it came to taking risks, but it didn't mean they were stupid enough to try and talk to their boss about whatever was going on—orwasn't—between him and his executive assistant.

No way.

"We won't, but honestly," Dave turned to Kalei as they switched places, them walking out of the elevator and him going in, "you should go home."

"I'm capable of keeping my own hours, thank you." Kalei pushed the button to the third floor. "Go home and get some sleep before tomorrow. This new course is supposed to be a real challenge, and I know how you all can get."

Travis flashed him a big grin. "As if you'd like us any less competitive."

Kalei's response might have been something along the lines of "As if I'd like you at all," but the door closing muted half of it and Travis decided to ignore the rest.

Sure, Kalei had been on their asses recently for going way too hard a time or two, but it was nothing. Travis and Dave enjoyed pushing their limits and the limits were moving as they got better and better at things, that was all.

"I kind of want to tell on him to Vic," Travis muttered, suddenly in a rebellious mood, but he deflated quickly at Dave's glare. "I won't! I won't. I'm simply saying I'd like to. Vic's the only one who can talk some sense into him, now that Noa's in New York."

"From what we just saw, I'd say not even Vic is capable of that." Dave took out the keys and unlocked the car. "For fuck's sake, who goes back to the office at half past ten at night? We'd know if there was an emergency, so there isn't one."

As they settled in the car and Dave started driving them home, Travis remembered what they'd been doing before they were interrupted by the walking ball of angst that was Kalei.

He spread his legs and reached out to put a hand on Dave's thigh, a surge of satisfaction rushing through him as he felt Dave tense and relax under his touch.

Travis squeezed the solid muscle before resting his hand there. "How about we go back to what we were doing earlier?"

"You falling asleep on me standing up?"

"I was not. I think it was pretty obvious we were both into it and very awake."

"Hopefully not so obvious that Kalei will give us yet another talk about keeping hands to ourselves on company premises." Dave grimaced briefly as he paused at the red light. "I'd like to pretend he doesn't know we're fucking."

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"I say the next time he mentions it, we should declare it on the paperwork and be done with it."

Dave glanced at him, surprised. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, why not? It's only a few forms, and while Kalei's not going to let us do anything at work, he won't be able to give us so much shit about it, either. I haven't seen him say a word to James or Eddie."

"James and Eddie are dating."

"They're ridiculously gone for each other is what they are." Travis shook his head. "The forms don't care if people are in love or simply fucking for fun and release. I'd say we should go for it."

Dave tensed under his hand again.

"I'd still prefer him not to say anything," he muttered with his head turned the other way even though the intersection was empty besides them. "He doesn't say anything outside of work."

"He better not. Who we fuck is none of his business."

Feeling his mood going sour, Travis straightened in his seat and took his hand away from Dave, who sighed.

"Relax, I've just said he doesn't care otherwise."

"Yeah."

They drove the rest of the way in silence, and Travis might have closed his eyes at some point, but he didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until Dave jabbed him with his finger.

"Ouch!"

"Come on, old man, your bed's calling your name."

After he got out of the car, Travis stretched his arms above his head, the evening air waking him up a bit.

Maybe the night didn't have to be lost, after all.

"And what if I'd like you to be in my bed, calling my name? What about that?"

He resisted pulling Dave against him, but only because he saw one of their neighbors walking her dog nearby and he knew her to gossip left and right.

Besides, it was nice to watch Dave's ass as he led the way a few steps ahead.

"You didn't answer my question, you know," Travis pointed out after they entered the house and closed the door for the night.

Dave turned around and looked him up and down for a long, dragged out moment before pulling off his shirt and tossing it in the direction of the couch.

"Is that enough of an answer for you?"

Travis crossed the short distance quickly and pushed Dave towards the stairs.

Oh, yeah. The night was definitely salvageable.

Rushing upstairs, getting naked, and tumbling onto Travis's bed was nothing new, which was quite a relief. What they had was the simplest thing ever—they liked to fuck and it was so easy to fuck each other. The sex was reliably great, the chance of drama amounted to zero, and they were going to remain friends after, so—win, win, win.

Travis pulled back from kissing the freckles along Dave's shoulder to reach for the lube.

"Condom?"

Half the time, they went without, since neither of them was sleeping with anyone else, but other times, they used them to save themselves the clean-up afterwards.

Dave nodded and tilted his head back, spreading his legs, and Travis dropped the lube bottle on his own hip as he stared, because, damn. That sight never got old. Dave was built like a brick wall, shoulders and chest thick with muscle—and covered with freckles, like most of his upper body. He was a redhead and his skin was so pale that Travis's tanned hands seemed even darker against it.

"Anytime now."



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Travis huffed. "Hold your horses, I'm getting the supplies and you're just lying there, looking pretty."

"Aww, you think I'm pretty, don't you?" Dave offered him a toothy grin. "Pretty enough to get a blowjob as you stretch me, I hope."

"Mouthy enough to risk not getting one, as it were," Travis tossed back.

It was a false threat—he was already settling in between Dave's legs, because of course he was getting his mouth on that cock. Dave made the best noises when Travis was fingering him and swallowing him down at the same time.

They didn't linger on prep usually, too eager to move forward, but they both enjoyed it and never skipped it like someguys did. While Dave might not require a lot of stretching, he did need at least some, since Travis's cock wasn't small—and Travis needed it, too, when the situation was reversed.

Now, his first finger went in without issue, and Dave sighed as Travis licked around the head of his cock.

"Yeah, like that."

Travis closed his mouth around the head and hummed, which earned him a breathy moan and fingers grabbing his hair. Dave always tried not to pull at it too hard, but Travis enjoyed the challenge of making him do so.

After all, what was better than driving a strong and capable man into losing control?

Not much, in his book.

The second finger followed the first, then Travis slipped the third one, crooking them just right, and Dave moaned louder and tightened his grip—only to pull Travis's head back a moment later.

"I was promised a hard fuck, so get to it, or I'm gonna come way too soon."

Travis stole another lick around the head before sitting back on his shins.

"As if you didn't like getting railed after an orgasm."

Still, he grabbed the condom and put it on as Dave rolled on his stomach and lifted his ass in a move that made Travis's throat dry.

Fuck, what an invitation.

It had been way too long since he'd eaten that ass.

He filed it away for later, because he had a different objective now. Balancing on his knees, he positioned himself right behind Dave and spread his ass cheeks apart.

"You ready?" he asked as he watched his thumb slipping into the space in between.

His cock was so close, almost brushing against Dave's hole, and all Travis needed was—

"More than ready, come on."

—that.

The first push inside always knocked the air out of his lungs, but Travis didn't stop. He pressed forward, slowly and surely, until he was all the way in that tight, tight heat.

Only then did he take another breath.

"Fuck..." He tightened his grip on Dave's hips and stared at the expanse of his back, clusters of freckles at the top dispersing into nothing on the way down, his skin shining with sweat. "Tell me when I can move."

"Now." Dave's muffled voice came a few seconds later. "Come on, get it."

An experimental push, then another at a different angle, and Dave's moan told Travis he found what he was looking for.

There wasn't much talking after that. Travis's pace was fast and hard, the sounds slipping out of Dave's mouth only urging him on, faster, harder, right there, yes. Dave came with a shout muffled by the pillow and Travis followed right after, swearing under his breath. He fell on top of Dave and nuzzled against the back of his neck as the tremors rushed through him for what felt like forever.

The way Dave smelled after sex was intoxicating, and if Travis could get it up again so soon after coming, it would be because of that mix of sweat, and metal, and Dave's spicy cologne against warm skin.

For now, breathing him in like that was enough, and Travis let his body go boneless, echoes of pleasure still reverberating through him but not needing his attention.

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He didn't have to do anything right then and there.

What a treat.

### CHAPTER TWO

Dave might not be walking bowlegged the next morning, but he was definitely feeling that fuck as he left Travis's bed and headed back to his room. He'd been too tired to make that trip before falling asleep last night, but now he desperately needed a shower, and his bathroom was clearly superior.

"No, it isn't," Travis shouted after him as Dave reminded him of that on his way out.

It was an old argument, dating all the way back to when they'd bought a small, run-down house in desperate need of repairs and fixed it up from the ground up. Travis preferred the bigger room with a smaller bathroom, and Dave wanted the opposite—it made things easy when it came to sharing house space, but also marked the beginning of a years-long debate on who had it better.

Dave's en suite had a bathtub, which of course made him the winner, but Travis just couldn't admit it, even though he enjoyed a long soak every once in a while himself.

Granted, he wasn't as big of a fan of them as Dave was, but he'd definitely become more appreciative over the years—especially when they climbed into the tub together.

Dave sighed as the hot water hit him. They didn't have to be anywhere before noon,

which meant he didn't have to hurry. The company outing would take care of the training for the day, so he could take his time in the shower and during breakfast, and maybe he'd even fit in some reading time, as he wanted to get back to the thriller he'd started last week.

It wasn't often that they had a morning like this, so whenever it happened, Dave tried to appreciate it. Today, he'd have maybe appreciated it even more if sex was on the table, but his muscles were sore enough that he didn't want to risk making it worse—at least not until tonight, when they would hopefully have reasons to celebrate a job well done on the obstacle course.

As he rinsed off the suds from his body, Dave pictured what the two of them might get up to tonight, but then he quickly put a stop to that line of thinking when his cock started getting too interested in those plans.

Later, he told himself. He liked delaying his pleasure from time to time, and today was one of those days.

He went through his morning routine on autopilot, simply giving himself permission to move slowly through each step, from shaving to putting on lotion, and by the time he walked back into his bedroom, he was completely relaxed, humming under his breath a song he couldn't quite place.

Skipping the underwear for now, he put on his favorite pair of sweatpants and headed out to the kitchen. He caught the smell of coffee before he was even halfway down the stairs and he grinned to himself.

There was nothing like living with someone who was great in bed and made him coffee in the morning.

Dave was one lucky guy.

\* \* \*

"Give it your all, ladies and gentlemen, as whoever comes last on the course will be buying the first round tonight," Martinez announced with his arms wide and grin even wider. "I hope you're ready."

"Ready to kick your ass, that's for sure," Travis told him, with several others humming in agreement.

Excluding Kalei, there were sixteen of them today, as some of the teams were out on assignments. This was the first time in a long while they had a chance to try a new training set-up they hadn't come up with themselves, so everyone was pretty excited.

Which, of course, meant various bets and taunts were flying back and forth from the moment they'd gathered at the training facility less than twenty minutes ago.

"Okay, okay," Kalei's voice cut through and everyone fell quiet and turned to face him in the large foyer. "Remember you're at work and behave accordingly. Pushing to challenge yourself is one thing, pushing to score a point against your colleagues is another. I guess the best I can expect from you all is that you do both."

Dave pressed his lips together to stop himself from laughing at the several yeas and hoorahs that answered Kalei, who nodded.

"Figured. No stupid risks, though. I'll be watching, and the team here will record you, too, so we can later use it for training ideas. Try not to embarrass me."

Kalei led the team with a cool head and high expectations, maintaining a serious front at the office and only ever slightly lowering his guard outside of it, usually at the company cookouts he organized at his house. Since Dave and Travis had known him for more than a decade and a half at this point and remembered him being different

before he'd lost his husband, Kalei was a little looser with the two of them one-to-one, but not by much.

"Okay, go get ready and meet me by the green door over there." He pointed to the corridor on his right. "You have ten, so get to it."

Orders received, the team dispersed quickly into the changing rooms.

Most of them came already dressed for training, but they all tossed their gym bags into the lockers and drank their electrolytes or shakes as they went back to shooting shit the moment the door closed between them and Kalei.

It was Jeremy who finally closed his locker with a loud click and shook his head.

"You all talk so much you'd think you'd have something to show for it. How about we go out there and see."

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There was a second of silence before a round of ooohs went around the room, even as everyone followed Jeremy out.

Dave fell into step next to Travis.

"Ready to kick their asses?"

Travis grinned at him. "Born ready, baby."

And that was that.

As they walked up to the green door, Kalei was there waiting for them with Stuart, the guy who usually oversaw all their training at this facility. After a round of greetings, Stuart led them to a briefing room, where he invited them to take seats as he stood next to the big screen.

"Since this is a new obstacle course, I'll walk you through what you may expect, but be aware that we're keeping some of it a secret, so you'd have to think fast on your feet."

When a floor plan appeared on the screen, Dave leaned forward in his seat. He could see others doing the same in the corners of his eyes, but he focused on the intel at hand.

There were three separate areas on the plan, with two where the setup was mostly visible—although some of the details weren't clear—and one where all they could see was the first few feet of the space, with an unspecified object blocking sight of the



rest.

"We'll be timing you, of course, but we'll also count the obstacles you complete and the ones you don't. Sometimes you may want to give up on something for the overall speed, and sometimes you should not, but you may not be able to tell, especially on your first go-round. I suspect you'll be revisiting this course in the future, since even knowing the whole setup, there's still a lot to work through."

Stuart quickly ran them through things they could see—adding some info about the dimensions Dave stored in his head, the cogs in his brain already turning to figure out the best and quickest way to tackle them.

And then, it was time to start. Each pair would have ten minutes to make their way through, and the bonus points for the obstacles they completed.

Unfortunately, Dave and Travis were slotted to go last, which meant they wouldn't be able to see much of the proceedings until later. There was an electronic scoreboard next to the screen that would be updated on the go and show how many obstacles each pair completed, but other than that, they would only see dots moving on the floor plan.

Then again, as things started, the two of them had ample time to assess the difficulty of each stage by how quickly and efficiently their colleagues made their way through the course. All the waiting pairs were whispering to each other now, eyes fixed on the screen and the scoreboard, and Dave could feel the growing tension in his stomach.

He couldn't wait for it to be their turn.

Ian and Clay were the last ones before them, and Dave and Travis got up to watch them on the screen. As they moved quickly through the space, it was clear that they were serious contenders for the first place currently held by Jeremy and Martinez. Ian

and Clay clocked one more obstacle in the second area but spent a bit more time there, and then they failed to earn points for the last obstacle, just like Jeremy and Martinez, even though they lingered there longer.

Ultimately, they fell behind by a point.

"Damn." Travis shook his head. "That was close."

"I wonder what that last thing is." Dave waved at the scoreboard. "Only Melissa and Keri have a point for that one, so I'm thinking less brute force and more flexibility—or height."

"I'm leaning towards height, but I guess we'll see soon enough." Travis bumped their shoulders together. "Whatever it is, if we make good time, I say we go for it with all that we have."

Dave nodded. He had no doubts Travis would want to fight until the very end and he had no problems with it—hell, he enjoyed it. Even if Travis had been pushing harder lately than ever before, Dave didn't mind trying to keep pace with him. After all, that was what they'd always done—they moved through life together, one way or another.

Finally, it was their time to shine, and Dave could feel his blood pumping as the adrenaline rushed through him right before the door opened.

And then there was barely any thinking, only moving, covering the space with his partner by his side. The first room was all about beams and ropes—challenging but not too hard—and yet Dave's heartbeat quickened, keeping him alert and on task.

Easy could lead to distractions and they couldn't have that.

They had a challenge to win.

In the second room, they got through the vertical ladders and the stepping stones quickly, but Travis almost slipped on his way down from the bouldering wall.

"You good?" Dave shouted as they ran to the door.

"Never better, come on, come on."

The moment they entered the last space, they realized they were out in the open—there was a tunnel to crawl through, and then they were on the sand, with several still rings ahead of them and the wall at the end, looming large over the rest.

There was no time to stop and think, though. Dave could tell their time was good, and they clocked in every obstacle so far.

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They had a chance.

The rings were harder for him than he'd like, and he promised himself to figure out how to work around his bulk on those, but that was for later, because they were rapidly running out of time now.

"Come on, come on, come on," Travis was chanting at him—and at himself, probably, but it pushed Dave to run harder anyway until they both paused in front of the ten-foot wall with a clear surface and nothing to hold onto until the top, where there was a big ball they needed to drop to complete the task. "I'll give you a boost, then run on the other side to catch the ball."

No time to argue, Dave nodded and took a deep breath before positioning himself, then placing his foot in Travis's hold and—holy fuck.

Not expecting to be thrown this high, he scrambled to get a hold on the handles on top.

He had them, he just needed to scramble a bit higher, but his elbow was at a weird angle, and he was going to do some serious damage to it if he tried to push up on it. If he relaxed his grip, he could—

He was falling before he even finished the thought.

## CHAPTER THREE

For all that Travis was aware that one's perception of time could become distorted in

a stressful situation, he also knew it didn't happen all that often.

Almost never, really, and Travis had been in some pretty fucking stressful situations.

But now as he heard Dave fall, as he listened to something inside him break at the impact—which should be impossible, but human body was capable of some awful shit, all things considered—the time it took from Travis registering it to him getting to the other side of the wall and dropping onto his knees next to Dave seemed to have taken forever.

Then Dave grunted in pain, and it slashed right through the litany of swear words that was running in Travis's head, anchoring him back to here and now.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he asked, stupidly, hoping against hope that it wasn't... That it didn't...

"Something's definitely broken," Dave managed through clenched teeth, but he didn't even glance at Travis. He stared at his leg as he went paler and paler.

Before Travis could say anything, Kalei was there, crouching on Dave's other side. The rest of the team was only a few steps behind, but Travis didn't want to look at them.

Didn't want to see what he knew had to be on all their faces.

"You with us?" Kalei's no-nonsense voice was like a splash of cold water, and Travis's back straightened involuntarily.

So did Dave's. "Yeah, but I'm not getting up on my own. My leg's broken."

A chorus of muffled swears and hisses came from the group behind Kalei, but the

man only nodded before turning back towards them.

"Martinez, call 9-1-1. Tanner, come see if you can do something as we wait."

Travis curled his hands into fists against his thighs, helpless and stuck in place, unable to—

"Move." Melissa appeared next to him. "I need to get to his leg and you're in my way."

Scrambling onto his feet so fast he almost stumbled, Travis made room for her only to kneel again right by Dave's head.

He would trust anyone here with his life—and he did, on a daily basis—but this was Dave, and he was hurt, and it was Travis's fault, all of it.

Travis needed to get a grip, though. Right now.

Ashen-faced and obviously trying to control his breathing, Dave was still staring at his leg, and when Travis followed his line of sight, he probably turned the similar shade, because, yeah, that was definitely a break.

It wasn't an open fracture, at least, but the bump in Dave's calf was obvious enough.

"They're on their way." Martinez stepped closer, his face unusually serious. He was an upbeat guy outside of the ops, and they'd been shooting shit merely minutes ago.

Not anymore.

Melissa nodded. "I'm not going to touch it, then. Unless you need support to remain in that position?"

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"I don't think you can do anything." Dave's voice was tight but even. "It is what it is, now."

Fucked, Travis thought, closing his eyes briefly.

What it was was completely fucked.

\* \* \*

Travis barely waited for the permission from the paramedic to climb into the back of the ambulance and settle next to Dave, who had gone completely quiet aside from answering the paramedics' questions.

Kalei stepped closer and glanced between the two of them.

"I'll see you at the hospital," was all he said before the ambulance driver shut the door, but Travis could tell there was much more coming, and he wasn't looking forward to any of it.

"We're screwed," Dave muttered, as if reading his mind.

The paramedic shook his head.

"While the break doesn't look great, it might not be as bad as you're thinking."

Dave hummed and slumped onto the bed, gaze fixated on the ceiling, and Travis tried to find something to say, but he couldn't think of anything.

For perhaps the first time in his entire adult life, his mind was blank. There was nothing. Not a quip, not a tease, not even a poorly-worded expression of genuine concern, which wouldn't come close to what Travis was truly feeling.

Nothing.

"Tell me immediately if you start feeling dizzy or nauseous," the paramedic continued as he typed something on the tablet in his hands. "Otherwise, keep tight, and we'll get you to the hospital as soon as possible."

Swallowing back a nasty retort—the paramedic wasn't at fault here and Travis knew that, heknew—he leaned forward and clasped his hands together. He was itching to reach out and touch Dave, but he felt like he couldn't, which was yet another kick in the teeth.

They had no concept of personal space between them practically from the moment they'd met, and now, it suddenly felt like there was a wall there, keeping Travis separate.

Keeping Dave safe.

Which sounded stupid, perhaps, but Dave was hurt because of him, because of Travis's big mouth, and his bluster, and his never-ending need to—

"Jeez, shut up," Dave said with a glare that almost made Travis pull back from the force of it. "I can practically hear you whining."

This would be a perfect place to throw a joke about Dave being the one who liked whining and moaning under the right circumstances, but the words got stuck in Travis's throat.



Dave huffed. "I mean it."

Get it together, come on, just get it together.

"I'm more of a brooding type," Travis finally offered, and when a shadow of a smile passed Dave's face, it became easier to take the next breath.

"You wish."

"I am!"

"Jeremy's the brooding type, and you're nothing like him."

Travis shook his head. "I'm not the whining type, either."

"Sure, whatever you say."

"See, I'm glad you could see things my way."

"It's either that, or go on arguing, and the meds haven't kicked in yet."

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Travis shut his mouth, whatever he was about to say disappearing without a trace. For a few seconds, it had felt normal, the familiar back and forth soothing along the hard edges of Travis's nerves, but this wasn't normal, and he shouldn't be acting like it was.

He should be apologizing, possibly groveling, and Dave should shout and scream at him before the paramedic told them to shut up.

But before Travis could at least make another attempt at an apology, the ambulance came to a stop.

"Here we are." The paramedic put the tablet away. "As we take you out, there may be a bump or two on the way, but be careful to stay as still as possible."

"Don't feel like dancing, anyway," Dave told him, and even with only a shadow of his usual smile, he made the paramedic fold like a cheap suit.

"Good, because I'm not sure we're ready for you busting some moves on us here," he said with a wink before growing serious again when the back door opened.

Once again, everything started to move quickly. They rode Dave in, reporting the basics to the attendee who met them at the entrance, and moments later Dave was getting taken for an X-ray and who knew what else. Travis couldn't follow, could only stand there and watch him leave, and, fuck, it wasn't like Dave was dying or anything, but Travis's hands were shaking, and his heart was hammering, and—

He shoved his hands in his pockets and pulled his shoulders in.

Breathe in, he told himself. Breathe out.

"You can wait for your—" The nurse hesitated before redirecting quickly as she nodded at the door to his left. "You can wait in there. We'll notify you when he's back and ready for visitors."

Travis followed her suggestion after yet another look towards the door Dave disappeared behind.

The waiting room was small, but with only two other people inside—an older couple sitting together and holding hands—there was enough space for him to pace back and forth along the glass wall and watch the corridor closely at all times.

He would know when Dave was back.

Travis would see him, and reassure himself, and then they would go home.

They would go home.

He couldn't tell how many times he crossed that small space in the time it took for Dave to come back, but once he saw him at the end of the corridor, Travis rushed out of the waiting room in less than a second.

"Sir, you can't—"

"I don't mind him being with me in the exam room," Dave cut in. "He's my partner, I want him there."

Saying it like that, he obviously let the nurse think they were a different kind of partners than they actually were, but Travis couldn't care less, really, as long as it would get him into that room with Dave.

And it did.

After he helped the nurse transfer Dave onto the bed, she left saying the doctor would be right there with them, which Travis knew could mean anywhere from a minute to an hour-long wait, so he lowered himself in the chair by the bed.

"Did they say anything?" he heard himself ask, the words slipping out before he could stop them. Before he could come up with something better.

Dave shook his head. "Not really. I mean, we know the obvious—"

The attending came in with a tablet in her hand, interrupting whatever he was going to say.

"Good afternoon, I'm Doctor Ortega, and I'll be taking care of you today." She offered Dave a nod. "I heard you just now, and yes, we all agree there's a break, but I can assure you it's as clean as it could've been, considering. No splinting fragments we can see, and no damage to the knee. The ankle may be sprained, though. Can I have a look?"

