



Just a Bit Wicked (Straight Guys 7)

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, M-m Romance

Description: He's sure he'll never fall for a man...

When it rains, it pours. After losing his prestigious job, Vlad discovers that his girlfriend has cheated on him. Angry and hurt, he's determined to find her lover and teach him a lesson. When he finds out that her lover is bisexual, it only makes him angrier. Raised by an extremely homophobic family, Vlad is convinced he's straight and holds nothing but contempt for people who aren't. But sometimes contempt and anger can turn into obsession, and then into something else entirely—something Vlad has always considered sick and wrong.

He's sure he'll never fall for a homophobic bully...

Sebastian is a successful English model who has always detested bullies. When a man shows up on his doorstep accusing him of sleeping with his girlfriend, Sebastian isn't interested in being a punching bag. However, provoking a homophobic man is probably not the best idea...or the safest. But then again, Sebastian has never been good at playing it safe.

Things get a lot more complicated when Vlad has to bodyguard Sebastian. Can they stay professional?

They can't. They bicker and fight, and they hate everything about each other.

Now if only they could figure out how to keep their hands off each other.

Warning: references to past bullying and minor character deaths, violence, homophobia, internalized homophobia, hate sex.

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Chapter 1

There was a used condom on the floor by the bed.

This wouldn't be particularly noteworthy if not for the fact that Vlad had been away for weeks and the condom definitely didn't belong to him.

Vlad stared at the condom, feeling bile rise to his throat. His gaze shifted to the picture on the nightstand—a picture of a day at the park. He and Nina looked so happy, her small body looking tiny in his arms as he hugged her from behind.

He looked back at the condom and felt sick to his stomach.

Behind him, Nina kept chattering obliviously, saying how happy she was that he had returned home early from Switzerland.

Vlad had always prided himself on never hitting a woman. He was a big man, with a dangerous job, hot temper and fists to match, but he'd never hit a woman.

He'd never been so tempted in his life.

And he'd thought this week couldn't get any worse. Apparently it wasn't enough that he'd lost his job and the trust of the man he'd considered a friend. Finding out that his girlfriend had brought another man to his own fucking place and cheated on him in his own bed was just the cherry on the top.

“Who is he?” Vlad heard himself say, his voice flat.

Nina's incessant chatter finally stopped. "What?"

Vlad turned around and jabbed his finger toward the condom. "Who is the shithead you're cheating on me with?"

Nina's enormous blue eyes widened. Her lips trembled. "Vlad, it's not what it—"

"It's not what it looks like?" Vlad growled. "Are you fucking kidding me, Nina?"

She flinched, stepping away from him. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said, her voice full of confusion.

She wasn't a bad liar. Too bad for her Vlad was a former government agent and knew people who lied for a living. He used to be one of them.

"Who is he?" he said. He didn't know why it was suddenly so important. No, he knew why: he didn't think he was capable of hitting a woman even now, no matter what a lying, cheating bitch she was. A man was a different matter. Vlad's body itched for a fight, had been itching to find an outlet for his pent-up frustration and anger ever since Roman had dismissed him from his position of head of security. If Vlad was honest with himself, he'd needed to find an outlet for his anger ever since that English twink, Luke Whitford, had gotten Vlad's boss wrapped around his little finger. To this day, it baffled and disgusted Vlad how the little cocksucker had managed to bewitch a man like Roman. Vlad had never thought Roman was gay. He was still convinced Roman wasn't. It was all Luke Whitford's fault: the brat had the most obscene cocksucking lips Vlad had ever seen. Even Vlad, a completely straight man, couldn't help but stare a little.

"Who is he?" Vlad repeated. His chest hurt more than he would have liked to admit. Nina had been his steady girlfriend for two years. She was smart, funny, and beautiful. He had been genuinely fond of her, sometimes even thought he loved her.

They'd had a good thing going on. Or so he'd thought. Apparently Nina was of a different opinion if she'd fallen on another man's dick in the few weeks that he'd been gone.

It wasn't that he'd thought their relationship was perfect. They quarreled pretty often, mostly because of his work trips all over the world. The sex hadn't been perfect, either, but then again, it never was: Vlad always felt vaguely dissatisfied and disinterested during sex, regardless of the woman he fucked. Vlad was used to it, putting it down to his low sex drive. He was actually pretty proud that he never let his cock rule his head, as many other men did.

"Does it matter?" Nina said, setting her jaw stubbornly. Her eyes flashed. She no longer looked scared and guilty; now she looked pissed off and defensive. "Why are you surprised? You're never home! Am I supposed to be a nun while you travel all over the world, fucking women in Paris and London?"

"I've never cheated on you," he said, ignoring her disbelieving huff. She never believed him. "I'm asking you for the last time: who is he?"

Nina pressed her lips together. "I'm not telling you. You would hurt him."

The fact that she was protecting the fucker was an additional blow.

"Damn right I will," he said. "Now grab your shit and get out of my place."

Nina froze.