Over the next few minutes, Doctor Ortega checked Dave's ankle and foot, finding the earlier sprained and the latter intact, and as Travis watched her closely, he tried not to overthink it and focus on the positives. The break was clean. The foot was fine. The ankle wasn't, but the leg was going to be immobilized anyway, so it would be secured.

Then Dave asked for a prognosis, and he was so clearly bracing for the bad news that Travis held his breath as well.

"It can take two or three months for the bone to heal, depending on various factors. More, if you're not careful about staying off of it, especially at the beginning."

Travis closed his eyes briefly. Maybe it wasn't as bad as it could have been, given that it was a broken bone—and Travis could hear that snap echoing in his brain once again—but it wasn't great, either.

"And after those two or three months, will I be able to go back to work? I'm in private security, so I'm expected to be in top form."

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Doctor Ortega tucked her tablet against her stomach.

"You're unlikely to be in your top form after needing to stay off your foot and to rest for long periods of time. However, since I'm assuming you're used to regular physical exercise, I see no reason you wouldn't be able to bounce back quickly."

"How quickly?" Dave pressed, but she shook her head.

"I'd only be guessing right now, and you don't need that. However, it should become clearer in a few weeks, when a doctor will be able to determine your progress. They might be able to tell you more then."

"Is there anything I can do to help the process along? Any exercises?"

"Lots and lots of rest. You should stay off your leg, that's the most important part at this stage. Pay attention to any tightening muscles, as you may need to massage your thigh and knee area regularly to keep them from locking up."

Travis immediately thought of Melody, their trainer at KRK who was also a physical therapist. He hoped she would agree to teach them everything they needed to know to do this right.

Whatever that would mean.

Fuck, Travis didn't even know how they were going to organize everything, but he was definitely going to request some time off, at least.

"I'll leave you for now, and the nurse will be back shortly to fit you in for the cast."

With that, the doctor was gone, and Travis looked at Dave, desperately trying to find something comforting to say.

Before he could do that, though, there was a knock on the door.

As Travis turned and saw Kalei, instead of the relief he would usually feel at the sight of the man, now it only added another twist to his already knotted-up stomach.

Because under all that calm demeanor, Kalei was livid.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The weight of the day was crashing on Dave pretty badly and the last thing he needed was to get schooled by his boss, but it didn't seem like he'd have any choice in the matter.

He knew he deserved it, anyway.

"How bad is it?" Kalei stepped into the room, stopping at the foot of the bed and clasping his hands behind his back.

Damn, Dave knew that pose.

They were in it, now.

"It's a clean break," he said after clearing his throat. "Two or three months to heal, then however long it takes to get back into shape. The doctor didn't want to give any estimates, but I'll try my hardest to make it as quick as possible, you have my word on that."

"Trying your hardest to make things as quick as possible is what landed you in this situation, so spare me, please." Kalei glanced between him and Travis. "I'd ask what the hell the two of you were thinking, but I can guess."

Ouch. "This was an—"

"I know I fucked up, and I'm sorry," Travis cut in, and Dave turned his head to see his partner staring at the floor. "We shouldn't have scaled that wall, or I should've stayed on his side to see it through. Even better, I should've been the one to do it."

"And maybe you'd be the one hurt right now," Dave protested. "It was an accident."

"It was an accident that would have been avoided if you stopped and thought things through." Kalei took a deep breath and let it out slowly, which was a weird sight for someone who usually looked unruffled no matter what. "And I'm not blaming you for falling, by the way," he told Dave. "I know accidents happen, and any day we train may be the day we get injured. But this was preventable, and that's partially why I'm so pissed."

Dave pressed his lips together, afraid to ask what the other reason was.

He didn't have to wait long to find out, though.

"Mostly, however, I'm pissed because I should have seen this coming. Hell, I did see it. I should have benched you a while ago, and I didn't, I let it play out, and here we are."

Before Dave could protest, Travis spoke up first.



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"What are you talking about? Why bench us?"

Kalei narrowed his eyes. "Why do you think?"

There was a weight in Dave's stomach, which had been growing pretty much since he'd been loaded into the ambulance, and now it was almost overwhelming. He'd love to fall asleep and turn back time, to do this entire day all over again, but he couldn't. He had to deal with the consequences of his actions—and wasn't that a blast?

"The two of you have no off switch anymore," Kalei said, and Dave closed his eyes, because he didn't want to hear any of this. "You've been pushing it in training, and skirting the line on the job, and we've talked about this, Travis. We've talked about this more than once."

That made Dave open his eyes. He only remembered one conversation like that, about a month ago. He turned to his partner for confirmation, but Travis was staring at Kalei.

"I know," was all he said, voice quiet and defeated, and Dave's eyebrows shot up. He'd obviously missed something, and since when did they keep things like that from each other?

"Well, the fact that you know isn't helping any of us right now, is it?" Kalei glanced between the two of them again. "Like I said, I'm partially to blame for not doing more than just talking, but that changes now. While you," he nodded at Dave, "are on medical leave, you'll focus on resting and healing, and not following this one," he tilted his head towards Travis, "into trouble. I'll save a lecture on that for some other time

when you're not on painkillers."

Then their boss turned to Travis.

"And you, I'm taking off the field, effective immediately."

It felt like a punch to the solar plexus, sucking all the air from the room, and Dave wasn't even the one it was happening to.

Travis looked crushed, his skin paler than Dave's was on a regular day.

"What—"

"With your partner not available for the foreseeable future, you'd be normally rostered into supporting other teams, but, frankly, Travis, I can't trust you in the field right now, which means you're desk-bound until I say otherwise. And," Kalei added when Travis opened his mouth again, "I'm not going to say otherwise until you get some therapy."

Travis straightened at that, curling his hands at his sides.

"For fuck's sake, man—"

"Watch it," Kalei warned, and Dave made a noise at the back of his throat that sounded pretty pitiful to his own ears, but at least it stopped the other two in their tracks for a second.

However, Kalei wasn't done.

"I'm doing this for your own good, but also, frankly, for my own, because I can't have you out there in good conscience. You're a powder keg waiting to go off, at this point,

and I'm not saying this to be an ass, but to make you see you've been going down a dangerous path."

"Travis isn't to blame for what happened today!" Dave protested, unable to hold back any longer, but when Kalei's gaze settled on him, he slumped against the pillow.

"And would you have tried that stunt four months ago?"

Dave opened his mouth, ready to say yes—they were all competitive, Kalei knew that, he'd said so himself—but then he remembered the other training outings. Sure, they were always pushing it, but there had been times when they'd backed down, laughing how they were going to work on it for the next time.

"I was there, too, and I took the risk," he said instead, because this, at least, he was sure of.

"And trust me, if you weren't already laid out, you'd be desk-bound, too," Kalei told him. "I'm not currently requiring therapy from you, since I do believe you've been swept into the rush alongside Travis, here, but don't get me wrong—if I continue to see the problem after you're back on your feet, I'll do the same for you, too."

Dave burrowed even deeper into the bed. While he was closer to forty than thirty and should be immune to a disappointed authority figure routine, he wasn't. He respected Kalei a great deal, and it stung to hear all of that.

"You need to deal with whatever's going on with you," Kalei addressed Travis again. "The further details, we'll hash out in private. However, I expect both of you to spend the next weeks and months really working on yourselves, because I want you two back out there. I know what you're capable of, and I've been proud to see you grow over the years. This is a bump in the road—a serious one, but it's not the end, do you hear me?" He looked between the two of them, and Dave relaxed a bit. "Good, now

I'll let you in the capable hands of the poor nurse who has been hovering right outside the door, likely waiting for me to finish my tirade. I'll go update the rest of the team."

With that, he left, and Dave could hear him apologizing to the nurse, who apparently had indeed been standing there for who knew how long.

Damn.

What a mess.

\* \* \*

Getting home with a cast on was a pain—not so much literally, since the painkillers were doing their thing, but still. He'd gotten seriously hurt only once before, back in high school, when a bad fall during a basketball championship game had taken away his dreams of going pro. Through all the years in the service and then in private security, Dave had been lucky enough to avoid any injury that lasted more than a week.

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Until today, when he broke his leg during a fucking training exercise.

It was so stupid that he would laugh if he could, but he just... He didn't have it in him. The reality of spending months off work was bad enough, but the weight of Kalei's anger and disappointment on top of that made Dave wish to burrow under the covers and not come out until he was ready to get back out there.

"Here we go," Travis murmured as he lowered Dave down to sit on the couch now.

"Thanks."

Staring at his leg with a frown and a sick feeling in his stomach, Dave missed Travis picking up a pillow from the armchair, but he definitely noticed him lifting Dave's leg to put said pillow under the cast on the coffee table.

"You need anything?"

Travis's question seemed to be directed at Dave's foot, and Dave was tired of his best friend avoiding his gaze, but he was also tired in general and had no energy left in him to have that conversation right now.

Kalei's tough love had been more than enough for one day.

"A do-over would be nice," Dave finally said, and he winced at his grumbling tone.

He was not going to be a model patient, that was for sure.

"You and me both." Travis patted him on the thigh. "But I meant more like water or soda before I order us some dinner. What would you prefer?"

Biting back the first, and the second, response that came to mind, which were nothing more than bitching and moaning about his fate, Dave forced himself to come up with a real answer. He might not be hungry, but he should eat—and so should Travis.

"I'm voting Indian. And I'd love a glass of water, thanks."

It felt weird. He felt weird. They should be shooting the shit, or maybe laughing it up, instead they were talking like two very polite robots.

Once Travis headed to the kitchen, Dave closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the couch.

Maybe if he didn't look, he could pretend his life wasn't suddenly a complete shambles.

Damn it, he should probably tell people, shouldn't he? If he didn't text his brother, at least, there would be hell to pay.

Dave tilted to the left to pull his phone out of his pocket, only to hiss in pain, because the move put pressure on his leg.

"You good?"

He almost dropped the phone at the sound of Travis's voice, but, thankfully, it was one humiliation he managed to avoid today.

"I forgot myself, it's fine." He waved his phone. "I figured I should text Colin before he finds out and kicks my ass."

His brother had the unbelievable ability to know stuff, somehow, and Dave had stopped trying to hide things from him a long time ago. It never really worked.

Travis usually teased him for the brotherly confessions, as he called them, but not this time.

"I'm pretty sure it's my ass he'll want to kick," he said instead, handing Dave the glass of water.

"Hey." Dave stared at him, waiting, but when Travis still didn't meet his gaze, he pressed. "Hey, look at me."

And, damn, whether Dave had energy for this or not, he needed to clarify things, because seeing the anguish in Travis's eyes was... Well, it was absolute shit.

"I'm not blaming you, okay? I'm not." Dave shook his head. "It was an accident, and the move could have worked. Oh, and also, a small detail—I agreed to the plan, so how about we don't treat me like a child who is only following someone else's directions, huh?"

Something shifted in Travis's eyes as he listened, and while it wasn't clear what he was thinking, at least he wasn't looking like a guy walking freely towards the shooting squad anymore, so Dave would take it as a win.

Everything else, they were going to figure out.

Somehow.

### CHAPTER FIVE

Walking out of the house later that night felt weird—like he shouldn't be leaving Dave alone, despite the fact that Dave would kill him for even thinking that.

The whole "I'm not a child" speech would likely be a recurring theme in the next however-long, and Travis needed to make sure not to give Dave too much ammunition for it.

Independence might as well be Dave's second name, and Travis was usually right there with him, but after today...Fuck, after today he was honestly itching to cover Dave in blankets and not let him out of his sight.

And yet, he had to leave, because he had unfinished business to take care of.

He'd texted Kalei earlier to ask whether he was at home or at the office—half genuine question, half Travis being an asshole—so he now headed straight to Kalei's place.

On one hand, he wanted to have this conversation over with, and on the other, he itched to turn around and never get into it.

If only today had gone differently...

It hadn't, though. It hadn't, and while Dave had told him he wasn't to blame, Travis couldn't shake the feeling that Kalei was right. The fall might have been an accident, sure, but there wouldn't have been one if Travis hadn't pushed.



Even now, he didn't know why he'd told Dave he should be the one going up. Travis was both lighter and taller, and it would have been easier for him.

Or they could have skipped the wall altogether. Their time was good, so they might have made it to the top even without that last part... but Travis wanted it all.

He wanted to push as hard as he could—and the consequences came to bite them in the ass.

Dave was going to be laid out for months, and who knew how long it would take him to get back to the fitness level their job required.

Travis didn't even want to think about not having his partner with him on the job.

One of them did join a different op without the other from time to time when he was needed, but it only happened once or twice a year, maybe. Everyone knew Dave and Travis were a package deal, and while many other partnerships at KRK were built on solid, deep friendships as well, no other pair had history like they did.

After all, the two of them had met in basic training and had been inseparable ever since. Nobody at their company could say the same—and most people outside of it couldn't, either.

Still, there was no way Travis was going to survive being inactive. No way. He was full of hectic energy on a good day, and on a bad day it bordered on manic instead. When he channeled it into work, he was fine—he could focus on the task at hand, on the person they were protecting, and on the frankly predictable rhythm of these things after so many years. Going without it meant he would have no outlet for all that energy, and if Kalei thought Travis was trouble now...

Fuck.

Travis spent the rest of the ride coming up with things to say, to convince Kalei not to take him out of the field completely, but the closer he got, the less he believed it would work. Kalei was stubborn and once he'd made up his mind, there was no coming back from it, especially if someone had pushed him too far.

Like Travis had.

Because they'd had those talks. He'd gotten warnings. And then he had done what he'd done, anyway.

After he parked outside of Kalei's place now, he needed a minute to center himself, so he inhaled and exhaled slowly as he stared at the simple house. Kalei and Maleko had bought it a long time ago, but they'd never lived here together, renting it out while they stayed in a small apartment between deployments and saved up to open a security company one day.

Unfortunately, Maleko had died on a mission before KKK could open—and before the two of them could finally move in here.

On the other hand, if they had, Kalei would have probably needed to switch places, after, because he'd barely lasted a week living alone in their old apartment.

As it were, the inside of the house looked like he'd barely moved in, even though it had been years. Only the ground level was fully furnished and it didn't seem like Kalei was itching to do anything more.

Which Travis totally understood. He hadn't had to go through anything even remotely as traumatic as losing a husband to know he would be a complete mess, if left to his own devices. Travis had lived with his parents, then he lived wherever the Marine Corps had sent him, and then he moved in with Dave—and they'd been living together ever since, with no end in sight.

Granted, there was a brief period a while ago when Dave had decided to give dating a real try and started going out, and Travis had wondered what it could mean for their living situation in the long-term. Thankfully, the dating experiment hadn't lasted long, and things had gone back to how they should be.

The front door opening pulled Travis out of his head, and he exited the car as soon as he saw Kalei standing in the doorway.

Damn the man for his situational awareness. Of course he had to clock Travis sitting outside of his house. Of course.

Then again, Kalei had probably clocked him the moment he arrived, so maybe Travis should be grateful to have been given a few minutes to gather himself.

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Or fifteen minutes, according to his phone.

Oops.

Kalei turned and went back inside as Travis got near, so Travis followed him in and closed the door behind him.

"Take whatever you want from the fridge and let's sit outside."

It wasn't a question, and Kalei didn't wait for him to say anything before heading down the corridor towards the back patio.

Resigned to his fate, Travis went to grab a beer from the fridge, but then redirected and went for orange juice instead. While the upcoming conversation might be harder with no alcohol, it had a chance to be a calmer one this way.

He hoped.

Outside, he sat down on the lawn chair next to Kalei and stared ahead as he took a sip of the juice.

Kalei clasped his hands against his stomach. "Dave's settled in at home?"

"As best as he can, I guess. Since we have no bedroom downstairs, I suggested moving his bed into the living room, but he dismissed the idea, and I don't blame him. While the stairs will be a pain for a while, he likes his space. I helped him up before I left, though, and he has everything he may need—including a pair of crutches, which

Melissa dropped off already. He hated them on sight, but he also knows he needs them, so."

"He probably hates them exactly because he needs them."

"Yeah."

For all that Dave was generally a laid back, optimistic guy, he didn't do well with losing control—or his independence. Travis had a feeling that part of the healing process would be much harder for Dave than the physical side of things.

"I came down hard on you back in the hospital," Kalei spoke next, and Travis's shoulders tensed in an instant. "I should have minced my words more."

"Not if that's how you see things. We didn't come this far to throw glitter at each other's shit."

Kalei snorted. "I was angry at you both, but I was equally angry at myself. Maybe more, if I'm being honest."

"Well, that part is stupid." Travis rapped his fingers against the glass as he balanced it on his thigh. "You're not responsible for every dumb thing we do."

"As your boss, I'm responsible for your safety on the job, and if I thought you might no longer be safe, I should've benched you."

"I don't want to sit on my ass."

"You're not talking me out of benching you now."

Travis swallowed the rest of the juice and put the glass down on the deck before

leaning forward in his seat.

"I'll deal with whatever you think I should deal with, but benching me isn't the answer. I'll go mad."

"Listen to yourself, man. You're only giving me more reasons to do so—or rather, you would, if I didn't already know that." Kalei shook his head. "I tried talking to you, and it didn't work. It only brought us here, which neither of us likes. So, this time it's benching and therapy."

Fuck it all to hell.

"Boss—"

"You sent Dave flying up that wall and didn't stop for even half a second to see if he needed support because you wanted to score points, Travis." Kalei leaned forward as well and stared him down. "That's not who you are."

Travis looked away. He had done that. A spur of the moment or not, adrenaline or not, he had done exactly that.

"And I know you wouldn't leave him out in the field if things were rough, that's not what I'm saying. I'm telling you that in an everyday situation, when there was zero actual danger to consider, you were so pumped on adrenaline that you didn't think clearly. Which means you're too far down a road I don't want to see you on, so we need to pump the brakes."

"I would die to keep him safe."

The words were quiet and Travis's voice gritty, and he'd rather that thought stayed inside his head, but it felt like Kalei needed to hear it.

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"I know that, and he knows that, too. Hell, everyone knows." Kalei clasped Travis's shoulder and gripped it tight. "Thing is, nobody has to die. It was a training exercise, and there wasn't even a dangerous scenario to go with it. And that tells me—"

"That I fucked up."

"—that you lost the ability to level down. You're always pumped up these days, and you know how dangerous that is."

Travis let out a shaky breath. "I'm not spiraling."

Fuck, how he wished he sounded more certain about it.

"You just told me you'll go mad if I bench you."

"Well, what would I even do?" Travis sat up, causing Kalei to withdraw his hand. "We don't have that much paperwork, and I'll stick out like a sore thumb."

"You'll be happy to know that you may work remotely for a bit. It will give you a chance to take care of Dave for a week or two, since you'll be there to intervene as needed. After that, we'll see. I'll find you something to do at the HQ, don't worry."

"Low blow, using him against me like this," Travis said, even though he did feel better at the idea of being there for Dave. If leaving for an hour or two to come here tonight was this hard, leaving for an entire working day would be excruciating.

"Against you or for you?"

Travis sat back, lowering himself in the chair and pretending it was a rhetorical question.

"Also, I'm serious about the therapy part," Kalei continued. "No matter how Dave's recovery goes, you're not going out into the field until you get a note from your therapist saying that you can."

That made Travis straighten in his seat again. "Oh, come on!"

"The faster you start, the quicker you'll get it, so I wouldn't stall if I were you. I sent you an email at your work address with a list of recommended specialists. You may, of course, pick someone else for the therapy itself, but then you'll have to be evaluated by one of those recommended."

"I don't need therapy."

"Said most veterans I've ever spoken to." Kalei shook his head again. "The fact is, we all need it."

"And are you going or are you sending others in your place instead?"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Travis regretted them, but it was too late, and, fuck, there went his last chance of convincing Kalei of anything.

Still, he owed the man an apology.

"I'm sorry, that was... I shouldn't have said that."

"You keep proving my point, over and over, so I hope it's becoming clearer for you, too." Kalei stared ahead into the trees, now completely black against the dark sky. "But for your information, I am. I started going three months after I buried my



husband and I've been going ever since."

Well,damn.

## CHAPTER SIX

Dave clenched his teeth as he hoisted himself out of bed using the nightstand that hit the wall after wobbling under his weight.

He also wobbled as he tried to balance on one leg, and he glared at the crutches resting against the wall.

Travis had been right last night when he'd wanted to put them closer to the bed, but Dave had been frustrated and in pain, and he'd argued against it, so here he was now, frustrated, in pain, and wobbling.

What a start to the day.

There was no way he would survive two or three months of this. He was going to scale a wall—or even a building, if his frustration levels skyrocket as he suspected they might.

On the other hand, trying to climb up a wall was exactly what had landed him in his current predicament, so maybe he should come up with something else.

His sister would say he needed to pick up another hobby—or a hobby in general, because anything a person was doing or had ever considered doing as a career shouldn't count as a hobby in Alicia's book, which disqualified both gym training and playing basketball, his main after-work activities.

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Good thing she wasn't here to offer any commentary, really. She would not let him forget about how he'd found himself in his current circumstances, whether he liked it or not.

"Knock, knock." Travis appeared in the doorway and looked him up and down. "You need any help?"

Obviously, Dave thought but swallowed it down.

He didn't want to start a fight—or worse, push Travis into a self-blame spiral.

Still, Dave absolutely hated the idea of asking for help to go to the damn bathroom.

As if he couldn't hop towards it, grabbing the crutches on the way.

Or as if he—

Well, he had no real idea what else he could do, which was a treat in and of itself. He was a grown man, a capable man, and he was now completely dependent on somebody else.

He couldn't decide whether it would be better if that somebody else was a person he knew or not. Would it be easier if he had a nurse coming over and helping him out with basic things? Or maybe the discomfort of a stranger would always be too much and Dave should start learning how to lean on his loved ones?

Either way, he was apparently taking too long to answer, because Travis crossed the

room and put his arm around Dave's waist.

"Bathroom?"

"Yeah."

And that was it. Putting more of his weight against Travis was familiar, even if not in circumstances like this one, and it gave Dave the answer he was looking for—he would never want to do this with someone he didn't know.

Once they got to the bathroom, Travis hesitated, but Dave waved him off.

"I'll be fine with this part. If you wanted to go make coffee, however..."

Travis snorted. "The coffee's ready, Your Highness. Now, I'm gonna sit there," he pointed behind him towards Dave's bed, "and wait for you to be done. Holler if you need anything."

I need a leg that's not broken.

Dave turned away towards the sink to hopefully hide the grimace he didn't manage to hold back.

This wouldn't do. He had to get his shit together or else he was going to turn into a whiner, and nobody wanted that—especially not him.

Thankfully, his morning bathroom routine helped him to perk up a little. While he needed to navigate his steps with care, by the time he returned to his bedroom, he felt much more like a functioning adult.

Somewhat functioning, at least.

What stopped him in his tracks wasn't his leg, but the sight of Travis sprawled on his bed, lying back and propped up on his elbows, looking absolutely delicious. His dark blond hair was long enough now to fall onto his forehead and his tanned skin was in sharp contrast against Dave's white sheet.

Dave wanted to eat him alive.

"We need to figure out how to have sex with a broken leg," he blurted out without thinking, and Travis chuckled.

"I wouldn't say no to exploring our options after breakfast, as long as you're up for it."

Dave paused halfway to grabbing his crutches, but then Travis was suddenly there—always paying close attention, even if Dave would prefer him not to, sometimes—and they didn't need words to know what would happen next.

"Low-hanging fruit, man," Dave muttered as he let Travis lead him out of the room.

"I'm an easy guy, what can I say."