"You can't do that," she said. "You can't just kick me out! I have nowhere to go in Moscow!"

"You should have thought about that before falling on another man's cock," Vlad

said flatly.

Nina flushed. “Do you have to be so vulgar?”

Vlad gave a harsh chuckle. “I’m just calling a spade a spade. Or, in this case, a whore a whore.”

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Turning bright red, she glared at him. “You know what? Yes, I cheated on you and enjoyed every second of it! He was so much better than you! He was the best I’ve had! I told him how pathetic and selfish you were in bed and we laughed together—”

“Out,” Vlad said through his teeth. “I’m going out now and you’d better be gone by the time I return.” His fists clenched, he stalked out after throwing over his shoulder, “Leave your key at the security desk.”

Outside, he punched the wall and leaned his forehead against it, breathing hard and trying to rein in his temper. He wasn’t going to respond to the provocation. He wasn’t going to strike a woman. He wasn’t, dammit. Although he needed like air an outlet for the hurt and rage thrumming under his skin, his target wasn’t going to be a weak woman. Nina wasn’t the only one who had humiliated him. She’d had an accomplice.

Vlad lifted his head, his jaw setting in a determined line.

He didn’t need Nina to tell him the name of her lover. He could find out himself. There was video surveillance in the building. The last decade as the head of security of one of the most ruthless and influential oligarchs in Europe had given him a lot of useful connections. By the end of the day, he would have the name and the address of the shithead that had made a fool out of him.

The fucker was going to pay.

* * *

It took him even less time than he’d expected to find the information he wanted.

What he found out pissed him off even more. The man Nina had cheated on him with was English.

Vlad was aware it was irrational to dislike a whole nation because of one person, but after the Luke Whitford fiasco, he'd developed a strong aversion to anything English. He wondered if it was some cosmic joke that an Englishman had ruined his professional life and another Englishman had now ruined his personal one. Well, Luke Whitford was out of his reach, but Sebastian Sumner wasn't.

Vlad knocked on the hotel room door, his body vibrating with tension and agitation. While he waited, he thought of what he knew about the man. Sebastian Sumner was twenty-five, seven years younger than him, and was a successful model who lived in London. A fucking model. Vlad still couldn't believe Nina had cheated on him with a model. She normally turned her nose up at them, saying she didn't like men who were prettier or skinnier than her.

The door opened.

Sebastian Sumner wasn't particularly skinny, but he was undoubtedly pretty.

He was tall, almost as tall as Vlad himself, though he was athletic and lean, whereas Vlad was muscular and beefy. Sumner's shoulders were pretty wide and he was packing some decent muscle, but Vlad's trained eye quickly assessed that the other man was no match for him. He was also Vlad's polar opposite where looks were concerned.

Vlad didn't have low self-esteem. Women liked him. He had stereotypical Slavic looks with his almond-shaped blue eyes, square jaw, and cropped blond hair. He knew he looked pretty good. A man wasn't supposed to be beautiful anyway. Frankly, beautiful men with refined features always made Vlad uncomfortable for whatever reason.

This guy...he was one of those.

Sebastian's wavy, raven hair was a little too long and was brushed back casually, framing a strong, handsome face with high, chiseled cheekbones. Big dark eyes stared at Vlad with an inquiring expression. Was the guy wearing eyeliner? His eyes were too pretty for them to be natural. Sebastian's generous lips were pursed, their red color contrasting with the guy's pale, perfect complexion. The asshole was gorgeous, Vlad would give him that. He somehow managed to look beautiful without looking feminine.

"Can I help you, mate?" Sebastian said. His voice was low-pitched, his expression a little sleepy, as if he'd been taking a nap.

His British English grated on Vlad's nerves, triggering a fresh wave of anger. This man had been inside his girlfriend. He'd fucked Vlad's woman at Vlad's own place, in Vlad's own bed. There were pictures of Vlad and Nina all over the place; there was no way the guy hadn't known Nina was taken.

"You know who I am, so cut the crap."

Recognition dawned on the guy's face. Sebastian stepped back, wariness and a hint of discomfort appearing in his eyes. "You're Nina's boyfriend. Vlad, right?"

"Nice to meet you," Vlad said, advancing on him.

"Look, I didn't know Nina had a boyfriend," Sebastian said quickly. "I saw your pictures only afterward." He gave an awkward, crooked half-smile. "She didn't exactly let me look around when we got to her flat—"

In one swift move, Vlad shoved the asshole against the wall. "Is that fucking amusing to you, you sick fuck? Was that fun for you to screw with another man's

relationship?”

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Sebastian raised his eyebrows slightly. “I’m telling the truth: I didn’t know. Besides, I think you’re putting the blame in the wrong place. It’s not my problem if your relationship was so weak that your girlfriend invited me to her place after half an hour of dancing—”

Vlad punched him square in the jaw.

Sebastian groaned, blood trickling down from his mouth. He wiped it, missing a spot by his lips. Something like fear flickered across Sebastian’s face, but a moment later, it was gone. He lifted his chin, his expression hardening. “Did I hit a nerve, big guy?”

“Shut your fucking trap,” Vlad said, knocking Sebastian’s head against the wall and wrapping his fingers around his throat. “Don’t you have any self-preservation, you stupid shit? I’ve killed people for less.”

The guy actually chuckled. “Does this silly macho talk actually work on other people, mate?”

Unbelievable. The idiot thought Vlad was macho posturing.

“You have no idea what I’m capable of, mate,” Vlad said tonelessly. “I can snap you in half with one hand.” It wasn’t an empty threat. He could. Vlad tightened his grip on the pale throat. It brought him a ridiculous amount of satisfaction when Sebastian began gasping for air. But he wasn’t planning to actually kill the guy; Nina wasn’t worth the fallout. So when the model’s stupidly beautiful face started turning purple, Vlad reluctantly loosened his grip on his neck.

Sebastian started coughing, taking greedy breaths of air. “You should be thanking me, you know,” he said hoarsely.

Was this guy for real?

“Thanking you for fucking my girlfriend?”

“For testing the extent of her loyalty.” Sebastian looked at him. “Do you really need a woman who told a perfect stranger how shit you were in bed?”

Vlad’s eyes narrowed into slits. “I’m not shit in bed.”

Sebastian shrugged. “Her words, not mine. How would I know?” He gave Vlad an assessing stare. “Sure, you’re pretty hot, but it means nothing if the guy doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

Vlad felt his stomach clench with uneasiness. Pretty hot? “Are you a goddamn faggot?” Fucking hell, lately it felt like faggots were everywhere.

Sebastian blinked. “Well,” he said faintly. “Aren’t you a ball of sunshine... If I didn’t know that you were just a product of the anti-gay propaganda prevalent in your country, I’d be pretty damn offended. I’m trying not to be offended, but you aren’t exactly making me regret sleeping with your girlfriend, you know.”

“So you are a faggot.”

“If you must know, I identify as bisexual, but yes, I generally do prefer men,” Sebastian said proudly. “I’m not ashamed of it.”

Vlad sneered. “Of course you aren’t. I wouldn’t expect any different from a man who sees nothing wrong with taking what belongs to another man.”

Sebastian cocked his head to the side. “Okay, I deeply resent your insinuation that being bisexual or gay is something to be ashamed of and that we have no morals. The homophobic bullshit aside, newsflash, caveman: being in a relationship doesn’t mean your partner is your property. Your girlfriend doesn’t belong to you. She’s her own person. If she chooses to sleep with another man, that’s her right, no matter how shitty it is of her. Ever thought maybe it’s your own fault she had no incentive to stay loyal to you? From what I’ve seen, your personality isn’t exactly sparkling. Or maybe you are that shit in bed—”

He grunted in pain when Vlad shoved him hard against the wall. “Shut up,” Vlad growled. “A pansy who takes it up the ass doesn’t get to judge normal men’s sexual prowess.”

Sebastian laughed in his face. “Don’t you think a ‘pansy’ is better equipped to judge your prowess than ‘normal’ men?” He rolled his hips.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, you sick fuck?” Vlad said, his neck turning hot.

“A problem?” Sebastian said and rolled his hips again, grinding against Vlad.

“Stop that,” Vlad ordered, tightening his grip around Sebastian’s throat again. “You won’t scare me off by this disgusting shit.”

“Disgusting, huh?” Sebastian said softly, looking him in the eye. “Then why are you half-hard?”

He wasn’t—

Fuck.

Vlad glared. "I'm not a homo."

Sebastian smiled again, something like amusement appearing on his face. "Tell that to your cock."

Vlad gritted his teeth. "Any straight man would get a little hard if someone creates friction against his cock. That doesn't make me a homo."

"Sure."

"Stop rubbing against my cock, you perv."

Sebastian smiled wider. "Why don't you step away if this disgusts you so much?"

"Because a little faggot like you won't scare me off," Vlad bit out, feeling much too flustered for his liking. "People like you are freaks of nature. They shouldn't be called men."

Sebastian's expression darkened. "You know, I've changed my mind: I'm getting offended, after all."

Vlad snorted. "Is that supposed to scare me?"

Something flickered in Sebastian's eyes before his lips stretched into a smile. "You should be," he said softly, and pressed his lips against Vlad's.

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Vlad went rigid. This was sick, wrong, and disgusting, but, for some reason, he was aching hard, and he wanted—

He jerked away and wiped his mouth furiously before shoving the faggot against the wall. “What the fuck?” he growled out, pressing his forearm against Sebastian’s throat. “I told you I wasn’t a homo. Do I have to spell it out on your face?”

Sebastian grunted, struggling to breathe, and yet he continued looking at him with challenge. “What does it say about you that your girlfriend liked a homo better than you?”

The stupid shit really had a death wish.

A blow to Sebastian’s stomach made him double over. Another to his ribs sent him to his knees, breathless and in pain.

Vlad grabbed a fistful of black hair and yanked Sebastian’s face up. “I should fucking beat you to death for your big mouth.”