There were many things that were easy about Travis, and about the two of them, but not all of it was. Dave had come to terms with it, though, as much as he could, and he'd adjusted his expectations accordingly.

He was still working on reining in his hopes, but he would get there at some point. While the dating experiment had been a mistake, it was probably him moving too fast, too quickly. When Dave decided to try again, he definitely needed to take his time.

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If he decided.

For now, there were other things to focus on—like the steps downstairs that normally took him a few seconds and now seemed like an insurmountable mountain. Last night, Dave had climbed it slowly with clenched teeth and Travis's assistance, but at least he could chalk it up to the exhaustion of the day.

Today was another story.

"Nope." Travis tightened his grip on Dave's waist, stopping him before the first step down. "Your choices are a fireman carry or a bridal carry, that's it."

Dave huffed. "I can—"

"You can fall down and break something else, and maybe take me down with you while you're at it." Travis shook his head. "You know descending isn't any easier than ascending like this, especially on such narrow steps. We'll practice, but for now, this is a safer option. I should've suggested it last night, to be honest, I just wasn't thinking."

And Dave wanted to push, to protest, but Travis was right—and he was also giving Dave an out.

So Dave took it.

"I'm half-tempted to make you carry me bridal style for being a know-it-all. We'd definitely be at a risk of falling then, though, and I try not to cut off my nose to spite

my face."

"Fireman style it is." With a decisive nod, Travis swiftly shifted and hoisted Dave up before patting his thigh. "Hang tight."

The words died on Dave's tongue as he stared at Travis's round ass, now so close and tempting that Dave would have bit it if doing so didn't mean sending them both falling down for real.

Damn, he was intimately acquainted with that ass, from every angle and in every way they could think of over the years, but he sometimes still got struck with the sight of it, the shape, the—

Before he could finish that thought, Travis deposited him in the wide chair in the kitchen, moving the table further to the side to make room. The soft landing made Dave even more grateful than usual that Travis had talked him into buying two comfortable chairs for the kitchen instead of a bigger set of narrow ones that Dave had wanted initially.

"I'll get you your coffee and you can tell me what you have in mind for breakfast."

"I'll eat whatever, I know you have to go soon—"

"I don't, actually. Kalei said I can work remotely for a bit, since I'm benched anyway." Travis grimaced briefly. "I'll have to call in soon, because he wanted to talk after he had a chance to figure out the best use of my working hours, but they're going to be flexible for at least a week, maybe two. So you have me for the whole day, every day."

Dave squashed the instinctual response—all day, every day, yes please—as he glanced through the window at their backyard.

"So the usual, huh?" he said after a beat, turning to meet Travis's clear blue eyes.

Travis laughed. "Pretty much, yeah. Why mess with perfection, am I right?"

Dave nodded, settling more comfortably in the chair.

Why, indeed.

\* \* \*

An hour and a half later, they were both sitting on the couch and half-heartedly watching the rerun of old Seinfeld episodes while scrolling on their phones, when Travis spoke up.

"Internet says receiving a blowjob can be beneficial to your recovery and overall well-being."

Dave lowered his phone even as his heartbeat sped up.

"What the hell are you reading?"

"You mentioned sex before, which, as you well know, is not a topic I take lightly, so I'm researching our options." Travis's grin only grew. "The results were illuminating."

"I bet. What else did those undoubtedly reputable sources offer in terms of advice?"

"A more active role from the uninjured partner, avoiding any acrobatics, and being aware that the discomfort of the injury may prolong the path to an orgasm or make it hard to ever get there, pun intended."

Dave blinked at the swift change into seriousness, but then before he could blink

again, Travis slid off the couch, settled on his knees, and winked at Dave before pushing his uninjured leg to the side to slide in closer.



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"Theory's done, now it's time for practice, don't you think?" Travis ran a hand up from Dave's ankle to his thigh before pausing so close to Dave's rapidly hardening cock that it would only take an inch or two for Travis to brush his fingers over it. "Nothing they mentioned should be a problem, should it?"

Dave shook his head.

"That's what I thought." Travis did move his hand then, and rubbed his thumb along the line of Dave's cock. "It's been a while since we took our time, especially like this."

"You could take a little less time." Dave lifted his hips up, pressing into Travis's touch and ignoring the twinge in his leg.

In response, Travis put his other arm over Dave's hips and pressed them down.

"Stay still and let me do the work," he said, but it was difficult for Dave to concentrate on Travis's words with his mouth so close to Dave's cock.

Being forced to stay in place was nice, though—more than. Dave enjoyed it whenever Travis put his strength to good use, and he enjoyed it especially when it involved Dave's body being restricted during sex.

"Get to work, then." His voice was too breathless to sound properly demanding, but the back and forth had always been a part of it for them, and Dave couldn't imagine sex without it now. "I'm waiting."

Travis pressed his thumb right under the head of Dave's cock and grinned when Dave inhaled sharply.

"Oh, we both know that in certain situations, you're more than willing to wait."

Isn't that the truth.

Any coherent thought was lost after that, because Travis closed his fist around Dave's cock as much as the fabric of his pants allowed, and the push and pull of so good-not enough-yeah right there forced a moan out of Dave he tried to swallow back.

"No, let me hear you." Travis released his hold on Dave to push his pants down enough to free his cock before returning to the same position a moment later. Travis's arm was pressing barely above Dave's groin to keep him still and the other hand curled around Dave's cock again, tightening his hold almost to the point of pain. "Let it out, come on."

Tossing his head back, Dave gripped the throwaway blanket at his sides as he fought for breath. He'd forgotten how good it could feel to be restricted and overpowered. In real fighting situations, he would never willingly give ground, injury or not, but like this, here, with Travis... Dave wanted it.

He craved it.

When Travis's lips closed around the head of his cock, Dave's whole body went up in flames, pleasure spreading in every direction, the tension rising and rising. He heard a moan before he realized it was him, unchecked and desperate, already straining for more.

Dave did love to wait for an orgasm every now and then. Chasing the edge was addicting and dangerous in many ways, but never like this, because Travis would

always get him to the finish line in the end. It allowed Dave to enjoy himself, to relish the moment, and get out of his head completely.

Lapping at Dave's cock as if it was a dessert, Travis moaned, too, then swallowed him down once again, as if determined now to push things along.

Because that was another thing, too—the patience game went both ways. For all that Travis loved teasing Dave, he himself had a hard time slowing down and making it last.

"Come on." Dave grabbed Travis's shoulder and held on, fingers digging too hard, but Travis only moaned in answer, which sent another wave of pleasure through Dave, making him hiss. "Fuck, yes."

He could feel the orgasm getting closer, circling around the edges of Dave's senses and pushing forward with each passing second but never quite passing the final line—

Then his cock hit the back of Travis's throat and all thoughts left Dave's head once again. Gripping Travis's shoulder, he tried to warn him, but Travis only hummed around him, sending him even higher as he came, and came, and came.

There didn't seem to be an end to it for a while, Dave's existence narrowed to the pleasure flowing through him without pause as he shook and moaned. He would be arching off the couch if he could, but Travis's arm didn't even budge, the veins bulging and fingers pressing hard enough to leave white indents on Dave's skin.

You have me, Dave thought, right before he collapsed against the couch cushions, sweaty, spent, and grinning stupidly at Travis, who always grinned back.

You have me.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Travis tended to startle himself awake at all hours of the night these days. Sometimes he dreamed of a work assignment going wrong, sometimes of being stranded on the side of the road, and sometimes it was even less specific, just a growing sense of danger and mounting frustration.

And yet today, as the last dregs of sleep slowly cleared out, he felt nothing but peace and contentment. There was no tension, no hurry, no blood pumping, only the soft glide into consciousness that made him sigh into the pillow.

The pillow was definitely one of Dave's, and as Travis stretched his arms up, his fingers brushed against the wall, not the high bars of the headboard he would find in his own bedroom. Whenever they slept in the same bedroom—which happened about half the time—they tended to alternate, but for the last few days it had been Dave's room every night. He had a setup of leg pillows in here, as well as anything else he might need at an arm's reach.

Travis didn't even miss his bedroom all that much, especially since he'd had a few good nights in a row, sleeping a solid number of hours and not needing to wake up with an alarm and rush out of bed.

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As he blinked his eyes open now—with great reluctance because he wasn't convinced he really wanted to be awake already—he saw Dave next to him, hugging a pillow to his chest and frowning in his sleep.

For all that they'd woken up together thousands of times at this point, Travis hadn't often had a chance to lie there and look at the man next to him. Most days, he rolled out of bed the minute he woke up, especially if he woke up tense, and the rest of the time, Dave tended to be awake before him.

Watching him now, Travis noted the changes he could see, the inevitable signs of years passing. They'd first met and become fast friends when they were still teenagers, knuckling their way through boot camp, exhausted every day and yet running on the kind of energy the men on this side of thirty simply didn't possess any longer. They'd been keeping themselves in great shape, obviously, but the years had left their marks. There were subtle lines on Dave's forehead and in the corners of his eyes now, and a small, easy to miss patch of hair where the red gave way to silver at the roots. There was also a barely visible scar high and to the left on his forehead, where Dave had been grazed by falling debris from an explosion during their tour in Afghanistan. A few other mementos were scattered all over his body, reminders of walking a dangerous path for the last eighteen years of his life. Although they weren't visible now, Travis knew about all of them, because he knew that man like the back of his own hand. He'd been there for every iteration of Dave as an adult, and vice versa, both of them changing but always changing together.

While they hadn't gone through an injury like this before, one that laid one of them down enough to put him out of work for a few months, they'd gone through so much other stuff—a reenlisting debacle and an identity crisis after leaving the military,

family shit of different shapes and sizes, or staring down the barrel of rising house prices only to finally get a mortgage on a run-down place together, to name a few. There had also been that cancer scare a few years back which turned out to be a false alarm but left enough of an impression that Dave regularly pushed Travis to do a check-up, just in case.

A broken leg wasn't going to keep them down for long, even if it was going to be a while before Travis stopped feeling so guilty for it all.

"What the fuck are you thinking so hard about?" Dave grumbled, pressing his head into his pillow, muffling his voice even more. "I swear you woke me up with your internal monologuing."

Travis poked him in the elbow and bit back a smile at the hiss that followed.

"Maybe you're hearing voices—or dreaming about me."

"Both scenarios sound similarly dreadful." Dave opened one eye to glare at him, then hissed once more and pulled his arm away when Travis poked him again. "Why are you like this?"

"I'm endlessly charming, and you know it."

"Who is the delusional one now?"

As Travis laughed, he could tell Dave was fighting a grin—a fight he ultimately lost, rolling onto his back and sighing at the ceiling.

"You suck."

"That's just too easy."

"That's what—"

Travis shut him up with a kiss, a quick press of lips that turned into a slow, lazy making out when Dave put his arms around Travis's neck and pulled him closer. They rarely kissed for kissing's sake, too eager for other things, but each time they did, Travis remembered how much he liked it. It felt... indulgent. Like, sure, they could move on to sex, but they also didn't have to. They could simply do this for a while.

At least until Dave tugged at Travis's hair, because, oh yeah, they were definitely moving towards sex now.

As they broke the kiss to get some air, Travis lowered his head and started a familiar line down Dave's neck, with a stop along the collarbone, and then down again—over Dave's chest and stomach. He paused above Dave's groin and looked up to see his flush and to listen to his gasp as Travis rubbed his thumb along the dip of Dave's thigh, slipping it below the waistline of Dave's boxers.

"If you're waiting for an invitation, you're hereby invited—"

Travis groaned. "Shut up, I swear."

"You were making a decent case for it, but then you stopped."

"I'll show you decent," Travis muttered, pulling Dave's boxers down.

He knew he was playing right into Dave's hand, but he didn't mind. Not like this, when they both wanted the same thing.

While Travis had always thought that sucking the same guy's cock stopped being exciting after a while, Dave seemed to be the exception. They'd been sleeping with

each other on and off for many years, and yet it could still make Travis hungry, almost desperate.

And listening to Dave making all those delicious noises might be the best part of it all.

Or maybe it was the way Dave fought to stay still instead of pushing into the heat of Travis's mouth, like he usually did at that point.

Or maybe the familiar weight on Travis's tongue and the knowledge how to make it particularly good for this particular man were the best, after all—Travis loved the power behind it, and his cock pressing hard against the sheets was a clear proof of that.

He closed his eyes and focused on bringing Dave to climax as soon as possible, sucking hard and fast, with his fingers slipping behind Dave's balls and brushing against his rim.

"Yeah, fuck," Dave whispered, and Travis looked up only to see Dave's exposed neck, his head thrown back in pleasure. "I'm close."

Travis redoubled his efforts and, sure enough, Dave came barely a few seconds later, flooding Travis's mouth faster than Travis could swallow. He didn't mind, though—he didn't mind at all. He caught as much as he could, and whatever spilled over, he chased with his tongue or caught with the thumb he later sucked clean as he sat back, staring at the breathtaking view a disheveled Dave made, spread on the sheets like that, sated and relaxed.



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"Get up here and come on my chest," Dave's next words shot like a bullet through him, and Travis was scrambling to straddle Dave's stomach without a second thought.

Coming on Dave, especially on that vast expanse of freckles everywhere, was almost as good as coming in him, and that was saying something.

Dave took a hold of Travis's ass and gripped him tight.

"You freak, stop staring and come."

His voice was way too soft to be mean, and they both knew he didn't mind Travis's obsession with his freckles. Even if Dave didn't get it—calling them just dots on my skin many, many times—he still enjoyed Travis looking.

And Travis totally got that. Dave's focused, heated gaze on him made Travis hot nine times out of ten outside of work—and sometimes at work, too, even though they were trying to cut that down.

Now, it only took a few tugs on his cock before Travis was painting Dave's skin with his come as the pleasure exploded inside him. Dave's grip on his ass tightened even more and Travis fell forward, one hand landing on the pillow next to Dave's head and the other right in the mess on his chest.

Catching his breath, he stared at his fingers as he rubbed his come into Dave's skin, his mind blissfully blank.

"Like I said," Dave muttered affectionately with a light slap on his ass. "Freak."

Travis leaned in to press his face against Dave's neck, inhaling deeply. He might be too tired for the way his spent cock twitched at the strong scent of them and sex, but he couldn't help himself. He loved it.

If that made him even more of a freak, so be it.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The first time Dave had learned what a luxury it was to have a shower you could just walk into was during his deployment. Once he'd returned stateside, he'd had what some would call a religious experience in his parents' guest room en-suite, equipped with decent water pressure and a seemingly endless supply of hot water.

And now, once again, showering wasn't a normal, everyday occurrence that could be done on autopilot. He had to take his time and be careful, because his damn cast needed protection.

To make things worse, it was only one of many normal, everyday tasks that needed way too much forethought and preparation these days—if they were even possible in the first place.

While Dave was never a fan of morning workouts, he still looked on in envy on Monday morning as Travis headed out for a run. They'd eaten breakfast together beforehand, but now Travis was gone and Dave was situated on the couch, surrounded by everything he might be needing—and then some.

Travis hadn't left before he made sure—twice—that Dave really couldn't think of anything else he might want to have on hand.

"And that's what's pissing you off?" Colin asked over the video call. "That he's what, overbearing?"

Dave shook his head as he buried himself deeper against the cushions.

"He's not overbearing. If he was, I'd be justified in my irritation."

"You can feel however you're feeling."

"Yeah, well, thanks a lot, but I'm not the one—"heading to mandatory therapy. Dave caught himself in time, but almost spilling Travis's personal business only pissed him off more. "I'm a lot to deal with, right now."

"You're a lot to deal with even without an injury, little brother, and yet Travis has been managing for basically half your life."

Dave huffed, but he could feel his shoulders drop an inch.

"Yeah, well, you're also a lot."

"Duh."

They fell into silence after that, and Dave stared at the corner of his screen, knowing his brother was waiting him out.

"I'm a lot more to deal with than usual, though," Dave finally said. "And I will be, for however long. Knowing how much I can't do right now is honestly worse than any physical pain."

"Of course, because you need your independence like you need the air to breathe. To have to depend on someone else, day in and day out, without feeling like you're also pulling your own weight, goes against everything you believe in."

That hit way too close to home for Dave's liking.

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"If I thought you'd be using what you learned against me, I would have been fiercely against the couples therapy you and Amy went to."

"You'd most likely have to deal with my sad, divorced ass if we hadn't."

Dave couldn't imagine these two ever heading that way, but he'd learned over the years that no one could ever truly know what was happening inside someone else's relationship, no matter how close they were.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to be independent," Colin continued. "Quite the opposite, as long as you're not pulling too much of that lone wolf shit. But with Travis there, and Kalei, to some extent, I can't see you ever getting too far down that road before they catch up with you."

"Yeah, well, Kalei's pissed right now, so."

He winced at the memory of his boss in the hospital room, laying it on them in that thoroughly disappointed tone that made Dave wish the ground would swallow him whole.

"He'll get over it. I'm sure you and Travis did stupider things when he was your platoon commander, and he still hired you afterwards. He may pick you up by your scruff and shake you every once in a while, but you know he's not leaving you behind."

Dave let out a slow exhale. "I know."

"And Travis—"

"I know. I told you I'm feeling sorry for myself. This is me whining about everything."

"I can see that," Colin offered dryly. "And as an older brother, it's up to me to call you out on your bullshit when you sound like you're getting stupid."

"I thought I was allowed to feel how I feel."

"Sure. But there's acknowledging, and there's wallowing. You aren't as helpless as you think you are, even if physically you're less capable than usual."

"I need help getting to the bathroom, not to mention anything else," Dave said, shoulders tensing once again.

Even admitting that out loud was hard, despite the fact that he and Colin were close and knew more about each other than the average siblings.

There was no way to hide his limitations from Travis, which was bad enough. Anyone else...

"And I'm glad you have that help readily available for you," his brother told him, making Dave snort.

"I wish it was as easy as you're making it sound."

"I'm sure it's not. But it's also not as hard as you're making it sound." Colin shook his head. "Especially since it's all temporary."

The thought of it being temporary was the only thing keeping Dave from falling into

the abyss. One life-changing injury was more than enough for a lifetime, and while he felt at peace with not going into professional basketball now, he'd never forget how devastating it was to have that dream taken away when he was a teenager.

"Besides, if the roles were reversed, would you resent Travis for making you help him out?"

"What, no!" Dave sat up, propelled with indignation. "And he wouldn't have to make me do anything."

Colin lifted his eyebrows, "I told you so" clearly spelled out without him having to mutter a single word.

"That's different," Dave protested. "Besides, I know Travis doesn't resent me."

"Of course he doesn't. There's nothing to resent."

Dave was pretty sure his grumpy ass would drag anyone else down, but with Travis, things were different. They were different. And there was no one else on the planet Dave would rather be doing this with.

Suddenly out of breath, he stared at the wall as everything fell into place in his head.

While there were things he'd like that Travis would never give him, there were a myriad of others that the two of them already had. And this was one of them—a temporary one, a new one, but still another example of Travis not only standing by Dave but also going the distance with him.

Dave would bet every last penny he had that Travis would switch places with him in an instant if it was possible. Not just because he felt guilty—which Dave was trying to talk him out of—but because of who he was, and who they were to each other.

Partners pretty much from the day they met, they had gone through various reiterations of that term, and they would likely go through many others in the future, too. Dave might have wanted them to be romantic partners as well, but even though they weren't, that didn't diminish their relationship in the slightest.

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They were as close as they could be, so of course Travis was by his side in this.

Of course.

The same way Dave would be, if the roles were reversed.

"Earth to Dave." Colin's voice made him blink and glance back at the screen. "I'm guessing the point has finally hit home, so I'll leave you to it, okay? Call me anytime."

With a quick thanks and goodbye, Dave ended the call and put the phone aside.

He didn't necessarily feel better after that conversation, but he kind of... felt lighter? His situation hadn't changed in the half an hour he spent talking to his brother, but his outlook might have.

A bit.

After all, it could have been worse.

Dave stared at his leg, perched on the pillows and not even aching for the moment, then he looked around the room—the crutches right by the couch, the clear path to the kitchen and the downstairs bathroom, the small mountain of books on the side table... He wasn't totally helpless and he didn't need help every minute of every day. Yeah, he was still getting used to things, and he'd hit some rough patches, but things weren't as terrible as they might have been.



Picking up the remote, he was already considering his ever-growing list of things to watch and trying to decide which show he was in the mood for, when the front door opened, revealing sweaty and flushed Travis.

Dave's heart did not lurch at the sight.

Absolutely not.

"You're back early," he heard himself say, his mind rebooting as he tried not to stare too obviously.

Travis toed off his sneakers. "Yeah, I decided to try a faster pace today. Figured you may miss me."

Always.

Dave tightened his grip on the remote as he tried to squash that thought as soon as it appeared, but the sight of Travis walking closer to the couch made the task that much harder.

Seriously, how hot could one guy be?

Martinez always joked that the KRK Security personnel had been picked at least partially for their looks, because they were all ridiculously pretty, but in Dave's book, there was no one at their company who came even close to how gorgeous Travis was.

Dave was biased, of course, but he didn't care. Many people were good-looking—or even beautiful—in the aesthetic kind of way he could appreciate, but only Travis flipped a switch inside Dave's mind that made him forget his damn name.

Thankfully, he'd had many years to build up at least some resistance.

"I'll miss you even more if you shower before getting any closer to me," he said, purposefully turning towards the TV.

There was a movement in the corner of his eye, and then there were warm and sweaty arms closing around his head and his face was pressed against Travis's chest.

Dave laughed, pretending to swat Travis away as his heartbeat quickened.

Yeah, it could all have been so much worse.

## CHAPTER NINE

Unsure how to decide between the therapists from the list Kalei had sent him, Travis ultimately chose the one whose office was closest to home. He figured a fifteen minute walk would do him good, both before and after the session.

Doctor Anika Kumar might have looked like a nice person, but she was still a therapist, and thus, Travis couldn't help but catalogue her as dangerous—at least for the time being.

"You mentioned in your intake form that you've been sent to mandatory therapy by your boss. It's always harder to build trust in a situation like that, in comparison to a case of someone making the decision on their own," she said now, as if reading his mind, which only confirmed that he needed to be careful. "But I'm hopeful that we can come to an agreement about working together on a subject you find important and worthy of exploration."

"It's not that I don't want to work on myself." Travis glanced around the room. A lot of natural light coming from the top to bottom windows and two very comfortable small couches facing each other made it feel inviting while remaining neutral. It was sparsely decorated, with only one art piece of a handwritten text half-hidden under

the brush of gold paint and two plants on the opposite sides of the wall he was facing.  
"I simply wouldn't do so like this."

"And how would you do it, if it was up to you?"

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Travis frowned, staring at one of the plants.

"The usual way—which is physical exercise, I guess." And sex, but he wasn't going to tell her that. "We spend a lot of time training anyway, and spending more time at the company gym wouldn't be a problem."

"Did you try that, before?"

"Of course." He looked at her then. "Like I said, I'm not against bettering myself, and I'm aware there are certain things I need to change."

"So since working out has helped you before, you figured it would help you with the current issue, is that correct?"

"Yes. And it's been helping with the current issue as well."

He tried to hold back on the snarking front, but she probably wasn't fooled.

"It's normal and expected that we fall back on what has worked for us in the past when facing any new problem that arises. Each person has their own methods of dealing with stress—there are some common ones, of course, but there isn't one that fits everybody, which is why we sometimes need time to figure out what works for us. And once we find it, it's great, we think we have it, we've cracked the code. But then, sometimes things happen, and our usual ways of dealing with stress don't work as well as they used to."

"That's the thing, though." He scratched his jaw and tried not to think about the

notepad in her lap. "Nothing's happened. Not at work, not outside of it, nothing."

"Is there a chance that you're so used to your job being stressful that you might not have noticed a particular thing becoming more aggravating?"

He'd dismissed that option before, when he tried to figure it out on his own, but he decided to give it a try again, not wanting her to think he was a jerk who didn't listen.

"It doesn't seem to be the case, no," he finally told her after sorting through the memories of various assignments once more. "Despite how it may look on the outside, my job isn't all that dangerous. I'd say 99% of the time, we're as safe as an average person, and I can't think of anything in recent months that would fall into that 1%."

The most recent dangerous thing he could remember was Eddie's kidnapping, but that had been almost a year ago, and Travis only heard the whole story after the fact, when he could already see for himself that Eddie was safe and sound.

As he told that to the therapist, she nodded. "And when do you think your symptoms first appeared?"

Travis grimaced at the word 'symptoms', but he tried to school his face quickly.

"Four months ago or so? I'm not sure." He shifted in his seat. "I didn't notice anything back then, but Kalei—my boss—first noticed something was different around four months ago."

"And what did he notice, exactly?"

"I was jumpier, easier to get riled up, and I took longer to cool off. I also went a bit too hard on the competitiveness front."

There had been a few sparring sessions after which his colleagues had given him looks, until finally Ian had called him out on it when they were alone in the locker room. But it was too late—Kalei had noticed, too, and Travis ended up in his office, getting a second wake-up call of that week.

"What did you chalk it up to, back then?"

Travis shrugged. "Nothing. I thought it wasn't caused by anything in particular, just a bug up my ass or something." He paused, catching up to what he'd said. "Sorry."

"I heard worse," she offered dryly. "But it wasn't just that, I gather."

"I started paying closer attention to how I'm feeling during training and that helped, since I usually manage to avoid getting that worked up again. But every once in a while, something flips, and the adrenaline takes over. I'm not excusing myself," he added quickly, "but that's how it feels."

"So you found something that helps in most cases, but not all."

"Yeah. Yes."

"Okay, that seems to cover the work part of your life, then—at least for now. What about the rest of it?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've already said there wasn't anything big happening that you could pinpoint as the reason for your increased stress responses. However, it doesn't have to be big. Sometimes, it's the thing that seems pretty small from the outside that disrupts a person's life on a deeper level. It can also be a positive change, actually, something we look forward to, like a job change or the start of a relationship. The difference

between old and new is a stressor in itself."

"I had neither."

She nodded, clearly unbothered by the lack of cooperation on his part—although he didn't do it on purpose. He honestly didn't know what the hell was wrong with him.

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"Let's try something, then. Tell me how your usual week went, let's say, six months ago. Where were you when you woke up, where were you when you fell asleep, and what was happening in between. Were you working every day, were you hanging out with the same people, stuff like that."

Frowning, Travis did his best to paint her an accurate portrait of his daily life. He woke up at home and got ready for the day. He went for a run when he had a day off but skipped it if he'd be heading into the office, aware he'd get his exercise at work since they needed to put in at least two hours in the gym there unless they were out on an assignment. He drove with his partner and returned home with him as well, because they lived together. If their assignment didn't run late into the night, they usually watched something on TV before bed. Rinse and repeat.

"No evening outings or regular social engagements outside of that?"

Her tone was measured, blank, like there was no wrong answer, which he appreciated.

"No, I'm not really that sociable of a person. We're a pretty close-knit group at work, but we hang out at the office and at our biweekly basketball games, so we don't need anything more. Or I don't, at least. Every couple of months, Kalei organizes a BBQ at his house for the whole company, and some people bring their partners to that. It can get pretty big, but it's fun."

"Okay, we covered your regular week from six months ago. Can you describe a week from four months ago, maybe four and a half?"



Travis shook his head, ready to tell her that it was the exact same—his life was the same six months ago, four months ago, and today, and he liked that, because he really liked his life overall—but then he quickly did the math and realized she was asking him about late January.

He closed his mouth with an audible click of his teeth.

Fuck. This was stupid.

It couldn't be connected, and yet, he was hesitating to tell her about it for some reason.

She waited for a minute, and then, when Travis was still fighting with himself, she gave a little push.

"I can see you thought of something. No matter how big or small it was, I believe it could be beneficial to what we're discussing, but if it turns out unrelated, then that's okay, too. We'll keep looking."

He did not want to do this.

He'd felt stupid even coming here, and he'd felt stupid talking to her, trying to explain himself, and now she was pushing him over nothing.

Because it had to be nothing, otherwise... Otherwise he would be really fucking embarrassed.

"Something was different. However, it wasn't me, and it only lasted for a few weeks, so I don't think..." he drifted off, but she shook her head.

"No matter how big or small," she repeated. "Oftentimes, we don't see a connection

until we reflect on things from a different point of view. Even if the thing itself, whatever it was, is not the reason we're looking for, it may give us a starting point."

Travis stared at the window for another minute, fighting his every instinct until he finally opened his mouth.

"It's about my partner, Dave. At the start of the year, he had this idea that maybe he'd want to be in a relationship after all and figured he might try dating."

"So the two of you weren't—" she paused, and he sighed.

"We're more than work partners, but we're not... We're not in a relationship. In a romantic sense."

"But you have sex with each other?"

Huh. Travis didn't expect her to ask outright.

On the other hand, he had nothing to be ashamed of.

"Yes. I guess you could call us friends with benefits. We've known each other half our lives and we've done most things together—military, the deployment, our current job. We've also lived together for most of that time. And since neither of us was interested in a long-term romantic relationship, it was easy to... fall into things."

"I see." She somehow managed to convey the same measured tone with no judgment in two words, which was honestly impressive. "So your partner, the man you're spending most of your time with, at work and outside of it, decided at the beginning of the year that he was going to start dating, even though you felt until then that neither of you wanted that?"

"Yeah."

"Were you surprised when he told you?"

Travis shifted in his seat.

"Of course. I mean, it wasn't even that he met someone and fell for him, which would be..." He cleared his throat. "It would be one thing. But Dave seemed to simply decide that he should try that. He also asked me if I ever considered changing my stance on commitment, too."

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"And what did you tell him?"

"That I didn't. I'm honestly content with my life, and I see no point in changing anything. I thought he was, too."

"So Dave telling you he was considering a change made you think that he wasn't content with how his life was going?"

"I guess."

"That sounds like a startling thing to hear."

He looked at her then. "Does it?"

"Of course. You two are very close in various ways, and you thought you had similar outlooks on life. When a person changes, or at least considers a change, that can throw off people close to them. They may start thinking, what now, what does it mean for me, or for us... And since they face changes simply because someone else has changed, now they're forced to figure things out for themselves, too. It can bring up a lot of different emotions—as well as stress."

"It wasn't that stressful, it was just... different." Travis frowned at the window again, thinking back to that time. "With him going on dates, we spent more time separately than we usually do, which was weird. But I wasn't begrudging him that, or anything. He clearly needed to get something out of his system. While I don't quite get it, I don't have to understand every last bit of him."

He wanted to—he wanted to know everything there was to know about Dave—but somehow, it had been hard to talk about anything back then.

"Did you stop sleeping together during that time?"

"No. He didn't get far enough with anyone to even consider going exclusive, so we never stopped. We definitely had less sex than usual, though, simply by the fact that we were spending less time together in general."

"And did you mind him sleeping with other people?"

"He actually never got to that point with anyone, either." Travis scratched his jaw. "There was a bunch of first dates, but only a handful of second ones, from what I gathered."

"And then?"

"And then, a few weeks after he started the whole thing, he told me it was a mistake. He wasn't getting what he thought he would out of it, so he figured there was no point in trying any longer."

"Mmm," she offered, writing something down.

Travis had no idea what it meant, but before he could ask, she glanced at the clock and nodded.

"I would say we've done some great work today. I think we're getting somewhere, even if it may not feel like it for you just yet. How about we set up our next appointment for Thursday at the same time?"

He found himself nodding, equally confused and intrigued. Exhausted, too.

He didn't feel like they'd uncovered anything important, but who was he to judge?

He only cared for the end result, after all. He needed to fix it, whatever it was, and get back to work.

## CHAPTER TEN

Dave looked on in astonishment as Ian unloaded a full bag of food containers out onto the counter.

"You really didn't have to do that."

"You say that, but my grandmother would rise from her grave to kick my ass if I hadn't." Ian folded a cotton bag and put it inside the second one he came with.

"There's nothing better for the recovery process than a load of comfort food, ready for you to eat. And don't worry, I toned it down on the spice front for your white man sensibilities."

Dave nodded, not offended in the slightest. He'd once taken a spoonful of a chili Ian had prepared for himself and he had to drink a full glass of milk before he could even think of eating anything else.

"Honestly, man, thank you."

"No problem, it really doesn't take that much longer to prepare twice the amount. I usually meal prep on Sundays, but we were working yesterday, so I did it today after the company meeting. I should get these enchiladas into the freezer, though." He picked up the top two of the three containers. "There are written instructions on the lid."

Once Ian put away the rest of the food, the fridge was full to the brim. It was looking

kind of sad before that, since Dave and Travis hadn't gone on their usual weekend shopping trip, but even if they had, it would never come close to what Ian's must be like on a regular basis.

"I'm envious of your kitchen skills," Dave admitted as he leaned against the counter a bit more, keeping the weight off his left leg. "We do okay, but we still end up ordering dinner more often than not."

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"You can always learn. Many people don't, because they prefer to spend their time on other things, and I don't really blame them." Ian shrugged. "I'd probably be the same if my grandmother hadn't taught me from a young age. Now it's more than just useful—I honestly enjoy it. It relaxes me."

Dave shook his head. "Lucky you. I'm more like, the faster I'm done, the better."

"Do you two alternate who's doing the cooking?"

"No, we tend to work together, since it speeds up the process. There are days when only one of us handles the prep, and the other handles the dishes, but it's rarer and less fun."

Mostly because they teased each other with lingering touches and light groping when working together. Ian didn't have to know that part, though.

"My grandmother never let anyone into her kitchen unless she was teaching us something, and now that I'm thinking about it, I don't think I've ever cooked with anyone but her, so maybe I'm the same."

This could have offered a nice segue to teasing Ian about ever having cooked for a certain rock star who had hired KRK quite often over the years and always asked for Ian specifically after the first time. The company rumors had these two anywhere from only flirting to secretly married by now, and Ian had to endure a lot of ribbing, which he used to handle with grace. However, recently it seemed like the jokes had started to rub him the wrong way, so Dave bit his tongue.



"Hey, how about we move to the living room?" Ian gestured towards the couch. "I'd happily kick back for a while."

"Subtle, you are not," Dave told him dryly, even as he grabbed the crutches. "After you."

Ian shook his head. "You wouldn't know subtle if it bit you in the ass."

"I would if it asked nicely first."

Still, Dave couldn't hold back a sigh of relief once he was sitting down again, with his leg on the throw pillow lying on the coffee table.

Ian settled sideways on the couch, facing Dave.

"Be honest, how are you doing with this?"

"Impatient and grumpy, mostly."

"So, the usual?"

As Dave glared at him half-heartedly, Ian broke out a grin.

"Couldn't resist."

"I can tell you I'm not missing the constant abuse to my person." Dave sighed. "I'm living in peace and quiet—"

"You live with Travis, that's not—"

"—and away from the peanut gallery. It's glorious."

"I bet."

"I don't miss you at all," Dave declared, but his grin was probably ruining the effect.

"None of you."

"Well, we do miss you. There's only so much shit Martinez can take, and we prefer to even it out between the three of you."

"And who is this 'we', exactly? Because last time I checked, everyone was getting their share, not just us three."

"Fine, you may be my favorites."

Dave snorted. "Aww, you say the sweetest things... in between all the shit you say."

"I do like mixing it up."

"Any new gossip to share?"

Ian tossed his hair back with a grin. "I thought you'd never ask."

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Interest piqued, Dave sat up. He'd stopped pretending he wasn't a big gossip a long time ago, so he didn't even try to fool Ian.

"Jeremy's thinking of proposing."

That brought Dave short, and for a long moment he did nothing but stare at Ian.

"Wow," he finally muttered.

"Right?! I swear, I want to see the two of them at the altar so badly."

Dave cleared his throat. Get it together.

"You want to see everyone at the altar."

Ian chuckled. "Fair enough. But admit it, Jeremy and Pascal are at the top of everyone's list."

As Dave tilted his head, he went over the available options. Some people were too early into their relationships to get hitched—although he wouldn't count James and Eddie out, they might end up eloping any day now—but some...

"I'm still hoping the Judge pops the question," Dave admitted. "There's no way Martinez would say no."

"If that ever happens, we're popping the champagne, but you know that's unlikely."

Dave nodded. The scuttlebutt was that the Judge had sworn off marriage after his divorce, which was why the chances weren't high. And yet, there was something in there that kept Dave's hopes alive.

"Have you noticed that our top picks are the guys with the most famous partners?" Ian asked. "I haven't, before now."

"Ryan's boyfriend may actually be the most famous, since more people follow sports than politics."

"They're too new right now, despite their history, but if they slide into our top three within the year, we know we have a problem."

"Nah, we're more into the longest of long-term couples."

"There's that." Ian smiled. "You're right, I like that interpretation better."

"But Jeremy!" Dave shook his head, still in disbelief. "I assumed it would be Pascal who asked."

"Most of us did, which is why Martinez will end up with quite a payout once that bet is called."

"Do we know when or how?"

"Nope. We don't even know this much, officially. Someone who shall not be named overheard Jeremy and Martinez this morning, and the news spread like fire."

"Damn."

As Dave imagined that, the excitement of the news and the rush to share it with

others, he felt a pang in his chest. The work itself was one thing, but he missed the office, and his friends, and how invested—over-invested, depending on the interpretation—they got in each other's lives.

"I can't wait to tell Travis," he said. "He's going to love that."

"I bet. How's he handling this, by the way?"

Dave frowned. "He doesn't know yet."

"I meant this," Ian waved at Dave. "You with a broken leg, him working from home, the whole thing."

"He's been a great help, honestly. I'm a terrible patient—"

"Noo," came Ian's exaggerated protest, which made Dave laugh.

"Shocking, I know. But he's great, and careful, and he seems to know what I need before I tell him."

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"That telepathic thing you two have going on comes in handy in situations like this, I imagine."

"Well, there's nobody to call you out on your bullshit like a person who's known you since before you could grow out a proper beard."

Ian shrugged. "There's only one guy I still talk to from basic training, and that's every couple of months at best. You may envy me my cooking skills, but I envy you a relationship like that, and something tells me you wouldn't trade one for the other for anything."

Hoping he wasn't burning red, Dave waved him off.

"Not even your tamales are worth breaking in somebody new."

There was a pause, and when Dave glanced back at his friend, Ian had lost his smile and he was picking at the thread in the couch back cushion.

"I bet it would be a hard transition," he offered in a lowered voice, as if he was talking more to himself than Dave, but before Dave could react to that—how, he wasn't quite sure—he heard the front door open.

Turning around too fast made him hiss as pain shot down his leg, but what made him want to hiss even harder was the expression on Travis's face.

Or Travis in general, because the man looked like he'd been run down and then someone backed up one more time to finish the job.

The moment Travis noticed Ian, he straightened, but it was already too late. They were all paid big bucks to notice things, after all.

Thankfully, Ian didn't say anything, only stood up from the couch.

"Okay, I really have to go now," he said. "I'm going to make another delivery on Sunday, so if you want more of any particular dish or don't want a repeat of something from today, let me know before Saturday, okay?"

"You really don't have to—"

"Yeah, yeah, we've gone over this." Ian waved him off as he passed him. "Like I said, the deadline is Friday night, because I'm going shopping first thing on Saturday. See you, guys," he added, patting Travis on the shoulder on his way out.

And then he was gone, and Dave was perched on the couch while Travis was still too far away, looking like he wasn't sure how he'd gotten there.

This wouldn't do.

Dave got up slowly and grabbed his crutches but stopped himself before heading towards Travis, somehow sensing he should give him space.

It didn't mean he couldn't do anything, though.

After all, Ian's grandmother was right—food definitely helped with various ills.

"Our fridge is full, thanks to Ian, so we have our picks for dinner tonight. Tamales or a burrito the size of your forearm?"

Travis blinked once, then again.

"I'm not—" He paused before shaking his head. "I'd love some tamales, actually. But I need a shower first."

"Sure thing. I won't reheat them until you're back."

There were several questions Dave wanted to ask—what happened? How was the therapist? Was Travis going to go back there?—but he swallowed them all down.

An avalanche of questions wasn't what Travis needed from him right now, and Dave didn't need any telepathy to know that.

"Thanks." Travis finally moved from his place by the door and crossed the space in quick, easy steps, bypassing Dave altogether and heading straight upstairs. "I'll be back soon."

Narrowing his eyes at the loss of the touch that hadn't happened, Dave stared after Travis long after he disappeared from sight.

"One thing at a time," Dave muttered to himself in the end, returning to the couch. "One thing at a time."

It wasn't enough—far from it—but it was the best he could do right now.

Hopefully, the food and the company would be enough for Travis to lose some of the tension before bed.



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And if not, there was more than enough food for Dave to try again tomorrow.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

"These are unbelievable," Travis announced after swallowing the first bite of the tamale. "Seriously, he should be a professional chef."

"I told him that once, and apparently that's his backup plan once he's too old to work in the field."

"He won't be too old for a long time yet, and the world should know about these tamales."

Seriously, they were delicious, and Travis never wanted to eat anything else from now on.

"Once the world knows, there might not be enough for the two of us," Dave pointed out, which made Travis grunt in protest as he chewed another bite.

"He can never be a professional chef, then," he finally said. "Tough luck."

Dave chuckled.

"Maybe we can talk him into cooking for us full-time—all of us at the KRK, I mean."

Travis, who had already been imagining the two of them sitting down for dinner years from now, was momentarily thrown by the mention of the whole team.

Damn, the therapy had really messed with his head today. And that was only the first consultation! If the next ones were going to be this intense, he might not make it through. He was barely holding it together as it were.

"I bet we could talk the boss into switching lunch providers if Ian was an option," he said, staring at his plate. "At the last barbeque, Kalei devoured his burrito in three bites."

"And only gave up that last one because it was Vic who went looking for it."

"Yeah, nobody else would have pried it out of his cold, dead hands."

Dave shook his head. "These two, I swear. If Kalei wasn't so stubborn, they'd be ridiculously happy."

Travis felt his throat constrict, unease tingling at the base of his spine.

"Not everyone needs a relationship to be happy," he heard himself say, only to watch the light dim in Dave's eyes.

Or maybe Travis was reading too much into things.

After an entire hour of blood-letting earlier, that was a very real possibility.

"Of course, but I meant specifically these two," Dave said. "Everyone but Kalei knows that Vic is head over heels."

"Kalei's not, though."

Watching Dave's face, Travis could almost see him sifting through the responses, from what the hell, you've been moaning about these two at least once month

yourself to what crawled up your ass, until finally landing on:

"Kalei doesn't want to admit it, and that's a huge difference. But anyway, I have some truly juicy gossip," Dave redirected, clearly not wanting to delve deeper into Kalei's inner life. "Guess who's proposing soon."

Travis frowned, whiplashed from all the quick and sharp turns in the conversation. He bought himself some time by taking another bite of the tamale, despite having lost what little appetite he'd had.

"Pascal wouldn't spoil the surprise, so disqualifying those two, everyone other than Martinez and the Judge is fair game, really." Travis mentally went over the available candidates. "Okay, I'm guessing James is the one jumping the gun."

"Nope." Dave shook his head with a triumphant smile. "Jeremy."

Travis almost dropped the food in his hand.

"No way."

"Everyone's shocked and out of luck with their bet, aside from Martinez who's about to be rolling in cash and planning a bachelor party of Jeremy's worst nightmares."

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"I can't believe it," Travis muttered.

"Yeah, well, I couldn't, either, at first, but now it's the greatest news ever. Don't you love it when the quiet ones surprise you?"

I got a reminder today about the last time someone surprised me in the realm of romantic woes, so not really, Travis thought but obviously couldn't say.

"I guess it's hard to wrap my head around it," he offered instead. "Jeremy, of all people."

Dave looked down at his plate. "Well, I don't think anyone has any doubts about how he feels about Pascal."

"Of course, he's clearly gone on the man." Travis scratched his jaw. "But he was always... I don't know, it seemed like he was letting it happen to him, not actively pursuing it, if that makes any sense."

"Letting it happen suggests way too much passivity. And while Jeremy hasn't been publicly wining and dining Pascal or anything, he's always... acutely aware of Pascal whenever they are in the same space."

Travis opened his mouth to argue that this was who they all were—veterans didn't just lose their situational awareness, ever. He himself knew where everyone was in his vicinity, especially Dave, who was his focal point.

But then he caught himself.

Why were they even arguing about this? This was great news, and he was nitpicking it instead of celebrating.

"You're right, Jeremy's not passive," he finally said. "Still, he managed to surprise us all with this."

"Yep." Dave looked up at that. "Good surprise, though."

"Definitely." Travis straightened, wanting to bring back that light in Dave's eyes from earlier but not knowing how. "I bet Pascal will be over the moon."

Dave beamed at that, and Travis let himself relax.

"Oh, yeah," Dave said with a grin. "I always assumed he dreamed of getting married and only held back because of Jeremy."

"You think?"

"Yeah. I mean, I did bet on Pascal being the one who proposed, but only because I figured he might get tired of wishing and hoping and finally decide to at least shoot his shot by asking. And Jeremy wouldn't tell him no."

Jeremy wouldn't tell him no.

For some reason, that part echoed in Travis's brain again and again.

Jeremy wouldn't tell him no.

"Huh." Dave sat up, the grin disappearing. "I guess that's why Pascal didn't ask."

Shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, Travis felt like he missed something.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Pascal wanted to get married, but he likely gave up on that plan when he fell in love with a guy who didn't—or at least we all thought he didn't. Jeremy very rarely tells him no, so Pascal proposing would put Jeremy in a tight spot. Either he'd say no and hurt Pascal, or he'd say yes for Pascal's sake, which would be even worse. So Pascal didn't ask." Dave slumped in his chair again. "But that's all guessing, of course."

Travis, who had never analyzed anyone's relationship this deeply, didn't know what to say.

"It all makes sense, when you put it like this," he finally offered, earning himself another smile.

"Yeah?"

"I didn't think about it this way before, but with everything laid out like that... It makes sense. Definitely more sense than my comment about Jeremy's passive stance on things." Travis shrugged. "But then, what do I know about romantic relationships?"

He realized he'd made a mistake before he even finished that last sentence, but he couldn't quite grasp why. Was it because it also implied that Dave had no idea what he was talking about? Travis hadn't meant to suggest that, he was only talking about himself.

Whatever it was, though, he knew he screwed up the moment he watched Dave's face fall again.

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"I think I should go lie down." Dave pushed his empty plate away. "In bed, since the couch will soon have a dent in the shape of my ass."

There was a part of Travis who wanted to escape into a joke, say something about how great that shape would be, but the rest of him...

The rest of him wanted to take care of Dave more.

"Whatever you want." He got up. "Are we going up with an assist or are we doing a fireman carry?"

Dave shook his head. "I can try to go up on my own. You can finish your dinner."

"I did finish, and besides, let's leave going up by yourself for another time, okay? Especially since I'm available."

"I'll have to start using that leg or my muscles will weaken too much," Dave muttered but still threw his arm around Travis's shoulders, so Travis counted that as a win.

"I'm not arguing that, simply start with something other than climbing stairs on your own while I'm here, okay?" Travis risked a small smile. "Anyway, if you're good now and let me assist you, I'll massage your thigh later, so the muscles will be taken care of, too."