Panting, Sebastian smiled up at him before croaking out, “Why don’t you put my big mouth to better use?” Before he could react, Sebastian pressed his parted lips against the outline of Vlad’s hard dick.

Vlad’s muscles locked up. He couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, could do nothing but stare as Sebastian dragged his red lips over his clothed dick, all the while looking up at Vlad.

“Stop that,” he heard himself say, his body vibrating with restrained tension, his cock so hard it was painful. Why was he so hard, dammit?

Looking him in the eye, Sebastian rubbed his cheek against Vlad’s erection like an overgrown cat, murmuring, “How does it feel to know that a homo gave you a boner, straight guy?”

And Vlad snapped. He yanked his zipper down, grabbed his cock and pushed it into the faggot’s mouth. Sebastian grunted, gagging on the thick length in his mouth, his eyes going comically wide. The sight was immensely satisfying. Clearly the guy had been bluffing. He expected Sebastian to struggle and free himself now that Vlad had called him out on his bluff, but Sebastian didn’t. He looked up at Vlad, tightened his lips around Vlad’s cock, and sucked.

Vlad’s eyes rolled to the back of his head, a low groan slipping out of his mouth. The warmth, the wetness, the perfect amount of suction were too much, and suddenly it wasn’t about calling the faggot’s bluff out, but about a warm, wetwetwet mouth wrapped around his aching cock. Before Vlad could stop himself, his hips were thrusting in and out of the guy’s mouth, disgust and overwhelming need to fuck that mouth raging a war inside his body.

He wanted to say, “Stop,” but nothing came out. He wanted to shove the faggot away, but his body didn’t obey. He could do nothing but ram his cock into the guy’s throat, growling lowly at the sensation as he fucked it for minutes, maybe for hours; he had no idea. Sebastian’s mouth was fucking perfect around Vlad’s dick, and Vlad was losing it, thrusting into it like a man possessed, cradling Sebastian’s face in his hands, needing—fuck—

Before he knew it, he was groaning and coming down the guy’s throat.

For a long moment, there was only silence and overwhelming pleasure.

And then his brain kicked back into gear.

“That didn’t happen,” he said hoarsely, wide-eyed and breathless.

Sebastian wiped his mouth, watching him with a thoughtful look that would have made Vlad uneasy if he wasn’t already freaking out of his mind.

“Sure,” Sebastian said amicably. He got to his feet and smiled. “Thanks for the visit. It was...interesting. You know where the door is.”

Vlad didn’t need to be told twice. He was almost out of the room when Sebastian said, “I would apologize for giving your girlfriend an orgasm, but now she and you are even.”

Vlad slammed the door shut.

He made his way out of the building, nausea rolling in his stomach. His jaw clenched, he looked straight in front of him, avoiding meeting other people’s eyes. He’d never felt so self-conscious and sickened in his life. Could people look at him and see what had happened? Was it written on his face that he had fucked another man’s mouth? Did it make him a faggot, too?

Pidoras, pidor, goluboy, pedik—familiar Russian equivalents for “faggot” echoed in his mind in a scathing, disgusted voice. It sounded a lot like his uncle’s, and it brought up half-forgotten memories of his childhood.

Vlad had grown up in a small Russian village far from any major cities. The village was so old-fashioned it seemed stuck in the first half of the twentieth century in many ways. With only one black-and-white TV in the entire village, they all were basically cut off from the rest of the world. Vlad hadn’t been unhappy about it; he simply didn’t know better. He and his brothers spent their childhood working hard on their

small farm under the stern, watchful eye of their uncle. A former Army sergeant, Uncle Stepan didn't believe in "lazing around."

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“Don’t be such faggots and get your asses to work,” Uncle Stepan would yell at them when the boys tired out and wanted to play for a change. “Faggot” had been a synonym of “weakling” for as long as Vlad could remember. None of the boys had known what exactly the word originally meant, but they all knew they didn’t want to be faggots. When the boys complained about being cold or hungry, Uncle Stepan would bark at them to stop being little faggots and start being real men. Faggots weren’t real men as far as Uncle Stepan was concerned, and the boys had never questioned their uncle’s authority or knowledge.

When Vlad turned eleven, the word got another meaning.

There was a new family in the village, something almost unheard of. The newcomers had moved from Moscow and they had a teenage boy several years older than Vlad. The boy’s name was Philip and he was unlike any other boy Vlad had seen in his life: soft-skinned, doe-eyed, and pretty useless at farming; or at anything, for that matter. And yet, Vlad couldn’t quite bring himself to despise him. The boy was nice. He had a nice smile and a lot of funny stories to tell. Vlad liked watching him. That was how one day he caught Philip kissing Sergei, another boy from their village. Vlad was utterly flabbergasted. Having lived in a very sheltered, old-fashioned village all his life, Vlad hadn’t even known boys could kiss boys. Confused, he went to his uncle and asked him about it.

The fallout was nothing short of explosive.