If Travis wasn't looking at him, he would have missed the way Dave's eyebrows shot up before his face relaxed.

"You don't—" Dave started, but, knowing what was likely to follow, Travis tightened his grip on Dave's hip and cut him off.

"You know I'm not the type of man who offers to do things he doesn't want to do. But if you don't want a massage, then by all means, let's skip it."

"I didn't say that."

And there it was—the twist at the corner of Dave's mouth, the softer tone, the gentle give-in. For all that Dave could be as impatient as Travis sometimes, he was incredibly patient in moments like this, forgiving Travis's every misstep.

Travis would like to think he tried to do the same, but the truth was, he was bad at it in the heat of things. He tended to say something stupid, or storm off in anger, or give as bad as he felt he'd gotten. In the long run, he forgave Dave for everything, too, but in the moment, he usually couldn't quite get there.

Whereas Dave offered him grace every goddamn time, usually within a few minutes.

They made their way up slowly, but Dave was already sweating a bit when they hit the upper level. And once they got to his bedroom, he stretched on the bed with a loud sigh.

"I can try on my own", my ass, Travis thought, turning away from the enticing sight to get a grip. He'd offered Dave a massage, not sex, and he needed to remember that.

"The massage oil is in there." Dave pointed at the nightstand, the handle of the drawer just out of reach for him. "It smells like peaches, fair warning."

Ignoring the bottle of lube that rolled forward, Travis grabbed the massage oil and closed the drawer quickly before scrunching his nose when he opened the bottle and



the scent hit him.

"Why would you?" he complained, but as he helped push Dave's shorts down, he got distracted by the sight of him in those close-fitted briefs.

"It was half-price if I bought it with the one I usually use."

With that, Dave crossed his arms behind his head, and Travis knew Dave wasn't trying to seduce him on purpose, he knew, and yet he had to take another inhale of the fake peaches to stop himself from getting hard.

"I told you, you need to resist the special offers." Travis settled on his knees next to Dave's thigh. "Half the time it's not even worth it."

"That's not true. Nine times out of ten, I'm happy with what I've got. Okay, eight," he corrected at the incredulous look Travis shot him. "Eight out of ten."

"You've got to be kidding."

"I'm not." Dave let out a hum as Travis ran his hands up and down Dave's thigh, pressing circles along the sides of it, while also trying not to disturb the lower part of the leg in the cast. "You only remember the things I complained about and forget about all the good ones."

"We took that awful coffee to work so we wouldn't have to drink it or throw it out." Travis dug in his thumbs and kept them there for a long moment before relaxing the grip. "And most people didn't want to drink it, even for free."

"Melissa and Keri loved it," Dave argued between grunts. "Aamir likes it, too. We did them a favor."

"Domea favor and stop buying shit simply because it's cheaper. I'll even chip in if lavender oil somehow becomes too expensive for you."

"I'm not using our joint budget to buy myself massage oil."

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Travis rolled his eyes. "Let's call it our oil, problem solved."

Dave hummed and tilted his head back as Travis rubbed the underside of his thigh, and, fuck, all of Travis's efforts to distract himself went to hell. His cock twitched, growing harder, and he could only hope Dave wouldn't care to look.

Travis didn't have the same luxury, though—Dave's cock was right there, nearly brushing against one of Travis's hands, and while it wasn't hard, it didn't have to be to make an impression.

Mouthwatering wasn't a hyperbole in the slightest.

"Fuuck," Dave let out through his teeth, and Travis faltered in his movements as the images of different circumstances for the closeness and those sounds flashed through his mind.

But it was only a stubborn knot of muscles—one Travis had gone back to again and again, and now stayed focused on as he'd already dealt with all the other tougher spots.

"Come on," he muttered quietly to the muscles in question, rubbing the skin that was now red and very warm. "Come on, let go already."

Dave inhaled sharply, and Travis glanced up right away, worried about hurting him, but instead he clocked the flushed expression and the heat in Dave's eyes.

Only then did Travis realize what he was saying—and what it usually meant, in those

different, far better circumstances.

Dropping his gaze again didn't help, either, because he was now faced with Dave's growing bulge.

Oops.

So much for the platonic massage.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The heat had been simmering inside Dave from the very moment Travis had put his hands on Dave's thigh, so close to his groin, but it was only there in the background since Travis was really working those muscles—while it wasn't painful, it wasn't all pleasure, either.

At least until Travis had whispered those words and something flipped immediately in Dave's head.

He was ready for a different kind of rubbing and petting now.

It was gratifying to see Travis's cock interested as well, but Travis wasn't the one dealing with an injury, which meant...

Dave didn't know what it meant, other than what he'd already known—he was so gone for this man that it was ridiculous.

Not to mention dangerous, like the smile Travis was offering him now.

"I'm all for a massage with a happy ending, but if you don't wanna, that's fine, too."

"It's my leg that's broken, not my dick," Dave tossed back, but when Travis leaned in for a kiss, he melted back against the mattress, surrendering. "You can check for yourself, if you want."

Travis chuckled against his lips. "Generous of you."

"I know, right?"

Dave started to pull his hands out from under his head, but Travis stopped him.

"No, leave them there." He dropped a kiss on Dave's jaw, then another one. "I thought I might ride you like this, if you promise not to move."

Fuck.

"Yeah." Already out of breath, Dave didn't think he was going to last very long, but he was definitely going to try. "Yeah, whatever you want."

"Good."

Travis bit his neck right over the collarbone before sucking on it, gently at first, then harder.

"Oops," he whispered as he pulled back, with no real regret in his voice. "I think that's going to stay for a bit."

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It was rare for them to leave marks, especially where they would be visible at work. Dave wasn't going anywhere any time soon, though, so...

"Fine by me." He tried arching his back, but it was hard to get any kind of leverage with his hands behind his head and one leg out of commission. "It would be even better if you started on that ride already."

"Mmm, I'm not sure." Travis dropped a kiss after a kiss along Dave's left shoulder, biting lightly every once in a while. "I'm in no hurry."

Dave slumped against the mattress, knowing that if Travis wanted to go for slow foreplay, they'd move at a glacial pace that would still leave Dave more out of breath than a hard and fast fuck, for some reason. He needed to conserve some energy, if he was to have any hopes of surviving this.

He wasn't above playing a bit dirty, too.

"I'm not sure how long I can have you in my lap with my leg being how it is. You'd better hurry."

Somehow, it wasn't hard to admit it like this, as a part of sex, a part of teasing and getting what he wanted. Put him on the couch and ask him how he was feeling, and Dave would deny any discomfort whatsoever, but this? He didn't mind this, at all.

Especially since it got Travis moving.

"I want you to know that I can tell you're playing me," he said, getting off the bed to

undress quickly.

Unable to touch, Dave only stared at Travis—his body almost as familiar as Dave's own after so many years.

"Noted," he offered as an afterthought, because Travis was grabbing the lube now, and getting back onto the bed, only this time situating himself astray Dave's lap, a bit higher than usual.

Then he hovered, not sitting down fully. "Is this good?"

"You can't maintain that position."

Travis dropped his head with a sigh.

"How about you don't challenge me like this? You know how I get."

"I want you to actually sit on me." Dave tilted his head a bit but still maintained eye contact. "I want to feel your weight on me, and I want to fill you up and then watch you bounce on my cock. I can't have that when you're so far away."

"Fuck, Dave." Travis opened the lube with a shaky hand. "You're too hot for your own good, has anyone told you that?"

"You might have, once or twice." Curling his fingers under the pillow, Dave licked his lips as Travis began to prepare himself. "Let me touch you, come on."

"Nope."

Dave swallowed hard as Travis added a second finger.

"Please, I can't—"

"Fuck, you're really desperate now, aren't you?" Travis's eyelids fluttered close, a sure sign he was feeling the stretch and it was good. "Thinking about how you'd put your hands on my thighs? Or on my hips, to try and pull me closer?"

Yes. Yes, that, and more, Dave didn't even care at this point, he simply wanted to feel Travis's skin under his palms, Travis's muscles shifting as he rose and fell on Dave's lap.

"Please," Dave moaned, not caring how needy he sounded. Travis had already seen through him, so what was the point? As long as it got Dave what he wanted... "Please, I'll be good, I swear."

Then Travis was suddenly right there, kissing the breath out of Dave as if he was trying to lick the words out of his mouth.

"I should've made you beg a long time ago," he whispered against Dave's mouth. "It's the hottest thing I've ever heard."

Dave almost keened as the heat spread through him.

"No, it would be better if I could touch you. I'd take care of you, pull your cock just right, you know I would."

"Of course you would." Travis pressed his cheek against Dave's, hot skin against hot skin. "But I love having you like this."

Clenching his fingers on the pillow so hard his hands hurt, Dave swallowed back the words that had no place in this moment. This was all about sex and how good it felt.



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"Sit on me already, then," he breathed out. "Stop teasing and—"

Travis kissed him again, hard and fast, but then he did sit up. He rested one of his hands on Dave's chest and grabbed Dave's cock with the other.

"You sure you're ready?" the asshole asked, as if he couldn't feel it, and Dave wanted to scream.

"Drag this out more, and I'll come before you get to feel me inside you."

"Before I get to, huh?" Travis grinned. "What an honor."

"Don't you forget it."

"Impossible."

Despite the teasing, Travis finally moved back a little and started lowering himself on Dave's cock.

Fuuuck.

Dave tried to buck his hips, but with Travis's weight on him, and with the cast on his leg, any kind of serious leverage was impossible without risking another injury. He still tried, leaning harder on his arms as he arched his back, but that barely did anything.

"So impatient." Travis shook his head, even though he, too, was panting now, his

chest glistening with sweat. "I'll get you there, and you know it."

I do, Dave thought, tilting his head back again, eyes shut and hands clenched, the pleasure sneaking up on him, teasing at the edges when he expected an overwhelming wave. They'd almost never done it like this, with an unhurried roll of Travis's hips and the way he tightened his muscles around Dave's cock despite appearing as if he had all the time in the world.

They'd definitely never done it with Dave's hands tucked away.

Clearing his throat, Dave opened his eyes again and looked straight at Travis.

"You just want me to beg again."

It was supposed to be a complaint, but it didn't quite work out like one—more of a breathless admission, an invitation to something Dave couldn't quite grasp.

Travis brushed his fingers over Dave's nipples, as if he hadn't yet tortured him enough.

"After today, I may want to hear you beg all day, every day, for as long as I live."

Dave's heart came to a halt before picking up in a rapid clip before his mind could catch up, before he could tell himself that, no, it didn't mean anything, it was only the heat of the moment, a fantasy of having Dave at Travis's mercy, not of having Dave forever.

Before he could spiral any further, Travis pressed his blunt nail against Dave's nipple, sending a sharp zigzag of pleasure down his body and distracting him fully.

"Come on already," Dave whispered as he stared at Travis barely blinking. "You

know you want this, too."

A lazy smile bloomed on Travis's face and Dave prepared himself for even more teasing, but then Travis angled his hips a bit and his eyelids fluttered close.

"Fuck, that's good."

Everything became faster and harder after that—Travis's rhythm, Dave's breathing, the swirls of tension and pleasure running all over his body—and Dave might have let out some more pleas, but he couldn't be sure, too focused on how good it felt, how right.

He was going to be hurting all over once they were done, but he didn't care.

What he did care about was Travis coming apart on his lap, pumping his cock and biting his lower lip.

"All day, every day, for as long as I live."

Travis's words echoed in Dave's head, and they fit this moment perfectly, because if Dave could have him like this, right there, until the day he died, he would be the happiest man on Earth.

"Come on me, yeah," he whispered now, hands coming to grip Travis's hips before he could register the thought of doing so. "Show me."

And Travis did, streaks of come landing on Dave's stomach and chest as Travis threw his head back and groaned, voice halting as if out of breath.

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Dave's orgasm hit a second later, almost hard enough to be painful, and he closed his eyes, lost for words but floating in pleasure, in tightness and release, in the feeling of Travis's skin under his hands.

Then Travis fell forward, dropping his head against Dave's collarbone, and the scent of him, of them, hit Dave's right in the chest. He hid his face in Travis's hair, chasing more of it, and as the shivers of post-coital high ran right under his skin, Dave didn't think of anything, didn't analyze, or wonder, or hope.

In that moment, he had everything he wanted. Everything he needed.

Nothing else mattered.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

If leaving for work without Dave was weird, arriving at the office alone was even worse—there was an itch under Travis's skin, clearly stating that something was off, something wasn't right, and although he knew what it was, that answer didn't help him much.

He'd been coming to work with Dave at his side for so many years now that anything different seemed like a mistake that deserved immediate fixing.

And yet, there was no quick fix, only months of healing, and needing to wait, and pretending that spending so much time apart wasn't as painful as it actually was.

After dropping off his backpack in their small office, Travis headed to the

kitchen—both for a coffee and a catch-up with his friends. None of them had given him any grief so far, and the group chats offered the usual amount of chatter, but he wouldn't be surprised if someone blamed him for what had happened and treated him differently because of it.

Hell, he blamed himself, so how could he expect anyone else not to do so?

Ian was the first one who spotted him, and he offered Travis a smile and a nod.

"Look who's here!"

That, of course, prompted everyone to turn around, so Travis had no time to take them one by one but was hit with Clay, Martinez, and Jeremy staring at him all at once.

After a second-long pause that felt like forever, Martinez raised his eyebrows.

"Huh, I feel like I know this guy but can't quite place him. It must have been forever since I saw him."

Travis snorted, relaxing a bit under the familiarity of Martinez's teasing.

"I can see you missed me greatly."

"In your dreams." Martinez sat up and dropped his smile. "How's Dave, for real?"

They all had updates on the main group chat, of course, but Martinez was right to question them, since Dave tended to downplay things and never admitted he was hurting or struggling, instead focusing his narrative on boredom and wishing he was at work.

"The leg's as good as it can be, fortunately, but it's hard to juggle the healing and making sure other muscles don't weaken too much."

"Yeah." Martinez rubbed at his side, maybe remembering his own recovery after getting shot. "It's a pain, no pun intended."

"We got an exercise plan from Melody, and we're following it. Dave just wishes he could do more and, frankly, I don't blame him."

As he finished, Travis's gaze fell on Jeremy, who was pressing his lips together and staring at the mug in his hand.

"What?" Travis asked before he could talk himself out of it.

Then again, he didn't want to overthink it later and wonder what Jeremy had wanted to say. He also didn't want to appear like he wasn't ready to face the consequences of this mess.

Jeremy lifted his head and caught Travis's gaze. "What do you mean?"

"I can see you have things to say." Travis made sure his voice was steady and calm. "I'm not trying to pick a fight here, to be clear. If you want to say something, I'm open to hearing it. I know I fucked up."

"Which time?"

And, ouch. Maybe Travis should have picked someone else for this.

Not everyone would be willing to confront him like this, though—Jeremy didn't give a fuck about appearing nice over being honest.

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"Which time do you want to talk about?" Travis tried, aware of the other three watching—and probably judging—him.

Jeremy squared his shoulders. "Frankly, I don't want to talk about any of them, because it's not like you listened before."

"Fair." Travis nodded sharply, knowing it was true. "But I'm listening now, and while you don't owe me anything, you clearly have things to say, and I don't want things to fester between us if we can avoid it."

Look at me, trying to communicate properly, the dry voice at the back of his head supplied. Doctor Kumar would be proud.

Fully facing Travis now, Jeremy held his gaze for an uncomfortably long time before nodding.

"Fine. I'm pissed that your partner had to break his leg during a fucking training exercise for you to see you've been a match always ready to burn the shit to the ground for months now. I know people had told you this, one way or another, but you blew us all off, so while I appreciate you taking responsibility now, it's too late."

Travis nodded. "You're right."

What else could he say? This didn't hurt as much as the dressing-down from Kalei in that hospital room had, but it still stung. Jeremy was a guy whom everyone respected highly around here, and his opinions counted for a lot—partially because he didn't offer them too often.

You asked for this, Travis reminded himself.

"It is too late, and I can't go back in time and change things," he said. "Trust me, I would if I could. I'd prefer to break both my legs instead of one of Dave's."

"Yeah, maybe the solution is that no one breaks anything," Clay said from his place at the small table. He'd been silent from the moment Travis had shown up, and he was frowning now. "It won't help anybody, including Dave, if you think your injuries are somehow okay."

"That's not what I meant—"

"That's how you've been acting." Jeremy put his mug at the table and crossed his arms, making Travis's arms twitch in response, wanting to mirror the gesture. "You've been taking risks as if nothing else mattered but the rush of it."

Travis swallowed back a protest, because... Well, because he couldn't argue with that, could he? He had been pushing it, he had been feeling reckless and unbalanced, and he'd somehow found a flicker of comfort on that edge of danger.

He should have known better. He'd seen what happened to the guys who couldn't turn the heat down and always chased the next high.

But he'd ignored all of the warnings— from Kalei, and Ian, and a few other guys, some more direct and some disguised as jokes and taunts—because whatever was going on with him certainly wasn't PTSD, which meant he was fine, only a bit of an adrenaline junkie.

Thinking that way now seemed stupid, but that was honestly how he'd felt before. As if PTSD was the only option. As if he could only be perfectly fine or suffer from a raging PTSD that destroyed his life, with nothing in between.



He cleared his throat. "I'm working on it now."

It wasn't an easy admission, but he made sure to meet everyone's eyes, showing them he was serious. These were his teammates and they had his back, and a part of having his back meant not letting him off the hook too easily when he screwed up.

"Good." Jeremy dropped his arms to his sides before picking up his mug. "Glad to hear it."

With that, he headed to the door, clapping Travis on the shoulder on his way out.

Martinez followed a moment later, with a reassuring smile and a pat of his own. "What he said."

Inhaling slowly, Travis looked at Clay, who rolled his eyes at him.

"Yeah, if you're really committed to working on it, we're good."

"And taking care of Dave," Ian added, "but we don't have to tell you that, do we?"

This one was easy.

"No, you don't."

"Figured." Ian nodded. "Now, what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be working from home, rechecking all of Kalei's beloved procedures?"

"Watch it." Travis turned to make sure their boss wasn't there. "You know he has ears everywhere."

"I'm certain he knows there's no one around here who loves procedures more than he

does."

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"He still wishes we would."

To be fair, most of them did appreciate having clear directives on the adequate responses for any and all situations—even ifallof them hated the fact that they'd needed to create one for a kidnapping of one of their own after what happened to Eddie.

"No one could ever compete." Ian shook his head. "Unless you're falling for them, too, now that you're going over them with a fine toothcomb?"

Travis chuckled. "I'm not changing that much. That said, while I'm pretty sure Kalei gave me this task as a punishment, the joke may be on him, because I already have pages of notes."

"Or it's a way back into his good graces." Clay sat back in his chair. "Offering to make his beloveds even better."

"We'll see, I guess." Travis didn't have big hopes of making things up to Kalei any time soon, but he still had some. Treating Kalei as the ultimate authority figure had been carved into Travis back in his military days and there was no going back. "Today I'm only here to finish the two reports I have pending. There's no way I want to bring Vic's ire on myself on top of everything else."

"It would have probably worked better if you'd filed them on time in the first place." Vic paused in the kitchen entrance with a frown. "Alas, here we are."

Fuck.

"I'll go do them now."

"Very well. I'll walk you to your office, then, since there's something else I want to discuss with you."

Double fuck. Travis left the kitchen quickly, with Vic on his heels, and he was already sitting down in his chair when he remembered he hadn't actually poured himself any coffee. Which meant he was going to have to push through those reports—and whatever else Vic needed from him—without a caffeine boost.

"Stop looking like that." Vic took a seat on one of the chairs at the side table after turning it to face Travis. "I'm not here to pile any more shit on you."

"That's a relief," Travis admitted. "But I wouldn't blame you if you did."

Vic shrugged. "I'm not a mental health professional, so I wouldn't be able to tell you anything that hasn't already been said. I might have had an urge to go all 'hurt Dave again and they won't find your body', but then I remembered you'd have likely buried yourself alive first before I could get to you if that happened, so. I'm letting it go."

Travis stared at Vic for a long moment.

"You know you're one of the scariest people at this company, right?"

With a flash of teeth, Vic grinned, which made Travis realize that he'd never seen him grin before. Smile, yes. Laugh, yes. But not grin.

"At any other company, I'd be offended not to be considered the scariest, but at this one, I'll take it as the compliment it is."

Chuckling, Travis relaxed back into his chair.

Damn, it was good to be back.

A flash of guilt ran through him at the thought, and he glanced at Dave's empty desk. It wasn't fair that Travis got to be here like this, hanging out with their co-workers and friends, when Dave was stuck back at home.

The only thing Travis could do now, though, was take care of his shit.

"Go on, then." He sat up and turned his computer on. "Lay it on me, what do you need?"

The sooner he was done here, the sooner he could go back home.

There was no place he'd rather be, anyway.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dave had to pretty much throw Travis out of the house on Sunday morning to make him go to the bi-weekly basketball game with the guys, because Travis was ready to forego any amount of fun for... Dave wasn't even sure what. Travis was either trying to punish himself or resisting leaving Dave alone, and Dave hated both of those options.

Unfortunately, once Travis had finally left, Dave was tired and cranky, and honestly ready to throw in the towel and bury himself in bed until his damn leg healed itself—or until he combusted out of sheer frustration.

The list of all the things he couldn't do—normal, everyday things, not even anything strenuous—seemed to only be growing. He couldn't get to the bottom drawer of the freezer, or drop to the floor and retrieve his favorite pen from under the couch. He couldn't easily change out of his sweatpants after he'd spilled a few blackberries on

them, which meant they were probably going to stain for good.

Hell, he couldn't even watch the very last minutes of the Eastern Conference Finals because he badly needed to pee and with how long it took him to get to the bathroom these days, waiting until the end of the game was out of the question.

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By the time Travis returned, Dave was lying on the couch, holding a pillow to his chest and staring at the TV with an intensity that a reality show about selling stupidly overpriced mansions definitely did not deserve.

"Everyone misses you," Travis told him as soon as the door clicked shut behind him. "It made me wonder if we shouldn't host a little get-together, actually. We could barbecue some food—or rather argue with Kalei until he inevitably takes over—drinksome beers, and then stuff ourselves full only to complain about it afterwards."

A part of Dave liked the idea—they'd rarely hosted more than two or three people at once but always had fun at Kalei's when he threw company-wide barbecues. Not seeing everyone for almost two weeks now had made Dave miss them and really appreciate the built-in social life at work. While a few people had come by to see him, and others texted and stuff, it wasn't the same.

There was a bigger part of Dave that didn't want the team to see him like this, though. He knew it was stupid, of course, but it was also the truth. He wouldn't be able to do any actual hosting or mingling, forced to sit back and watch as Travis and others easily handled everything around him. To top it all off, he would be no fun. He was used to being the life of the party, ceding ground only to Martinez, but Dave didn't have it in him now. Hurting and frustrated, he was a moping mess unless Travis distracted him properly, which wasn't a viable plan for recovery—or for anything, really.

Still, it was the only one Dave got, these days.

"Hey, you alright?" Travis stepped to the couch and squatted next to it.

Another thing I can't do, Dave thought and sighed, slowly turning onto his back and staring at the ceiling.

"I'm in no shape for a party," he finally admitted, out of several discarded options for a response. "Maybe some other time."

"There's no shape—"

"Then I'm in no mood," Dave cut him off without looking away from the ceiling. "Honestly. It's a good idea once I'm better, but not now."

Travis didn't say anything for a long moment, then rose back onto his feet.

Dave rubbed his eyes. Shit. He had to stop mentally listing everything Travis could do that he couldn't or else he would lose his mind—and possibly a friend.

He could almost hear a screech in his head at that, and didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Wow, he was seriously moping if he'd gone this far.

Needing a distraction, he finally met Travis's gaze. Dave was definitely not in the mood for sex, which meant...

"How about we order a pizza or two?"

Travis stared at him for a few long seconds before nodding.

"Pizza it is. With cheese sticks."



Now a smile came a little easier. "Yesss. You know the way to a man's heart."

"To yours, definitely."

All too well, I'm afraid.

"As much melted cheese as our arteries can sustain, and then some," Travis added, turning away as he pulled out his phone. "Coming right up."

Dave ignored a familiar twinge of disappointment, since he really should have known better. He'd already had as much of Travis's love and attention as he was ever going to get, and while it wasn't the kind of love Dave had hoped might develop as time went on, it was better than anything he could get from anyone else.

He'd tried that, after all, a few months ago. It didn't go well.

And yet, he couldn't get rid of the last remnants of hope of something shifting, of Travis one day realizing the same things Dave had—that a romantic relationship wasn't so hard if you met the right person, and that they'd both met the right person already, on a sunny afternoon eighteen years ago.

Closing his eyes, Dave pulled the pillow he was still holding closer to his chest and took a deep breath, then another, trying to push back that feeling of not enough. It would only lead to resentment, which was the last thing he wanted.

Colin would be proud Dave actually remembered some of the lessons from marriage therapy he'd tried to instill in him.

"Done," Travis announced from up close, and Dave opened his eyes, startled, only to see Travis leaning over the back of the couch. "Food should be here in twenty-five minutes, so I'm gonna shower real quick and be right back. Unless there's something

you need first?"

Dave shook his head and watched Travis leave, before slowly sitting up and rolling himself onto his feet—one foot, really—while gripping the arm of the couch for balance.

There were many things he needed help with now, and while he didn't like it, he had no choice but to accept it. He could do other things, however, even if slower and more unsteady, so he wasn't going to bother Travis with them.

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He was going to white-knuckle it through this recovery no matter what.

\* \* \*

Of course, white-knuckling it and trying to do things on his own wasn't so easy when he had a partner trained in paying attention to his surroundings.

Not only would Travis hand him a glass of water before Dave could fully sit upright from his slump to reach for it, but he also fetched him the second package of cheese sticks, a paper towel, and the remote Dave dropped when he tried to grab the paper towel roll from the coffee table.

It was honestly embarrassing how clumsy Dave was now, but Travis didn't comment on it even once.

Which was the worst part of it, in a way, because if Travis had teased him, Dave wouldn't have even raised an eyebrow. That's what they did, after all—constantly ribbing each other and not taking each other too seriously.

But there was little to no teasing tonight, both of them in their heads—or maybe Travis was really that invested in following the ridiculous plot of the show they'd put on. The crime was convoluted, the prosecutor's case was sketchy at best, and while Dave had checked out of the show halfway through the episode, he'd seen enough to know the cops had mishandled critical evidence.

Finally, when the episode was over, he decided to put himself out of his misery at least for the day, and go to bed early. There was hoping tomorrow would be better,

but for now, he was done.

Waiting until Travis busied himself in the kitchen with the pizza boxes and plates, Dave stood up on his own again and grabbed the crutches. He knew he had no chance of going upstairs without Travis noticing, but he could at least get a head start.

Or not.

"You heading up?" Travis appeared in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, and when Dave nodded, he stepped closer immediately. "Okay, let's do this."

"No," Dave protested too loudly, stopping Travis in his tracks. "No, thanks, I'll be fine," he added in a softer tone, even though he didn't meet Travis's gaze as he put his crutches on the first step.

"I thought we went over this—"

"Well, that was before, now it's later, and I want to do this on my own, okay?"

Dave snapping was a truly rare thing, so it made them both pause. He immediately felt guilty, of course, but he was determined to stand his ground on this one.

"Sorry, it's... I really need to do this myself."

For a minute there, Travis looked like he was going to argue.

Then, he nodded.

"Okay."

Still, he didn't move from his place already at the bottom of the stairs, so after a couple of seconds of staring, Dave resigned himself to asking.

"You're not going to watch me go up, are you?"

Narrowing his eyes briefly, Travis shrugged. "Humor me and my overbearing tendencies."

How about you humormeand back off, Dave wanted to say, but he thankfully swallowed the words back. He really was tired of his own bullshit today.

"Fine," he gritted out before facing away from Travis and climbing the first step, then the next one, and the next.

It was slow going, and his arms ached more than when he had Travis to lean on, for sure, but he was doing this. He was going up the fucking stairs on his own, and it might be a silly thing to be proud of, but tonight, Dave would take it.

He needed that win.

Unfortunately, his body wasn't as happy with him, and he was a sweaty mess of tight muscles by the time he got to the top of the stairs.

How ridiculous was that?

"You good?" Travis spoke up from below, and Dave would bet everything he owned that if he asked Travis for help now, the man wouldn't even blink, wouldn't throw it in his face, because he understood Dave's thirst for independence more than perhaps anyone Dave had ever met.

And yet, the words wouldn't leave his mouth.

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He was already depending on Travis for so many things that he couldn't handle anything more tonight.

Tomorrow, maybe. But not tonight.

Even if it meant a shower that would last forever or a half-assed massage of his thigh because Dave couldn't get the same angle Travis had and couldn't dig as deep.

"I'm good," Dave told him without turning back. "See you tomorrow."

It wasn't until he was in his room and sitting down on the bed for a minute to give his body a break that he realized it was going to be the first night since the accident that they wouldn't sleep in the same bed.

There was a pang in his chest at that, then another when he realized it was all his doing. He'd made it sound like Travis wasn't welcome in his bed tonight.

And sure, Dave had zero desire to have sex, but they could have just gone to sleep. It wasn't like they'd had sex every night for the last two weeks, there were two or three nights in between when Dave had fallen asleep pretty much the moment his head hit the pillow and woken up in the middle of the night to see Travis asleep next to him.

For whatever reason, he'd needed a break from everything tonight, though. And now he had it.

If only it felt better than it actually did.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"So, how have you been?" Doctor Kumar asked, already a familiar question after only a few sessions.

They were meeting twice a week now, which seemed way too much for him at the start, but he'd kind of... gotten used to the idea.

While Travis wouldn't want to do this forever, he could see how it was helping him focus on his reactions and interpretations of things. He didn't like it much when Doctor Kumar offered a different point of view for certain things, but it was honestly useful.

"Travis?" she prompted him now, and he realized he hadn't answered her question.

"Pretty good, I guess."

He paused at that, but he already knew what was coming—her silence. She was good at waiting him out when he tried to skirt on a short, easy answer.

"It was different," he finally said to the art piece on the wall. "I went to the office on Friday and again today, and on one hand, it was weird, going there without Dave. It felt off the entire time. On the other, it was nice to see my coworkers. I got a talking to, but it wasn't as bad as I feared, and it seems like we're good now."

"Tell me about how it went."

As Travis gave her a recap of what had happened, he started thinking that maybe she wouldn't see it as he did, maybe she would tell him that things were worse than he'd assumed and he needed to do better than this, if he wanted to truly make up for his mistakes.

"It sounds like you have good friends over there," she said instead. "Ones who would be honest about how they're feeling but also give you grace as you're working on your issues."

Travis shifted in his seat. He would never put it in those words, exactly, but she wasn't wrong.

He focused on the easier part. "Yeah, we have a great team at work, like I told you before, and some of them have become close friends."

"You mentioned being relieved that after leaving the military you were able to find another group of people you enjoy spending time with."

"It's more than enjoyment, actually. Having people at my back is priceless, in our line of work but also in general."

"And being the kind of person who has other people's backs."

"Yes, of course."

"How do you view your relationships, in general?"

Travis frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You have family ties, a close-knit group at work, a partner with whom you live, a former commander turned boss... It looks like you tend to gravitate towards solid, long-lasting relationships."

Snorting, he rubbed his jaw.



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"Nobody has ever said I'm into long-lasting relationships, myself included."

"Why not?"

"I don't... I'm not interested in a long-lasting, committed romantic relationship, and I've never been in one."

Doctor Kumar stared at him for a few seconds, but this time it didn't seem like she was waiting him out, more like she had something to say.

"What?" Travis sighed. "Please don't tell me that not wanting such a thing is somehow a flaw I need to fix."

"Not being interested in a romantic relationship is not a flaw or something to fix," she said. "However, it is worth exploring why you're so adamant about this. What don't you like about the idea of being in such a relationship?"

"I'mso adamant, because many people are judgmental about somebody being single by choice."

"I see. And that's what you don't like? Other people telling you what's best?"

"No, I just..." He huffed. "I have a great life, and I honestly don't feel like anything's missing. Going out there and looking for someone to build a relationship with when I have everything I need feels counterproductive. I'd rather spend that time with Dave, or with my other friends, instead of fulfilling someone else's idea about what I should be doing."

"So it's not commitment that bothers you, but more the fact that you'd have to take away from what you already have to give to that other person. Is that correct?"

Travis had never thought about it this way, but phrased like that, it made sense.

"Yeah, I guess."

Doctor Kumar tilted her head. "You're not sure?"

"It's a different way of seeing this, that's all. I'm used to saying I don't do commitment and that's that. Many guys don't care for one, anyway, but I learned to be straightforward from the start, so there would be no expectations later on."

"So you're honest with any potential romantic or sexual partner that you're not into commitment long-term."

It was more of a statement than a question, but he still nodded.

"Exactly."

"That makes sense in this context, then." Doctor Kumar rolled a pen in her hand. "However, I'd argue that calling yourself a person who doesn't 'do commitment' in general can create confusion, because that's not who you are in every context. You are committed to people who are already in your life and with whom you have close bonds. You're committed to your job and the idea of protecting people, even strangers. It's all commitment, and it's not better or worse than any other form of it."

Feeling hot, Travis glanced towards the window. It was wide open today, and a slight breeze moved the sheer white curtain slowly.

"Did that make you uncomfortable?" Doctor Kumar asked, prompting him to look at

her again.

"More like unsure, I guess." He shifted in his seat. "You're basically telling me that how I've seen myself for years isn't actually who I am."

She shook her head. "You're not a fundamentally different person just because of the words used. It's more about giving a name to things that were contradictory until now. And some of those things will be easier to accept than others, probably, but it's not about forcing you into anything. The goal isn't to get you out there to date strangers you don't care about, if that's what worries you. The goal is to explore how a different perspective may help you understand yourself more fully, which will then inform your actions and maybe even assist you in handling your emotions better." She offered him a brief smile. "It's normal to be frustrated when you're stuck. We all experience this. However, understanding ourselves and the situation we're in is crucial in order to get unstuck."

Rubbing his thumb over the palm of his other hand, Travis could feel tension growing in his body as he tried to digest everything she was saying.

"I'll think about that. I see the logic in it, but I need some time to process, I guess."

"Great." She smiled again. "I appreciate you're willing to think about this, and I'm open to a future discussion, even if you don't agree. For now, how about you go back to telling me how you've been the last few days?"

Travis winced before he could stop himself. That was only marginally easier to talk about.

"It's been fine, until yesterday. I mean, I'm okay, I haven't done anything stupid or reckless, or anything, but it's... Dave's been struggling and I wish I could do more."

"Healing from an injury is often a complicated process, with ups and downs along the way. What has he been struggling with?"

"Not being able to do things. It's been killing him from the start, but he was more upbeat in general, and he could snap out of it more easily. Now he's withdrawn, he gets irritated quickly... And that's not me complaining, to be clear," Travis rushed to add. "I'd be a mess if it was me, so he's already ahead, but I'm afraid he's pushing himself too much. He waits for me to leave the room to do certain things instead of letting me help. Last night he insisted on walking up the stairs on his own, even though I was right there, and I had to watch him struggle over the simplest thing." Travis dug his thumb even harder. "I could tell he was getting even more pissed at me for watching, but I couldn't just leave, because what if he fell?"

Again.

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What if he fell again?

Watching Dave climb those stairs had been brutal on Travis's nerves, and he hadn't quite shaken it off yet.

"So there's a conflict between the two of you over how much or how little Dave should do on his own."

Travis sat up straighter.

"A conflict is too strong of a word. He's irritated, that's for sure, but I wouldn't say we're fighting."

"A conflict of perspectives, then. He thinks he should be doing more, and you think he should be doing less and letting you help."

"I want to help him get better."

"Of course you do. And he knows that, too, right?"

"Right."

"Meanwhile, he's also struggling with not being able to do things and insists on trying stuff. Did he make it up those stairs?"

"Yeah." Travis slumped in his seat again. "It took a while, but he made it."

"And you were at his back."

Closing his eyes briefly, Travis sighed.

"I'm not sure I'd be fast enough if he fell. He'd be safer if I helped him up."

"But if you helped him up, he wouldn't be able to try on his own." Doctor Kumar rolled her pen again. "That's a common struggle in a situation like this. The person with the injury pushes for independence, and the person who's there next to them tries to protect them from further harm. What about when he's not injured? Do you find yourselves in similar circumstances at work, for example?"

"You mean, do I try to do things for him when he's not injured? No, I don't. I mean," Travis added with a frown, "we do stuff for each other all the time, but it's more usual, everyday stuff, like making coffee or something. We're not hovering over each other out in the field."

"And do you think you're hovering now?"

He grimaced. "I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

"For the record, I'm not calling it one way or another, I'm simply using your words."

"I don't know if that's better or worse," he muttered, but he was rewarded for it with a twitch of her lips. "I don't think I'm hovering most of the time, but I can see how it may feel stifling, especially for Dave. Independence is crucial for him, like I said. He always made sure he was self-sufficient and able to do things. We fit well right from the start, because we both wanted a partner to rely on in the field but were also eager to excel on our own. We never tried to hold each other back—the opposite, really. We push each other to get better."

"But now you feel like you do want to hold him back, at least a little."

Swallowing an immediate protest, Travis gave himself a minute to think about it.

"If I thought it was safe for him to do it on his own, I wouldn't hold him back," he said slowly, but then realized that it wasn't quite right. "Fuck, I am holding him back."

He caught himself and apologized for the swearing, but she waved it off, as she'd done in the past.

"Maybe you do, maybe you don't. His doctor or physical therapist should probably decide what's enough and what's too much. I'd like us to focus on how it feels. Right now, you want to protect him more than you want to push him into getting better. None of this is bad in itself."

Travis lowered himself in his seat, feeling the tension blooming in his head.

"It's not that simple."

Not to him, and certainly not to Dave.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sleeping alone had done nothing to improve Dave's mood, and once he'd wobbled his way to the bathroom, he grimaced at himself in the mirror. What a shitty way to start the week.

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Then again, what difference did it make if it was Monday or any other day?

Not like Dave had any place to be.

Getting downstairs did nothing to fix his mood, either, since Travis was already on his way out and they didn't have any time to talk aside from Travis making sure Dave had everything he could possibly need for the time being.

That check had become an everyday thing and was quite soothing, actually, but today it just irked Dave instead.

Which seemed like a repeat of how he'd felt right after the accident.

Like he'd been sliding, instead of moving forward.

It was also rather unfair towards Travis himself, but Dave couldn't help it. The same way he couldn't help how much his skin itched under the cast, he couldn't stop a different kind of itch under his skin.

He wanted out.

Out of this house, out of this cast, out of constantly feeling like he was stuck, and helpless, and needing help like he hadn't needed one since he was out of the damn diapers.

After spending a few hours watching things mindlessly, trying not to think of Travis at the office and of everyone having fun without him, Dave fell into a restless sleep,



only to wake up in the same bad mood and with an empty stomach, to boot.

As he was reheating one of the burritos Ian had delivered yesterday, Dave's phone vibrated on the counter. He glanced at it to see a message from his brother, but he didn't swipe to read it. He didn't want to complain to Colin yet again or listen to another pep talk. He just wanted to wallow in his frustration until he pushed through it, somehow.

Usually, if Dave had a bad day, he could go for a run or to lift some weights until his arms threatened to give up on him, but he couldn't—

Well.

There was nothing preventing him from upper body strength training. He'd been doing it almost every day, after all, with Travis there on the other side of their gym room pretending he wasn't watching him like a hawk.

Dave clenched his hand over the edge of the counter.

He missed the days when Travis looked at him sweating it out because he wanted to fuck Dave and not because he wanted to save him from a piece of equipment falling on him or whatever.

He was probably not being fair towards Travis once again—the man still fucked him plenty, and it was actually Dave who had shut that door last night, literally and metaphorically—but he figured he didn't have to be fair every minute of every day.

He could be petty and mean every once in a while, inside his own damn head.

He could also go lift some weights while his keeper wasn't home.

Dave could definitely use some breathing room as he sweated his way through the training.

Once he made it to their home gym after lunch and a little break, he sat down and stretched carefully, methodically, until the rhythm of the music he'd set up matched the energy that was pumping through his veins. He might have rushed through some of the stretches because of it, but he did complete the process.

After all, he didn't want another injury on top of the one he already had.

He started small, doing a few sets of lat pulldowns at his usual level, followed by shoulder press sets. Then, he moved to his main goal for today—the bench. He upped the weight settings, wanting to feel the burn, and lowered himself until he was lying on his back, his arms at the perfect angle for the handles.

That was when the realization hit him—there was no way for him to find his balance with only one foot securely on the floor.

Damn it.

Dave pushed himself back up to a sitting position and winced at the shot of pain in his leg. Absentmindedly massaging his knee right above the cast, he looked around the room in search for a solution to his problem until his gaze fell on a stack of bumper weight plates in the corner. If he put one large enough plate across his thighs, he would be kept still, and the leverage could offer him additional abs exercise.

It wasn't a perfect solution, but it was something, at least.

There was no way to bring the plate to the bench while having to balance himself on the crutch, though, so he finally managed it without a crutch by rolling the plate on the floor for the few steps it took to get it there.

By the time Dave lay down again, he was already tired and sweaty, but he wasn't going to give up now. Not even when he realized he forgot to lower the weight on the bar back to the usual, what with the additional weight across his thighs and everything.

Fuck.

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He considered getting up again for a minute there, but then let it go, not wanting to take any longer than he'd already had. He would do one set and call it a day, especially since Travis should be getting back soon.

Hefting a plate on himself while lying down turned out to be harder than expected, however. He dropped it on the first attempt and winced at the loud bang on the floor, but finally managed to lift it all the way on the second try.

Dave took a deep breath, then released it slowly as he looked up at the bar above him.

This was it.

Finally.

"What was—" Travis's voice came from the door, loud enough to be heard over the music, which he quickly went over to turn down. "What are you doing?"

Dave clenched his jaw as his eyes fell shut.

Fuck it all to hell.

He could hear Travis walking closer, but he wasn't ready to face him. Not yet. Not like this.

Unfortunately, that didn't stop Travis in the slightest.

"Are you okay?"

The question came in a different, softer tone, but Dave didn't really care much about that at this point.

"I'm fine." He clenched his hands around the bar as he opened his eyes to glare at Travis. "I needed leverage to bench press, and I figured it out, so now I'd like to get a set in, if you don't mind."

"If I don't..." Travis lifted his gaze above Dave's head and his eyes narrowed. "Are you actively trying to hurt yourself? What the fuck?"

A wave of anger rushed through Dave and he sat up, almost tossing the plate on the ground.

Travis caught it, of course. The asshole.

"I'm trying to exercise in peace without you hovering over me."

Nostrils flaring, Travis crossed his arms over his chest after putting the plate near the wall.

"Do we or do we not have a deal about lifting weights above a certain level on our own?"

Okay, so, yes, Dave had maybe upped the weight a little too much, but he'd needed a challenge instead of playing around.

"I can lift that, and you know it."

"That's not what our deal is about." Travis shook his head as he took a step back, then another, which was good, because Dave needed space or he was going to explode.

"We agreed, better safe than sorry."

"Well, these days it's all about being safe with you, isn't it?" Dave clenched his hands in his lap. He didn't want to keep sitting when Travis was standing, but getting up seemed like even worse of an idea. "I should do nothing but lie on the couch and wait for you to bring me every fucking little thing, as if I was paralyzed and not simply had a broken leg."

Travis's stance changed as he shifted on his legs and lowered his arms.

"Okay, I get it, I've gone a bit overboard with—"

"A bit?!" Dave grabbed the crutch and got onto his feet after all, too furious not to move. "You go any further and you're gonna try taking a piss for me! Last night you watched me climb those fucking stairs as if I was going to fall off the side of K2 or something!"

"You fell and broke your leg when I wasn't looking!" Now it was Travis who raised his voice, clearly no longer interested in placating Dave. "Forgive me for wanting to make sure it doesn't happen again!"

Dave's chest ached, his leg ached, and he did not want to have this conversation. At all.

And yet—

"Yeah, well, I don't want you to, okay?" he snapped back. "I don't want you to protect me, and I don't want you to stand by in case something bad happens to me. It's not always about what you want or what you need, sometimes it's about me and what I want."

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Travis reared back as if Dave had hit him, and when the words registered in Dave's head, he understood why.

Fuck. He'd gone way over the line.

Gripping his crutch tightly, he tried to figure out how to backtrack, now that the rush of anger drained out of him at the look on Travis's face. Before Dave could find the right words, though, Travis headed for the door.

"Fine, have it your way. I'm going out, so I won't be here hovering over you and... and forcing you to do my bidding, apparently. Do whatever you want. But for fuck's sake, use your brain before you drop a weight on your head, you absolute asshole."

Dave held his breath as he listened to Travis walking away.

He wouldn't really leave, would he? He only just got back, maybe he would go upstairs or...

When the front door shut loudly enough to be heard in the gym room, Dave fell back down to sit on the bench.

What the fuck had he done?

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Shutting the door with a bang brought him no more than two seconds of satisfaction, but Travis was too pissed to care at this point.

He was done for the day—done with analyzing, done with trying, done with everything that had brought him here: tense, and tired, and with a headache from hell.

What he needed was fun and easy, but he wasn't going to find it at home tonight, so he was going for the next best thing.

He decided to order a ride to his favorite pick-up bar.

It was startling that it had taken him a few seconds to remember the address, but then he realized he hadn't been there in months. He'd gone once during the whole Dave's-dating-now phase, but even before that it had been a while, too.

Perks of having a regular fuck buddy at home, Travis figured once he accepted the offered ride in the app. Even if said buddy is a fucking asshole at the moment.

After the session with Doctor Kumar, he'd had every intention to go back home, have a quiet night in, and try not to push any of Dave's buttons. He'd been looking forward to lying on the couch and forgetting everything the doc had said because it was too much to process in a day. Hell, he'd been hoping Dave would be up for relieving at least some of the tension with orgasms, but if not, it would have been fine to simply chill together.

What hadn't been fine, however, was that a grown-ass man risked his safety for absolutely no reason at all.

The hypocrisy of that thought didn't hit Travis until he was already in the car, but he pushed it aside for the night. He was done with overthinking—or even thinking in general.

He needed to relax, and what better way to do so than a night out after a few weeks of quiet nights in.



He chatted with the driver for the rest of the way, exchanging opinions on the NBA playoffs so far (underwhelming) and the next season (a shakeup, hopefully), and by the time Travis walked into the bar, he was in much better spirits.

The club was far from crowded this early in the evening, but he knew it would pick up in less than an hour, the usual crowd skirting a bit older than the young guys who didn't even leave the house before nine thirty and could dance the night away.

Still, as Travis walked towards the bar, he clocked a few guys as possible options. Two of them were familiar enough that he had a feeling they'd hooked up before, so he took them off the list, but the other three seemed new, which sent a bit of excitement down Travis's back.

It had been way too long since he flirted with a hot stranger, that was for sure.

It had been even longer since his last bathroom hookup. Whenever they'd gone to a bar, there was no point of dragging Dave out of the booth and into the bathroom when they could just as well go home and fuck in a bed—or against the front door, on a few memorable occasions.