Vlad got the whipping of his life for asking “such a stupid, freaky question.” Philip and his family hastily left the village the same night. Sergei, the boy Philip had kissed, was beaten to death by his own father.

“Serves that faggot right,” Uncle Stepan had said with grim approval. “Abominations, all of them. They shouldn’t be allowed to mix with normal people.”

Vlad’s brothers had murmured their assent while an eleven-year-old Vlad just sat there, feeling sick to his stomach. Was Sergei’s death his fault for telling his uncle about what he’d seen? He had known Sergei. The boy had been strong and capable and didn’t seem like an abomination or a weakling. Or had he been corrupted by Philip? Was it really contagious?

“Don’t beat yourself up over it, kid,” Uncle Stepan said gruffly, patting Vlad on the head. “Those freaks are nothing like you and your brothers. They’re a disgrace to men and should be hunted down and killed like rabid dogs so they don’t spread their disease.”

More than twenty years later, as Vlad walked out of the hotel in which he’d fucked another man’s mouth, he thought of his uncle’s words and felt nausea roll in his stomach. No, he was no longer a sheltered eleven-year-old. He knew homosexuality wasn’t actually a disease. His uncle was long dead, and by now Vlad knew Uncle Stepan’s hate for gay men had been...rather radical. But it was impossible to completely eradicate everything he had been raised to believe.

He wasn’t a faggot. He was normal.

What had happened back at the hotel was a fluke; it would never happen again.

Never.

Chapter 2

Five months later

The phone call came while Vlad was lounging in front of the TV with a beer in hand. Chelsea had just scored against Liverpool, to Vlad's annoyance and disappointment. He had put a bet on Liverpool, but the goddamn Gabriel DuVal just had to score and ruin it.

His phone went off again and Vlad looked blearily at the caller ID, squinting at it to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him.

They weren't. It really was Roman Demidov, his former boss, and one ungrateful son of a bitch—the man Vlad had respected and foolishly considered a friend of sorts before Roman had fired him over nothing five months ago. Fine, maybe not nothing, Vlad conceded grudgingly, but still. Weren't fifteen years of loyalty worth more than the fucktoy Roman had been obsessed with?

Vlad stared at his phone before sighing and swiping the screen to answer the call. He didn't bother with small talk and said, "I didn't think I'd hear from you again after you told me to fuck off and never come back." Or something along those lines. Vlad didn't remember all that well because he had been too busy being choked by Roman, but the gist of the message had been pretty clear. Frankly, he had been lucky to leave with his life. Roman could be absolutely ruthless when he was angry and Vlad had known better than to defend himself.

"The circumstances have changed," Roman said. "Have you found another job?"

"You know I haven't," Vlad said, his lips twisting. He had no delusions: Roman wouldn't be calling if he hadn't thoroughly checked to make sure that Vlad hadn't accepted one of the numerous jobs he had been offered by Roman's enemies.

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“Yes, I know,” Roman said. “Why?”

That was a fair question. Vlad might have been fired from his previous job, but he was good at what he did and didn’t exactly lack job offers. Normally he wouldn’t still be unemployed. He had simply been waiting for the right offer. He could afford being temporarily unemployed.

Vlad smiled. “They all wanted me to sell you out.”

There was silence on the line. They both knew that Vlad knew too much about Roman’s business dealings—both legal and illegal. He could have made a fucking fortune on selling Roman out.

“Why haven’t you?” Roman said, sounding unconcerned, as if he hadn’t doubted for a moment that Vlad wouldn’t do it.

Vlad scowled and took a gulp of beer. “Because apparently I’m an idiot.” He really was an idiot to stay loyal to the man who had kicked him out over a fucktoy.

“Good,” Roman said curtly. “I have a job for you.”

Vlad tipped his head back, frowning at the dimly lit ceiling. “A job?” It wasn’t like Roman to forgive someone who had wronged him.

“Look,” Roman said in a clipped voice. “Don’t think for a moment that I have forgotten what you did, but I know that you—mistakenly—thought you were acting in my best interests. I’m giving you a second chance. Your last chance. Don’t fuck it

up.”

“What, exactly, is the job?” Vlad said, suspicious but curious. “What happened?” Roman was a proud, stubborn man who rarely changed his decisions. He wouldn’t be offering Vlad a second chance if he genuinely didn’t need him.

“I don’t know if you’re aware or not, but I’ve moved the headquarters from Switzerland to London.” Roman’s voice was cool and calm, but Vlad could sense tension in it.

Vlad said, “And?”

“I need to leave London for a month, but there’s a...situation here, and I can’t leave Luke unprotected.”

Vlad sneered. Of course. He should have known. He should have known only that English brat had the power to make Roman change his mind. It was kind of ironic that Luke Whitford was the reason Vlad had lost his job and was the reason he was getting it back. Or was he?

“What sort of situation?” he said gruffly. He still didn’t understand. Roman had hundreds of people in his employ.