Damn, was Travis getting old if he preferred a bed over a questionable bathroom stall?

He hoped not.

Besides, tonight wasn't about that. He'd rarely followed a guy to his place, and he'd definitely never taken anyone to the house he shared with Dave, so his current choices were the bathroom or the shadowy corner out the back.

Both could do in a pinch.

"Can I buy you a drink?" A deep male voice came from the left and a moment later, there was a tall, black-haired man on the stool next to Travis. "Two of what he's having," the guy told the bartender without waiting for the answer, but when he turned towards him, Travis saw a nice enough smile and a jawline that could cut glass, so he decided to let it go.

"It looks like you already did," he said with a raised eyebrow.

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Okay, so maybe he didn't entirely let it go, but he liked to keep people on their toes, especially at the beginning.

Thankfully, the guy only laughed.

"That's true. But if you say no, I guess I'll have two whiskeys to soothe my busted ego with."

Travis's lips twitched. This, at least, was easy.

"How about you keep one and I keep the other?"

"Perfect." The guy's smile widened. "I'm Byron."

"Travis."

And after that, it went down a fairly familiar path—even if one that was half-buried in his mind. They talked, they flirted, the personal space got smaller and smaller...

But then came the obvious question, and things suddenly weren't the same anymore.

"You up for another round or do you want to get out of here?"

Travis had come here to hook up. That had been the whole plan for tonight—to let out some steam, to lose himself in quick and easy pleasure. And yet, now that he was faced with what he supposedly wanted, he balked.

"Sorry, I'm—" Travis halted, searching for the right words while he still didn't quite understand what he was doing and why. "I'm up for another round but nothing more, so no hard feelings if you want to change targets, so to speak." He glanced back and saw the place had filled out while they'd been talking. "Plenty of fish, etcetera."

Byron leaned back in his seat but thankfully didn't seem angry or upset.

"Ah. I might have mixed up the signals, then. It's been a while since I've done this."

"No, that's on me," Travis assured him quickly. "I seem to have changed directions along the way. Sorry about that."

"No worries. Maybe that's actually a better outcome. A slower reintroduction to the scene won't hurt."

"Bad breakup?" Travis motioned for the bartender for another round. He wasn't usually the type to sit there and listen to a sad story from a stranger, but their conversation had been going well so far and he did feel kind of bad for backing out. "Or a nice one, which may be even worse?"

Byron drowned the rest of his drink.

"Uneventful for him, life-changing for me, since I've had to start looking for another job and an apartment now that I don't want to keep living my life in the same place as him."

"The worst, then." Travis grimaced and grabbed a glass when the bartender put the new drinks in front of them. "That sucks."

"The worst part is, I know I was the stupid one. We lived together, worked together, and spent basically all our time with each other, and he still kept insisting he wasn't

'the commitment type'."

Freezing, Travis stared at the drink in his hand, unable to look up at Byron, who seemed to be on a roll now.

"And let's be clear, I wasn't asking for his hand in marriage or whatever. I used the word 'boyfriend' and he would flip out, that kind of thing. I finally realized I'm too old to be a convenient fuck buddy hoping for something that will never come, but that's two years I'm never getting back."

For a moment there, Travis could kind of see the scene from the side, as if he was watching an interactive-experience movie or something. There was Byron, gesticulating and talking about his failed relationship with a guy who sounded like he could be a copy of Travis, and there was Travis himself, unmoving, having some kind of an existential crisis in the span of a few seconds.

"—too old to be a convenient fuck buddy hoping for something that will never come—"

"—calling yourself a person that doesn't 'do commitment' in general can create confusion, because that's not who you are in every context. You're committed to people who are already in your life and with whom you have close bonds—"

"Do you ever think you might one day want a committed relationship after all?"

Byron's words, and Doctor Kumar's, and, finally, a question from Dave, one that had seemed insignificant at the time—all of it came back to Travis now, reframing what he'd always thought of as central to who he was.

But was it really?

Was "no commitment" really a core part of him, or was it more that he had "no desire to seek commitment outside of what he already had", like Doctor Kumar had suggested?

Travis didn't know.

He didn't know.

And suddenly, it was as if nothing was more important than finding out. He needed answers, because what if Dave felt like that, what if Dave was Byron, and Travis was The Asshole, and—

"Hey, are you okay?" Byron's voice cut through the spiral Travis had caught himself in. "You look like you've seen a ghost. If my story stirred up some shit from your past, I'm sorry, I got carried away."

It definitely stirred up something.

"Not your fault." Travis moved to his feet and pulled out some cash to drop it on the bar. "I have to go, though. Good luck with everything."

Without waiting for a reply, he left, making his way through the crowded space quickly.

He couldn't stand being here even a minute longer.

He had other places to be.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

What the fuck was he thinking?

Dave stared at the doorway as if Travis were to appear again, but he wasn't, he wouldn't, because he'd left. Dave had pushed him away, and he'd gone.

You wanted it, you got it, a voice at the back of his head supplied, and Dave lowered himself back to lie on the bench.

That wasn't what he wanted. He was a mess, and the frustration was thrumming in his blood almost constantly now, and he'd—

He'd pushed away his main source of comfort. Brilliant.

Tilting his head back, he looked at the weights of the bench press and winced. Travis was right. They'd had an agreement, and Dave had been the one who had suggested copying some of the rules from their work gym.

He'd never gone over the limit before. It was easy enough, because they usually trained together, but still. They'd made those rules and he broke them, so to go off on Travis for pointing it out was an asshole move.

Dave was just so tired of not being able to do things.

When his eyes prickled at that, he promptly sat up. He needed to get a grip, because he was all over the place today.

His phone vibrated with an upcoming call, and he clambered off the bench.

It probably wasn't Travis, but maybe...

Nope. It was Colin.

Swallowing the disappointment, Dave accepted the call and put it on speaker as he



headed out of the room.

"Hey."

"Hey, what's up? You've gone silent on me, so I'm checking in."

"I haven't gone silent," Dave protested. "What the hell's with you people, I'm not fighting for my life or anything. I don't need constant check-ins."

Colin was silent for a moment.

"Okay, let me rephrase that. What has crawled up your ass?"

Pausing at the bottom of the stairs, Dave glared at them.

Damn it, he hadn't thought about that. He needed a shower, but he wasn't looking forward to making that trek up to his room now.

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Since it was impossible to do during a call anyway, he headed to the kitchen instead.

"Nothing has crawled anywhere," he muttered. "It's just been a rough—"week"—day."

"What happened?"

Dave put his phone on the counter before opening the fridge and pulling out a pitcher of water.

"Can't it simply be one of those days?"

Colin sighed. "It could, but I don't think it is."

"Great, another person who knows better." Dave shut the fridge door a little harder than necessary, then caught himself. "Shit. Sorry, that was stupid."

"A lot of people having opinions, huh? It must be hard."

Slumping into a chair, Dave leaned on his forearms against the table.

"You don't have to coddle me, either," he said, but the fight that temporarily reared up its head inside him was gone again.

"Wow, there's no winning today, huh?"

"Looks like it, yeah."

"How about we start over, you tell me honestly how you're doing, and I promise not to assume I know any better."

Dave stacked up his hands on top of each other and rested his chin on them.

"Well, if you must know, I'm currently wallowing in self-pity over how stupid I am."

"Uh-uh. What did you do?"

"I fucked up."

"Which means what?"

"I had a fight with Travis—and a stupid one, too. I went off on him because I was tired, frustrated, and pissed off, and he... Fuck, I don't want to get into it. Suffice to say, he left with a door bang, so, you know, not great."

There were another few seconds of silence on Colin's side before he spoke up again.

"Wow, I don't think you've ever told me about you and Travis having a fight."

"Yeah, well, we haven't. I mean, we've had disagreements, don't get me wrong, but we've never... This one deteriorated quickly, and it's mostly my fault."

Going off on Travis would have been bad enough. But to throw that other thing at him...

"And how did you usually handle your disagreements in the past?" Colin asked, dragging Dave's attention back before he could go down a rabbit hole.

"Like most people—by talking it out, or giving ourselves some breathing room and

then talking."

A few times they also opted for a hard fuck to relieve the tension, but Colin didn't need to know that.

"Okay, so there's a pretty good chance that you're going to talk it out once you both cool off, right?"

"I guess. I don't know. I've said some things I shouldn't have, and I feel bad about it."

Wasn't that the understatement of the year?

Colin hummed. "Do you feel like apologizing or are you not ready yet?"

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Dave was more than ready to have Travis back with him right now, so the answer came easily.

"I'll apologize, sure. But I'm afraid he's not going to simply accept it."

"Why not?"

Because I said too much.

Dave rubbed his eyes.

"Because he'll want an explanation for some of the things I said, and I'd rather not talk about it."

"Did you—"

"If I'm not ready to have that conversation with him, I'm not having it with you, either."

Colin had suspected Dave wanted what he couldn't have with Travis even before Dave had fully realized it himself, but that didn't mean Dave had any desire to get into it with him now.

He wanted to bury it deep inside him again, where it belonged.

"Fair. But even without having that conversation, you know he's going to forgive you eventually, right?"

"You weren't supposed to make any assumptions," Dave muttered, even though he nodded at the question.

Yeah, Travis would forgive him. That part was easy.

It perhaps hadn't been, for a minute there, when Dave had been at his lowest, but only then.

Colin snorted. "Fair enough, assumption withdrawn."

"What if we can't get past it?" Dave murmured quietly before he stopped himself. "Not the fight part, but the other part. I don't want things to change. I'm already an obligation now—"

"You're not an obligation, shut your mouth," Colin cut him off. "And that's not an assumption, so I'm allowed, by the way. That's you being stupid because you're in a bad place."

"I'm barely a few weeks in and I'm losing my mind!" Dave pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. "I'm bouncing off the walls, saying stupid shit, and I'm frustrated nearly all the time." He took a shaky breath. "I want my life back."

"Your independence, you mean."

"That, too, but it's more than that. It's my everyday life, my work, my friends, everything."

"Sure, yeah. It sucks to have your routines so utterly destroyed."

"I feel like shit."

"Yeah."

"I mean, if everything goes well, I'll return to work, but who knows how long it will take? And would things even be the same once I'm back?"

"Why wouldn't they be?"

Because they'll get used to being without me.

Because Travis will, too, and then he won't need me in the same way and—

Dave dropped his hands and stared at the wall as his heart pounded in his chest.

He wanted to be needed, and, at the same time, he didn't want to need anyone himself—not even Travis.

Of course, Dave failed at that miserably—he did need Travis, in many different ways. He'd needed him for almost as long as they'd known each other.

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And yet, needing him now to accomplish basic things had thrown Dave completely off balance.

It was worse than being stupidly in love with the guy. That, he knew how to handle. But to be dependent on him, to feel like a weight pulling Travis down instead of being right there with him every step of the way...

Dave didn't know how to do this. At all.

He had to figure it out, though.

He had to.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

As the car parked outside of Kalei's house, Travis realized that it was the second time in less than three weeks that he was coming here shaken up, his emotions all over the place.

Clenching and unclenching his hands, he focused on his breathing. He counted the houses on the left side that he could see on the inhale, and then the houses on the right as he exhaled. He repeated it a few times before glancing back at Kalei's house, only to see him already there on the front porch.

Of course.

Travis still had no idea how Kalei did that—even his exceptional hearing couldn't



explain it fully, could it?—but he was grateful for it, now. Who knew how long he would have sat in here instead of walking up and knocking, otherwise.

Probably as long as the driver would let him before getting impatient.

It didn't matter that Travis wasn't ready to have the conversation he'd come here to have—he didn't think he could ever be ready. He was here, and Kalei was staring at him, which meant Travis was doing this, one way or another.

The moment he left the car, Kalei turned and walked back into the house, and Travis chuckled humorlessly. No matter what kind of crisis he was going through, some things stayed the same.

In the kitchen, Kalei had already taken a pitcher of water out of the fridge and was putting ice cubes into the glasses. It sharpens the mind, he liked to say, and whether it was scientifically proven or not, Travis did think it at least helped keep his focus on the here and now when things were hard. Alcohol was for smoothening the edges for a while, the ice-cold water was for looking right at them.

Kalei put a glass in front of him and sat on the opposite side of the table.

"Okay, give it to me."

And Travis wished he could explain it in some kind of logical order, but if he could manage that, he probably wouldn't need to be here in the first place. As things were, his head was a mess, his emotions were a mess, and he was grasping at straws to make sense of it all.

"What if I'm an asshole to Dave?" he finally blurted out, clasping his hands around the glass, which sent a cool shiver up his arms.

Kalei sat back.

"Oh, boy."

"I never intended to!" Travis straightened in his seat. "I never, ever intended to. I thought everything was great! I honestly did. If you had asked me a month ago, I would have told you things couldn't be better."

"I know, because I did ask."

Travis grimaced before taking a sip of the water.

"You asked me in the context of my adrenaline thing."

"I asked you in general, and I never assumed your 'adrenaline thing' was separate from the rest of you. So don't play me."

Slumping back in his seat, Travis nodded.

"Speaking off, I've been calmer than usual in the last two weeks or so. Of course, the circumstances are what they are, but I am better."

"Good. I'm glad. Now, go back to the current crisis."

"Current".

Damn it, Travis had gone years without any major issues and now it was one thing after the other.

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"Well, it all started at the therapy today," he finally spoke. "Or maybe last night, actually. Dave's been pushing himself to do things on his own, including stuff I've been doing for him ever since the accident. And I guess last night it came to a head, and we were both frustrated. Me because I had to watch him struggle from the sidelines, and him... He apparently thought I was hovering." Travis's stomach tightened at the memory of Dave's face as he'd thrown it all at Travis earlier. "Anyway, that was last night. This morning it was a little tense but better—or so I thought. Then after I left the office, I had a therapy appointment, which was... hard. Some of it was enlightening but hard to hear." He grimaced. "I'm still digesting things, let's put it that way."

Kalei nodded, tilting his glass towards Travis a bit.

"Yeah, that's the hard part, for sure."

"There was some stuff I managed to digest right away, though, including how I was perhaps coming off as if I wanted to hold Dave back, which was never my intention. So I was determined to do better, I swear I was. I had the whole plan of how I could support his progress without suffocating him. But then I came home and found him in our gym room, about to start bench pressing at a level we'd agreed not to try on our own—and we've had those rules for years, so it wasn't an idea I suddenly came up with, for the record. And yet today, here he was, with a fucking weight plate on his legs to make it even worse."

"Why the plate?"

"To keep him in place, I think. But I didn't get to that part, because when I asked him

what the fuck he was doing, he went off on me, accusing me of being overbearing." Travis took another sip of water, his stomach tensing even more. "Then he told me I'm always pushing for things to go my way and that he was sick of it. I got angry and told him I'd give him space then, and I left."

"So you walked out when he expressed that he wanted some distance. The emotions were heated, but that's not an asshole move."

"But am I an asshole in other ways? Am I pushing for things? I don't want him to do things just because I want them!"

Kalei leaned closer, resting elbows on the table.

"What are you really asking, here?"

"I don't know!" Travis ran a hand over his hair. "Fuck, it's all confusing, okay? I went out to a bar to let out some steam after a hard day, and instead of getting laid I ended up having an existential crisis when some guy told me about his asshole ex who didn't want commitment despite the fact that they were living and working together already."

"Ah."

Travis narrowed his eyes at Kalei, who glanced down at his glass.

"What 'ah'?"

"I'm starting to understand what's going on, that's it."

"Enlighten me, then." Travis drowned the rest of his water and put the glass on the table, only for Kalei to fill it up again. "I'm not sure what I'm looking at, here."

"Well, that's bull. You wouldn't be here if you hadn't already figured it out. You'd be at that bar, having your dick sucked or whatever. But you're not back at home, either, which means something's still blocking you, so walk me through it. What are you seeing?"

Feeling suddenly hot and uncomfortable, Travis shifted in his seat.

"You're making me feel like I'm at another therapy session."

"Yeah, well, be glad I'm allowing house calls at all hours, then." Kalei raised his eyebrow. "You didn't come here to be coddled, you came here to figure things out, so do it. What's holding you back?"

"I could lose everything."

The words rushed out of him before he could stop them, and they hung between them for a minute.

"What exactly would that look like?" Kalei asked in a softer than usual tone.

Travis breathed in and out, staring at the table in front of him.

"It looks like losing the best friend and partner I could ever imagine having. Or like going home to an empty house, or like having to switch jobs because I'd never want to rob Dave of—"

"Okay, okay," Kalei cut in, lifting his hands in a placating gesture. "You have to know you're catastrophizing, here."

Travis glared at him. "Well, you asked!"

Kalei conceded with a nod, so Travis ran a hand through his hair.

"I don't want to be the asshole ex," he offered, staring at the glass.

"The way you always told it, you didn't want to be an ex, period. You've always been pretty vocal about not wanting to be in a relationship."

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"Yeah, and according to my therapist, I was lying to myself the whole time."

Kalei raised both eyebrows now. "Did she really say that?"

Shaking his head, Travis looked down at the table again.

"She basically said that for a guy who claims not to be into commitment, I seem to be already committed to several people and things. And that a committed relationship doesn't have to mean going out there, snatching a stranger, and having to mold my life around him."

"She sounds smart."

Travis huffed. "Don't I know it."

"Still, she didn't say you were lying to yourself, more like seeing things one way and not the other. That doesn't mean you have to—" Kalei paused. "Okay, help me out here, because I don't want to put words in your mouth. How's the fact that you may now see yourself differently in regards to the whole commitment thing related to Dave and your fear of losing him, exactly?"

Travis bit his lower lip, shifting in his seat again. "You know how."

Now it was Kalei who huffed.

"Listen, when it comes to you two, I thought I had you figured out a few times over the years, only to be proven wrong each time, so no, I don't know. I mean, I can see

some things," he added as he leaned on his forearms, "but not the whole picture. And it sounds like the picture has just shifted for you, so. Talk to me."

"I've never lied to him," Travis whispered. "Not on purpose."

"Right."

"I was never interested in dating, and he said the same, so it was easy to fall into things, you know? Why not add sex into the mix if we enjoy each other's company and have great chemistry on top of that? Win-win for everyone."

"Not for the people running into the two of you while you're at it, in various places."

Travis snorted, amused despite it all.

"Yeah, well, like I said—great chemistry. So, it was always easy, and we were never exclusive, but it kind of... Most of the time, it was the two of us, because why not? Why would I go out there looking for something else, someone else, if I had Dave at home? There's no beating that."

Fucking hell.

As Travis was talking, things were getting pretty damn clear, but they weren't getting any less scary.

"A few months ago," he continued, quieter than before, "he told me he'd been reconsidering the no-relationship thing, and he asked me if I ever did, as well. And I swear to you, I thought it was nothing more than a throwaway question, and I was already taken aback by his admission, so I told him, no way, never in a million years." He sat up and pressed the palms of his hands against his eyes. "Fuck."



Kalei didn't say a word, and for a while they sat there in silence as Travis tried to pull himself together.

"What if he was asking for himself?" he finally whispered. "What if he was trying to ask me to make things official, and I was the asshole who told him no?"

"Hey, listen." Kalei's tone made Travis look up on instinct. "You can't make any decisions based solely on what he wants. Assuming you're right, that is."

"Well, right now, I'm rather desperately hoping I am, actually."

And the truth of it—the simple, clear truth of what he wanted—made everything fall into places inside his head.

He slowly lowered his hands and clenched them around the edge of the table as his heartbeat sped up.

"So you want to be with him, then?" Kalei asked. "Not just for him, but for yourself?"

"Yeah." Travis nodded, still getting used to the idea, but the growing excitement inside of him pushed out any lingering doubts. "Yes. I feel like I've already been with him for ages."

"You certainly looked the part, but it doesn't matter what other people see, okay? It's about how you feel and how he feels. Nothing else matters."

"He's pissed at me right now."

"He's pissed at you for something else," Kalei pointed out. "You can clear that out, and then figure out the relationship thing."

"If he wants it."

"If he wants it." Kalei nodded, straightening in his seat. "But from what you're telling me, and from what I've seen, I'd say your odds are pretty damn good."

Travis perked up at that. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Now, get the hell out and go talk with Dave."

Snorting, Travis got to his feet.

"Yes, Boss. I'm on it."

He couldn't wait to get home.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Dave turned off the TV with a huff. He couldn't pay attention to anything for even a minute, his thoughts racing around Travis, and where he was, and how he felt about their fight...

As Dave rolled onto the sitting position, he stared at the front door, wishing it to open up, to reveal Travis on the other side, ready and willing to talk things out.

Ready to forgive Dave for his stupid outburst.

The door stayed closed, of course, because life didn't work that way, and the longer

he sat there, staring, the worse he would feel, so he needed to get it together.

He wasn't looking forward to getting up the stairs by himself again, but he didn't have much of a choice, unless he wanted to continue wallowing on the couch and imagining Travis picking up some hot stranger at a bar for something easy and fun.

Because Dave clearly liked to torture himself.

Not anymore, though.

He grabbed his crutches from the side and was about to lift himself onto his feet, when there was a quiet noise outside and a moment later, the front door opened.

Travis was back.

Damn, maybe life did work that way, after all, when given enough time.

Dave's heartbeat sped up as they stared at each other for the longest time without uttering a word.

Don't mess this up, don't mess this up—

"I'm sorry."

They both said it at the same time, with Dave maybe half a second ahead, and then there was a beat of silence again, and the tension broke, just like that.

Dave's shoulders almost hurt when they relaxed, but he didn't care, instead offering a little smile to Travis, who nodded and smiled back.

"Okay, then." He quickly shrugged off his boots and a jacket before coming to sit on

the couch next to Dave, facing him. "That was a promising start."

With a chuckle, Dave put his crutches aside again and sat back to face Travis, too.

"I'd say so, yes. But there's more where this came from, to be clear. I know I have some explaining to do."

"So do I."

"Yeah, no." Dave shook his head. "That's gracious of you, but we both know better."

"You have more explaining to do—how about that?" Travis ran a hand through his hair. "About today, at least. I have a... larger issue."

Dave's eyebrows shot up at that, but he didn't want to get derailed. Any excuse would be an easy copout, a way to put off something that really needed to be said.

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He took a deep breath.

"You know I've always been... fiercely independent."

"Of course. That's one of the best things about you."

That sent a warmth through Dave's chest hereallyhad to ignore if he were to get through his plan.

"Well, sometimes it's one of the worst, too. Because it's not—"

He looked away, his gaze falling on the small pile of books that had been there on the side table from the day after his accident.

Why were the words somehow escaping him now?

"My injury isn't that bad, considering everything, and yet I've been struggling lately, and it pisses me off."

"I get it. I'd be climbing the walls—and falling on my ass while doing so." Travis snorted. "Seriously, it would have been a disaster."

"Yeah, well, this doesn't feel like a tremendous success, either." Dave waved at himself. "I suck at accepting help, and it's even worse than I thought," he admitted quietly. "I've never been good at it, but this whole thing, especially the last few days... I don't know. It's been driving me to the brink, and I guess I finally fell over."

"Hey." Travis clasped a hand on Dave's shoulder. "You had a bad day—"

"Or two."

"—or two. It happens." His hold tightened briefly. "You've been doing well with accepting not only my help, but also Ian's mission to feed you. You've done everything the doctors and Melody told you to do, and then some. Considering how deep that need for independence runs in you, the fact that you didn't go off earlier is quite an accomplishment, if you think about it."

Dave grinned at Travis's teasing tone, something unclenching in his chest and allowing him to breathe easier.

"Well, you were working hard at distracting me, so there's that."

"I was happy to provide such important assistance at this difficult time."