“It’s all over the news,” Roman said with a sigh, impatience creeping into his voice. “Three gay men have been beaten to death. All of them were publicly out, and all of them were influential one way or another, advancing LGBT causes. The authorities believe it’s the work of some anti-gay cult.”

Vlad rubbed at his temple. “And you think your boy is targeted?”

A pause.

“I don’t know,” Roman said. “But Luke is publicly out and has been all over the news since the beginning of the summer as the sole heir of Whitford’s business empire. He’s an obvious target.” His voice acquired a steely edge. “Even if he’s not targeted, I’m not going to risk it.”

“Why me?” Vlad said. “You have other people. You have Anna.”

“Anya will be accompanying me,” Roman said. “I need her with me in Peru. She can’t be in two places at once.” He paused. “I didn’t fire you because I doubted your professional abilities, Vlad. I fired you because I didn’t. I know how good you are and that’s why I didn’t believe that you had nothing to do with Luke’s disappearance while you were responsible for him.”

Vlad took another sip from his bottle and decided he hated Roman Demidov. Roman knew all too well how to manipulate people into doing what he wanted. But even knowing that Roman was manipulating him, it was still working, dammit. Roman wasn’t one to give compliments lightly.

“And you would trust me with the boy’s safety after I got rid of him last time?” Vlad said. “After I roughed him up a little that other time?” He knew Roman hadn’t forgotten it. Roman never forgot anything.

Roman didn’t reply immediately.

“I wouldn’t if I had another choice,” he said, his voice like ice. “I don’t trust you with him, but I trust you to keep him safe.” A pause. “The murders aren’t the only reason why I need you to bodyguard Luke. Charves has been a nuisance lately. Some of his people were seen in London.”

Vlad frowned. Charves was a Peruvian gangster with a personal vendetta against Roman. He was also ape-shit crazy and therefore unpredictable.

“You and Anna are the only ones who know how his mind operates,” Roman said. “I’m going to Peru to deal with him and I can’t afford to be distracted. And I will be if I’m worrying about Luke’s safety.”

Fucking hell. That English kid had Roman completely whipped. Who would have thought?

“Fine,” Vlad said. “But I’ll need a visa.”

“It was already taken care of.”

Vlad laughed hoarsely. “You’re such a smug asshole.” Of course Roman couldn’t even imagine anyone saying no to him.

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“Careful, Vlad.”

Vlad rolled his eyes. Roman firmly believed that familiarity bred contempt and usually distanced himself from his employees. The problem was, he and Roman had known each other for half of their lives and knew each other too well for a strict boss-employee relationship. On the other hand, they also weren’t close enough to be true friends. It was always a struggle for Vlad to find the right balance.

Vlad said gruffly, “Fuck off, I don’t have to be respectful until I sign the contract. Send it to me now. When do you need me in London?”

“By the end of the week.” Roman went silent for a short while. “Don’t disappoint me again,” he said at last, his voice deceptively soft. “If anything happens to him while I’m gone, losing your job is the last thing you’ll have to worry about. I’ll find you.”

Vlad smiled. He didn’t have any delusions about that. Roman rarely got his hands dirty these days, but when he did, it wasn’t pretty.

“I know,” he said. “I don’t repeat my mistakes twice. You know that.”

“I do,” Roman said and hung up.

Vlad heaved a sigh and stared at his phone, wondering if he’d made a mistake. He had his pride and didn’t really want to bodyguard Whitford’s brat. But on the other hand, he did owe Roman. If Roman hadn’t taken him under his wing all those years ago, who knew which jail’s cot he’d be warming today? He’d saved Roman’s life plenty of times since then, but he had never really felt like he’d repaid his debt. The

truth was, until he'd met Roman Demidov, his life had been a shithole. He had been a nobody from some godforsaken village, with no education, no prospects, huge debts, and a penchant for violence and expensive drugs. Even after fifteen years of loyal service, Vlad still felt like he owed Roman something.

Maybe this job would finally do the trick and he'd be finally free.

Ignoring the knot of unease that had appeared in his stomach at the thought of going to London, Vlad went to his laptop to book a flight.

London was a huge city. The odds of running into someone he'd rather not see were very slim. He had nothing to worry about.

Chapter 3

London greeted him with fog and heavy rain.

The cab dropped him in front of Luke Whitford's building, but Vlad was still soaked by the time he got inside. All he wanted was a cup of hot tea and a change of clothes, but the extensive security screening by the private lift leading to Luke's penthouse took almost fifteen minutes. Although the security measures satisfied him, the long wait in soaked clothes didn't exactly put him in a good mood. By the time he was approved and the private lift doors slid open to reveal Luke Whitford's spacious penthouse, Vlad wasn't in the mood to wait until its owner made an appearance. Silently, he moved toward the kitchen where he could hear familiar voices.

"...I still don't understand why it has to be him," Luke Whitford was saying. "He hates me. I don't trust him."

"Then trust me," Roman said. "Vlad is the best at what he does. In the decade he was responsible for my security, no attempt on my life was successful." Roman's voice

softened a little. “If things were different, I wouldn’t have chosen him to bodyguard you, but...”