They both laughed, one setting the other off, and for a minute there, it felt easy again, and good. It would take no effort at all to lean in for a kiss, to pull Travis closer, to jump to the make-up sex and forget everything else.

But if Dave didn't say his part now, he might never get it out.

"There's no one in my life I trust more than you," he told Travis, voice serious again. "You know that, and a bunch of people know it, too. That's not a secret. But even though it's a no-brainer for me to put my life in your hands in the field, it's apparently much, much harder to say, 'hey, can you help me go upstairs, please'. But then," he added when Travis opened his mouth, "you offer, and I still can't easily say, 'sure, let's go'. I was trying, but there's only so much I can take."

"Like I said, you held out for two weeks. That's more than I would've."

"I hope we'll never find out."

Travis shrugged. "Either way, I know I haven't been making it easy on you, hovering and trying to guess your every move. I overdid it, and I'm sorry."

"I overreacted big time." Dave shook his head. "I shouldn't have snapped at you last night, and I definitely shouldn't have said what I said today, either."

"I was determined to give you more space today, but when I saw you on that bench, I—" Travis winced. "All I could think of were the multiple scenarios of what could have gone wrong."

Dave nodded, glancing down at his hands.

"I broke our rule. I fucked up, and I know that. It's like my mind was only focused on one thing—a proper challenge that would make me feel like I accomplished something, anything. Thinking about it now, I'm frankly embarrassed by this whole thing, but when I was in the moment... I don't know. My blood was pumping, I was figuring things out for myself, and it felt good."

"Yeah, I'm guessing that's exactly why Kalei wanted to bench us, because my thinking was similar all those times he got pissed at me before. And I know I sound like a hypocrite when I lecture you about safety, but—"

"No, you were right. I broke our rule," Dave repeated. "If you broke it, I'd be pissed, too."

"Looks like we both sometimes do stupid shit out of frustration, whether we're aware of it in the moment or not."

Tempted as he was to ask Travis more about his side of it—in the past, Travis had

always denied there being something other than adrenaline pushing him to act out a little too much—Dave knew it would only pull them away from the main point.



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"Apparently so. Either way, my issues aren't your fault or your responsibility to solve."

"Are you going to therapy behind my back?" Travis blurted out, only to grimace a second later. "Sorry. Sorry, it just sounded like something my therapist might say."

Dave snorted and rubbed his thigh.

"Which means I've been talking to Colin way too much lately. I told him he was using a lot of therapy-talk, and now it's rubbed off on me."

"It's not bad, for the record." Travis withdrew his hand from Dave's shoulder and tangled his fingers in a loose hold in his lap. "I'm starting to dig it."

"Therapy?"

Travis rolled his head in a way that wasn't a nod but could be, at least in part.

"I don't enjoy the part where I have to talk about things, but the reframing is helpful. And pointing out new perspectives, too. Hell, sometimes even the obvious ones, like what you said about my issues not being your fault or responsibility. Of course they aren't."

"I said it the other way around, but sure. Hearing it out loud does make it sound obvious. Still, since those issues aren't anyone's to solve but mine, I want to do better with it, so, here we go." Dave took another deep breath. He could do it. He could. "I'm frustrated, because I want to be independent, but the truth is, I also want other

people to see me as independent, and strong, and like I don't need anyone to help me. I trust you with my life, but I don't want you to think of me as—"

He pressed his lips shut, words sticking in his throat.

"Fuck, Dave." Travis reached out again, this time catching Dave's wrist and squeezing it. "You're one of the strongest men I've ever known, but even if you weren't, I wouldn't think less of you now. I wouldn't think you're weak."

Here it was. The word that still couldn't make its way out of Dave's mouth.

"You are all those things you described—independent, and strong, and determined to be self-sufficient," Travis went on. "That's not who you have to be day in and day out, however—both because that would be impossible, but also because it's not all that you are. You're so much more than that. I'd give you a list if I didn't think your head would grow too big."

Chuckling, Dave stared down at their hands and wondered if Travis could feel the jump in his pulse or the quickened rhythm of it.

"Most days, I know that," he admitted. "I go to work, where we're all more than that, and I like people there for many different things. But then my stupid leg gets broken, and it's suddenly as if my world narrowed to what I can and cannot do, and if I'm neither strong nor independent, I'm not quite sure what's left."

As Travis tightened the hold on his wrist, Dave lifted his gaze, looking straight into Travis's bright blue eyes, only to be met with his narrowed, singular focus.

It took Dave's breath away.

"Here comes a list, then," Travis said in a gruff, low voice he rarely used outside of

sex. "You're funny and quick with a comeback. You're efficient. Most days, you read me like an open book, whether I like it or not. You're one of the top tacticians at KKK, and I'm pretty sure Kalei only tasked me with reviewing the procedures because he knew you'd get involved. You're also the sexiest fucking guy I've ever seen. I never get enough of you, which is something I never had, with anyone. And I'm not just talking about sex, although, that, too, for sure. But I'm never tired of you, period. I could talk to you for hours, or not say a word for hours, and it honestly says something about my intelligence that it took me this long to realize I'm in love with you, but I get it now. I do."

Dave's heart was pounding wildly in his chest now, and he turned his hand in Travis's hold to grab him, too, desperately needing the contact.

"Say it again." Barely above a whisper, but that was all he could do. "Please, say it again."

A wide smile bloomed on Travis's face along with a rare flush, and, damn, Dave wanted to kiss him so badly.

"I'm in love with you. Whatever you want to do with this, or not, that's fine, but I thought you should know."

"You asshole, come here." Dave pulled at their joined hands, and Travis moved closer until he was hovering a breath away from Dave's lips, as if waiting for him to bridge that last bit of space.

And Dave did, because how could he not, after a confession like that?

He started slow, brushing his lips against Travis in more of a tease than anything else, but then he tilted his head and deepened the kiss, tasting Travis again after what felt like forever.

It had been at least thirty hours since the last time, which seemed like a horrible oversight now.

Travis cupped the back of his neck, and something in Dave relaxed even further, that last knot of tension releasing as Travis licked into his mouth like a man on a mission, determined and not giving an inch.

When they pulled back to get some air, they were both breathing hard as they stared at each other, and Dave didn't know where to look—at Travis's bright eyes, his flushed cheeks, his smile...

He realized he hadn't seen Travis so happy in a long time.

Dave could definitely relate.

"Tell me again."

He ran a hand up Travis's chest to his shoulder, squeezing the hard muscle there. The body was familiar, but the words weren't, and Dave still couldn't quite grasp the magnitude of what Travis had given him just now.

"You know, I don't want to make assumptions, but if you had something to say, I'd love to hear it, too." Travis ran his thumb over the soft skin behind Dave's ear, sending shivers down his body. "But I'm in love with you, either way. If you're not there—"

"I'm there," Dave cut in, not wanting Travis to doubt Dave's feelings for even a second, now that they were safe to share. "I've been there. I'm in love with you, too."

Travis kissed him at that, hard and hungry, as if trying to catch the words straight from Dave's mouth.

He didn't have to, though. Dave would happily repeat them, over and over again.

Preferably forever.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"I'm there. I've been there. I'm in love with you, too."

The words echoed inside Travis, the earth-shattering truth of them so obvious on Dave's face now that Travis dared to look.

They were on the same page with this.

Just like it always should be.

"Fuck," Dave whispered when Travis moved to trail kisses down his neck. "I can't believe it."

Pausing at Dave's collarbone to breathe him in, Travis closed his eyes. Neither can I.

They were lying on the couch now, pressed together as closely as they could, and a part of him had expected everything to be different now, but it wasn't. While some things had shifted and changed, others—perhaps the most crucial ones—stayed the same.

Dave smelled the same, and still shivered when Travis licked along the ridge of his collarbone before sucking on the soft skin next to it.

The noises he made were the same as well, and so was the way he clutched at the back of Travis's head or his shoulders, whatever he could grab onto.

The hard press of Dave's cock against Travis's was the same, too, the prickly friction and both of them shifting their hips at the same time, rearranging to fit even better.

And yet, there was also something more there. Something new.

Travis couldn't pinpoint what it was, but he was eager to find out, and to explore it all with Dave.

Now, though, they were both too worked up to slow down and wonder.

Dave slipped his hands between them and pulled at Travis's jeans until Travis lifted

himself a bit with his arms framing Dave's head on both sides. Once their pants and underwear were pushed down, Travis pressed closer again and moaned loudly into Dave's mouth as their cocks slotted perfectly together.

It always felt good, but tonight... Tonight it felt amazing, and messy, and theirs.

They stumbled over the edge a few seconds apart, and Travis barely avoided falling down on his partner by rolling onto his side instead, fitting into the small space between Dave and the back of the couch.

Pressing first a kiss, then a smile onto Dave's shoulder, Travis couldn't believe how the day had gone. From waking up in an empty bed, trying to tiptoe around Dave, to everything that happened after... A true roller-coaster, but one Travis hoped they were leaving behind for good.

They didn't need it now that they'd figured themselves out.

"I wish I could tell you to take me to bed," Dave murmured without even opening his eyes, "but I'm in need of a shower, so I guess that has to come first."

"Are you sure?" Travis inhaled deeply against Dave's neck and licked the sweaty skin there. "Maybe we should get a little dirtier before that, to save on water."

Dave groaned and pushed at him until Travis lifted himself onto his elbow.

"I can't believe you used that line on me. It's awful."

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"But is it working?" Travis grinned down at him. "You've been known to fall for worse."

"I've fallen for you. The rest is an unfortunate byproduct."

After one more kiss, Travis moved onto his feet and offered Dave a hand.

"That's not a no."

"Like I said, an unfortunate byproduct." Dave tilted his head towards the stairs. "Take me to bed, then."

Looking between Dave and the crutches lying on the other side of the couch, Travis hesitated.

"And how do you want to do this?"

That earned him another heated kiss, with Dave resting his hands on Travis's hips as he leaned against him.

"I'm still not up for a bridal carry," he whispered, his lips brushing Travis's as he spoke. "Aside from that, I'm game for anything."

Travis probably didn't hide his relief well enough, but he quickly redirected Dave's attention with a wink and a kiss of his own.

"I'm gonna be a barbarian whisking my lover away over my shoulder, then. Prepare



yourself."

Dave grinned. "Oh, I'm always ready for you to be a barbarian."

And just for that, Travis didn't wait any longer, hefting Dave up and heading for the stairs.

Why waste time on more talking, when they could be getting laid instead?

It had definitely been too long since he'd last had Dave's cock in his mouth, after all.

With a motivation like that, getting upstairs and undressing them both took barely a few minutes, and soon enough, Travis was crawling between Dave's legs—one propped on the pillow, the other bent at the knee, with Dave's foot resting on the mattress for leverage. With the lazy cleanup they'd done after coming earlier, the smell of Dave and sex was particularly strong, and Travis's mouth salivated as he buried his face in the red curls at the base of Dave's cock.

"Don't tease me or I swear, I'll make you regret it." Dave tugged at Travis's hair. "Suck me or sit on my cock, these are your options."

Travis caught Dave's hand and turned to drop a kiss on his wrist.

"Who's the one tempting who, now?"

"I'm ready and willing, and you're the one dragging your feet." Dave gripped his hardening cock and tugged at it with a sigh. "Looks like I have to do everything around here."

Snorting, Travis grabbed the lube from the nightstand.

"Fine, be that way. I guess I can play with your cock later. Maybe after the shower, I could lie here and just keep it in my mouth for a while. After two orgasms you wouldn't be so impatient, would you?"

Breathless curses were Travis's only answer, which was how he knew he scored a hit.

Good. They'd never done that, but it suddenly seemed like a perfect way to spend the evening before falling asleep.

After he rode Dave to oblivion.

"Get up here and turn around." Dave patted his stomach before making a grabbing gesture at the lube. "I want to open you up."

Fuck, yes.

Scrambling to do as he was told, Travis stole a short, hard kiss on the way before straddling Dave's stomach in reverse and leaning forward, resting his hands next to Dave's knees.

He glanced at Dave's cast, but he didn't let himself get distracted by it, especially with such a lovely view of Dave's cock and balls. That was a new angle, and as it turned out, Travis had been missing out on some interesting perspective. Maybe one day Dave would be willing to eat him out like this while Travis swallowed his cock.

Then a slick finger entered him, sliding without a stop until it was as deep as it could go, and Travis forgot everything but this, right here. Dave didn't waste any time, too—he slid his finger half-way out, then pressed forward again, crooking it at the perfect place to brush against Travis's prostate.

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Travis let out a moan, pushing back into the touch and smiling widely, relaxing into a familiar rhythm, so good Travis's knees were shaking with only two fingers inside him.

"I'm good," he said as he caught his breath. "That's enough."

Dave paused but didn't withdraw. "Are you sure? I'm happy to continue."

As if to underscore his point, he brushed his thumb right next to where his other fingers disappeared inside Travis.

"I thought you were happy to move things along." Travis closed his fist around Dave's cock and tugged. "I recall something about teasing?"

"Fuck, okay." Dave pulled out his fingers. "Have at it."

"How generous," Travis tried for a dry tone, but he was too worked up to really sell it. He turned around quickly, settled back in Dave's lap, and positioned himself before sinking down with a sigh.

"Good?" Dave whispered, voice punched out of his lungs, and Travis nodded. There was a bit of a burn, but he liked that from time to time.

"Yeah. You?"

"You keep clenching around me like this, I'll come in no time." Dave ran his hands up Travis's thighs before resting them on his hips. "Damn, you're hot."

Once he was fully settled, Travis relaxed a bit, and they both exhaled shakily, then chuckled, grinning at each other.

"You're not so bad yourself," Travis said when he could speak again. "And you know it."

"Doesn't mean I don't enjoy you telling me that." Dave bit on his lower lip. "Not as much as that other thing, but still."

"What other thing?"

"Say it again."

It was a testament to how turned on Travis was that it took him a second to get it.

"Oh." Another kind of heat spread through him, tingling all the way down in the best way possible. "I'm in love with you." He clenched around Dave again. "I love you."

Dave arched his back, eyes fluttering close.

"You're killing me here, fuck. But I love you, too," he added, opening his eyes and catching Travis's gaze straight away. "I love you."

"I can't believe this." Travis rolled his hips and swallowed back a moan. "Fuck, that's good."

Tightening his grip on Travis's hips, Dave thrust deeper into him. "You better believe it. I'll keep telling you that every day from now on."

"Good." Travis rested his hands on Dave's chest, trying to catch his breath as his orgasm approached faster and faster. "I want to keep hearing it."

"Perfect." Dave moved one of his hands to Travis's cock and squeezed it not-too-gently. "You close?"

Barely hearing the question over the rushing in his ears, Travis only managed a nod before he came, messily and a bit painfully, spilling between them. Dave swore and followed him over the edge with his back arching off the bed as he tried to catch his breath.

Perfect, indeed.

\* \* \*

It was half an hour later, when they were both showered and lying in bed, that Dave lifted his head from the pillow.

"Can you tell me what happened?" He waved his hand between the two of them. "To make you realize, you know."

Travis gnawed on his lower lip, searching for a way to explain it without going into too much detail. Perhaps one day he would tell Dave the whole story, but for now, maybe the simplest answer could be enough.

"I realized there's no reason to worry about making a commitment I'd already made half a lifetime ago," he offered quietly and watched Dave's eyes widen. "I was always honest before about not needing a relationship, but that was because I was picturing it being with some faceless stranger—and I never, ever wanted that. Meanwhile, with you... I already had everything I wanted, I just needed things to finally slot in the right places in my head."

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Dave grinned at him and leaned in for a soft kiss, bumping their noses together.

"I know the feeling."

Travis's heart skipped a beat. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

As Dave turned onto his back, he pulled him closer, and Travis went easily, settling with his head on Dave's shoulder and his arm thrown over Dave's waist.

"I can't tell you how happy I am that things slotted in the same way for you," Dave whispered after a few seconds, and Travis brushed his fingers over Dave's hip.

"Sorry for lagging behind."

"Nothing to apologize for. We can't do everything at the same pace, after all. Weren't you the one who told me that?"

Travis snorted as he closed his eyes. He had said it, last year when Dave had fallen during the charity run they'd gone to.

"That was me trying to make you feel better."

"Well, it worked, so now I'm returning the favor."

"Why, thank you. I appreciate it."

"My pleasure."

They went quiet after that, and Travis melted into the bed, the day's ups and downs catching up to him finally. Any sexy plans would have to wait until tomorrow...

He was almost asleep when Dave nudged him gently.

"What?" Travis murmured, slurring the word more than actually saying it.

There was silence, long enough for him to think Dave had done it in his sleep, but then the whisper came.

"Say it again."

"God, go to sleep already," Travis groaned and jabbed Dave's side before letting out a sigh. "I love you, though."

Dave hummed happily and dropped a kiss on the top of Travis's head.

"Good. Now we can sleep."

Travis waited—a second, and another, and another. Then he jabbed Dave again, prompting a laugh out of him.

"Yeah, yeah, fine. I love you, too."

"You're an asshole."

"An asshole you love."

"That's what—"

"No," Dave cut him off quickly, lifting them both an inch or two off the mattress with the force of his protest. "I don't wanna hear it."

"You were the one—"

"Good night."

With another laugh, Travis closed his eyes again.



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Yeah, some things definitely stayed the same.

He wouldn't want it any other way.

### EPILOGUE

A few months later

Dave laughed as Travis pulled him towards the bathroom.

"You know that if we're late, there'll be a line of people ready to kill us, right?"

"We're not going to be late." Travis stepped into the shower and turned on the water, angling the showerhead away as he always did, since he hated being hit with cold water. "That's what a joint shower is for."

"Sure, because that has worked so well for us in the past." Dave picked a conditioner from the cabinet before following Travis into the shower once the temperature was warm enough. "Bullet-proof plan, right there."

Tugging Dave closer until they were pressed together, Travis raised his eyebrows.

"I'm hearing a lot of complaining, and yet, here you are."

Dave exchanged the conditioner for the shampoo on the shower shelf and poured a bit onto his hand and Travis's.

"Not every decision I make is the smartest one." He started massaging Travis's scalp and sighed when Travis did the same to him. "I can't resist."

While it was supposed to be teasing, that last part came out soft and too earnest, which made Dave scrunch his nose. When he glanced at his partner's face, though, Travis was giving him that beaming smile he reserved only for him, so maybe it was worth it, in the end.

Who knew Travis would be a glutton for soft admissions and praise?

Not Dave.

He'd thought he would for sure be the softer, cornier one—and he did crave hearing things like that, which thankfully Travis delivered in spades—but to have it the other way around, too? And see Travis light up like this?

Dave would have never, ever predicted that.

Which was only one of the many surprises the last few months had brought.

"Well, I can't resist you, so we're even."

Travis tugged at Dave's hair, and when Dave tilted his head back, Travis dropped a kiss on his neck.

Then another, and another.

"Na-ah, I'm not getting it up again right now." Dave pulled back and turned them around so he could rinse his hair.

And, damn, the ease of not only moving without issue but also using his strength in

simple ways was still so damn refreshing. He'd been back at work for about a month now, but only those past two weeks had he been allowed to go back to the regular training routine with the rest of the crew, which he'd solely missed.

He'd missed manhandling Travis even more.

"With proper time and attention, you would and you know it." Travis squeezed Dave's cock as if to underscore his point. "But like you said, we'd be risking a killing squad behind the wedding hall, so we better not."

"It would ruin the party, I'd imagine."

Travis chuckled as he started soaping Dave's chest. "Pascal would find a way to revive us just to kill us again."

"Not a great look for the reelection campaign, nor the VP murmurs."

"I can't believe a guy coming to our basketball games is on the shortlist for the VP." Travis motioned for Dave to turn around so that he could wash his back, too. "As if the Supreme Court Justice wasn't enough."

"You've never had a problem relaxing around Pascal."

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"He wasn't the VP then."

"He's been a popular senator for years." Dave dropped his head forward, enjoying Travis's hands sliding up and down his body. "It's okay to admit you don't want that to be true because we might lose Jeremy over it."

Travis's movements stopped.

Shit.

Turning around, Dave put his hands on Travis's shoulders.

"Hey, you're not alone in this. I don't want to see him go, either."

"I feel like we can't say it, though."

"Well, not to Jeremy or Pascal, obviously." Dave soaped his hands and started running them down Travis's chest. "But we can admit it here."

"If not now, it's going to happen someday in the future. Pascal's going places, and we all know it."

"And some of those places don't mean Jeremy has to stop working for a long time yet."

"But not the VP."

Dave sighed, guiding Travis to turn around. "No."

"Fuck, what a decision to make. Have I told you lately how happy I am that we work in the same field and neither of us is famous or in need of a Secret Service detail?"

With a chuckle, Dave dropped a kiss on the back of Travis's neck.

"Not in so many words, no."

"Well, I am."

"I am, too. A few months away from work were already more than I could handle."

Travis turned back around at that.

"You handled it well, and you know it, hiccups and all."

They vastly differed in their opinions on that, but Dave didn't want to get into it again, so he redirected.

"Speaking of being famous, do you think Ian is coming alone or—?"

"No way would they launch their relationship at the wedding of a sitting US senator. Even if there was anything to launch, which I'm not so sure about."

Dave huffed and turned off the water.

"I don't know why you were more willing to believe there was something going on when Ian wasn't giving us anything, and now that he's obviously preoccupied by something, you're having doubts."

"Ian having a tryst with an international music star was a fun idea, but... I don't know. I don't like how he seems more anxious than excited these days. What if the guy doesn't want to come out? What if they were together and he cheated, but Ian can't tell anyone because he promised not to out him?"

"Whoa." Dave stared at his partner as he toweled off. "That's pretty dark."

"Exactly." Travis handed him the conditioner Dave had forgotten to use in the shower. "It can all be bullshit, of course. Still, whatever it is, Ian doesn't look happy to me."

Dave couldn't argue with that. Ian was usually a pretty reserved guy, but he wasn't grumpy by any means, or even particularly serious. He simply didn't share much about his personal life, which—while hard to stomach for a bunch of gossips at the office—wasn't bad in itself. There was definitely something going on with him now, though, and Dave wished he knew what it was.

"That's a no for a star-studded wedding, then?"

Travis glanced at him in the mirror as they both prepared for a shave.

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"Well, if you discount all the political stars, then sure."

"We were told it's going to be a pretty small wedding, so there shouldn't be too many of them, right?"

"I hope so. And I don't think there's going to be anyone above the Supreme Court Justice, anyway."

Dave snorted. "What a relief, that really narrows it down."

"Admit it, a POTUS drop-in would be cool."

"Damn, don't even say it."

Travis chuckled as he saw Dave put his blade down.

"Okay, give me that. We wouldn't want you to accidentally cut yourself from the nerves."

"I'm not—"

"It's okay, we all know you're a fan." Travis grinned, tilting Dave's head back before he put the blade to his skin. "Shut up now."

Frowning at the ceiling, Dave came up with quite a few rebuttals, but by the time Travis was done, they were all forgotten, because, as it turned out, being shaved was more arousing than Dave had ever imagined.

"Not getting it up again right now, huh?" Travis grinned at him after noticing Dave's thickening cock. "Called it."

Dave groaned. "Shut up. It's all your fault, anyway."

"I'll happily take the blame. Hell, I'll be even happier to shut up." Travis dropped to his knees, grinning up at him as Dave cursed. "With a proper incentive, that is."

Leaning against the counter, Dave gasped when Travis took him into his mouth.

"Yeah, that's good." Dave tossed his head back. "You get me off in less than three minutes, and you can fuck me in a bathroom stall at the venue. How's that for an incentive?"

Travis moaned, sending spikes of pleasure all over Dave's body.

Damn, what a life.

Dave was one lucky guy.

THE END