Luke sighed. “I know. Soon, yeah?”

“Yes,” Roman said. “Vlad, you can stop snooping.”

Vlad stepped into the kitchen, schooling his face into indifference at the sight that greeted him.

Luke’s head was resting on Roman’s chest, Roman’s fingers running through the boy’s golden curls. Roman’s ice blue eyes fixed on Vlad over Luke’s shoulder, losing the softness they held just a moment ago. Now there was only the hard, calculating edge Vlad was so familiar with.

“Hi, Vlad,” Luke said unenthusiastically without looking at him.

“I have to leave earlier than anticipated,” Roman said, without bothering with social niceties. “I’ll be gone for a month, maybe more.”

Luke sighed, burrowing his face into Roman’s neck. “I hate it.”

“I know,” Roman said, his arm tightening around the boy for a moment.

Vlad shifted from one foot to the other, deeply uncomfortable.

“Be safe, yeah?” Luke murmured so softly Vlad could barely hear it.

Something flickered in Roman’s eyes as they met Vlad’s. They both knew there was no such thing as safe when your name was Roman Demidov. Roman was a dangerous and powerful man, but there were other dangerous and powerful men. Back in

Moscow, Vlad had heard through the grapevine that Roman wanted to get rid of the criminal aspects of his business and was doing a major cleanup. It made quite a few of his former business associates unhappy.

“I will,” Roman replied.

Luke lifted his head and smiled a little sadly at Roman. For all the dislike Vlad felt for the kid, he knew Luke Whitford was far from stupid. After all, Luke’s own father had been killed during a “business” trip similar to what Roman was leaving for.

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Luke ran his hand up Roman's chest and adjusted his tie a little. "If you get yourself killed, I'll be very, very mad," he said with a crooked smile before tugging Roman's face down by his tie and pressing their lips together.

Vlad looked away.

After about half a minute, the sounds of kissing finally stopped with a wet sound.

"I have a flight to catch, Curly," Roman said, stepping away from Luke.

Luke said nothing, wrapping his arms around himself.

Roman looked at him for a long moment before shifting his gaze to Vlad. "Something happens to him, you're responsible for that. You're to accompany him everywhere, no exception."

"I don't need him at the engagement party tomorrow," Luke cut in.

"No exception," Roman repeated, meeting the glare Luke sent his way. "I'm serious, Luke."

Luke just glared harder.

Roman smiled a little, the coldness in his eyes disappearing, before tugging the boy close and kissing him hard, greedy and possessive. "Behave while I'm gone," he said hoarsely. "Be a good boy for me."

Luke's eyes glazed over. Vlad didn't even want to know.

With a curt nod at Vlad, Roman was gone.

An awkward silence descended upon the room.

He and Luke stared at each other.

Vlad had never liked the kid. He was too pretty, too innocent-looking, too...gay. His flamboyance grated on Vlad's nerves.

"You really don't have to accompany me to the engagement party tomorrow," Luke said at last. "I don't want you to. It'd be awkward as hell. I mean, I'm used to your homophobic slurs, but I don't want you to offend the hosts."

Vlad frowned. "You mean..."

"Yeah, the people that are getting engaged are gay," Luke said and looked Vlad in the eye, as if daring Vlad to say something mean. "Maybe you've heard about Tristan DuVal?"

Of course he had. It wasn't every day a football player of Tristan's caliber came out. "Yeah. He's a former Chelsea player who recently admitted he was a faggot."

Luke shook his head. "You aren't going to the party unless you promise not to ruin their day by being rude and homophobic."

Vlad rolled his eyes. "I can restrain myself. I restrained myself a few minutes ago, didn't I?"

"Did you? I must have imagined the disgusted look on your face."

Vlad said nothing.

Luke heaved a sigh. “Look, I know you don’t like me. I don’t like you, either, so let’s make a deal, yeah? You don’t have to stick around when it’s not necessary. Roman’s out of the country. He won’t find out.”

Vlad snorted. “I don’t have a death wish, kid. He told me to follow you everywhere. I’ll follow you everywhere. I don’t have to like you to keep you safe.”

Luke raised his eyebrows. “Are you scared of him?”

“Yes,” Vlad said bluntly. If the boy had seen the extent of what Roman was capable of, he wouldn’t have even asked. Being wary of Roman was smart. A leopard couldn’t change its spots no matter how hard it was working to cover them up. “And you’re an idiot not to, no matter how good you are at sucking his dick. He isn’t a faggot. He’ll come to his senses soon.”

Luke blinked. “Every time I start thinking I can tolerate you, you prove me wrong.” He cocked his head to the side, his eyes curious. “You know, sometimes I wonder if you have some latent feelings for me or Roman.”

Vlad stared at him. “Is that supposed to be a joke?”

Luke shook his head and walked out of the kitchen.

Vlad gritted his teeth and followed him. “You don’t get to say stupid shit like that and then ignore me.”

“You’re right: it’s stupid,” Luke murmured. “I’m pretty sure you don’t actually have feelings for either of us—just a lot of repressed gay feelings in general.”

Vlad clenched his fists and didn't think of a certain hotel room and a wet mouth around his dick. "I'm not a homo. I don't have any 'repressed gay feelings.' It's pathetic how you gay people see gayness everywhere."

Luke smiled a little, shaking his head. "Whatever. Anyway, Tristan DuVal is the only publicly out football star in the world. Although he doesn't play anymore, he's still famous and his coming out is a big deal for us all, so I'm sure there will be lots of members of the LGBT community at the party. Either you behave, or you aren't going. It's as simple as that. Tristan is my best friend's brother. I can't, and won't, let you ruin the evening."

"I'll keep my opinions to myself," Vlad said, frowning thoughtfully. If there were going to be many prominent gay people at the party, it was very likely to be targeted by the cult. He had to be there, regardless of his distaste. He was a professional, first and foremost.

The wariness in Luke's eyes didn't disappear. "We'll see," he said softly. "The party is tomorrow at six in the evening. Don't be late."

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Vlad stared at him. “I’m not going anywhere. Didn’t Roman tell you I was going to stay here?”

Luke’s eyes widened. “What—?” He cut himself off and sighed, shaking his head. “Fine. Follow me, then. I’ll show you to your room.”

Judging by the tense set of Luke’s shoulders, Roman had a hell of a fight coming his way.

Vlad wasn’t concerned. He wasn’t there to be liked and make friends. He was there to do his job.

“And Vlad?” Luke said, his voice very soft. “I don’t care about your views, but I won’t tolerate any homophobic slurs toward my friends. Give me one reason and I’ll fire you, regardless of what Roman says. If I don’t feel comfortable around you, I’m not going to put up with you. There’s enough hate toward us; I won’t tolerate it in my own home. Got it?”

“Yes,” Vlad said. The kid had a spine, he’d give him that. He could respect it.

Chapter 4

Sebastian was so, so late.

“Dammit, Hermione!” he said, trying to instill some authority into his voice. “Come down this instant.”

His cat didn't move an inch.

"Come on, girl," he pleaded, glancing at his watch. He was so fucking late. "Come down, princess. Please. I know you can." At least no one could see him begging his cat. A perk of living alone.

Hermione didn't move, still meowing pathetically from her spot on top of the wardrobe. Sebastian sighed, brushing his fingers over his carefully styled hair. He didn't want to leave her up there. He would likely be gone till the next morning and he wasn't confident in her ability to get down while he was out. It wouldn't be the first time his cat had climbed on something and then couldn't get down. Sebastian loved Hermione, he did, but he wasn't blind to her flaws. She was kind of...not very smart, truth be told. His sister, Julia, always cracked up and called him an idiot for naming the "dumbest cat in existence" after one of the smartest fictional characters. To be fair to him, he couldn't exactly tell how smart she was—or wasn't—when Hermione had been a kitten.

"All right," he said with a sigh, glancing at his watch again. He was already fifteen minutes late. "It's your own fault," he said, reaching for the broom.

Half an hour later, after getting his cat down and changing his outfit, Sebastian was climbing into his Range Rover, trying not to feel guilty. Maybe his mother was right and he shouldn't be responsible for another living being. Hopefully Hermione wasn't too traumatized. But it wasn't like he had much of a choice, was it? It was rude to be late for the engagement party of your boss. Well, strictly speaking, Tristan DuVal wasn't his boss—Sebastian was employed by a modeling agency and was only signed on to be the face of Tristan DuVal's new fashion line for men, but still. Being late wasn't acceptable. Looking like he'd been fighting with his cat was even less acceptable. The party wasn't exactly a small affair, and there were likely to be members of the press in attendance. Tristan DuVal's engagement to another man was a pretty big deal, after all. It wasn't every day an ex-footballer of Tristan's caliber

came out.

Sebastian smiled ruefully, wondering when the sports world was going to change. He was lucky the modeling business was nowhere as cruel and unforgiving to non-straight people. Sure, there were assholes everywhere, but things were nowhere near as bad as in football. There were quite a few gay designers and gay models in the fashion industry, and most people were cool with Sebastian being openly bisexual. Actually, he sometimes wondered whether the fact that he wasn't straight influenced Tristan in choosing him as the face of his fashion line. Maybe. Either way, it was a great opportunity. Tristan's fashion line was getting a lot of publicity. Sebastian didn't doubt it would be very successful. Gay or not, Tristan DuVal had always been a media darling. He was England's Golden Boy, with his exquisite looks, effortless charm, a childhood sob story, and the tragic ending of his promising career. Tristan also had great business instincts and belonged to the rare category of people who succeeded in everything they set out to accomplish, and Sebastian was genuinely flattered that Tristan had chosen him to be the face of his fashion line. It was going to be huge.

Sebastian smiled excitedly at the thought, turning the ignition off and getting out of his car. As he had expected, there was a sizable group of paparazzi in front of the club.

"Sebastian, give us a quote, please!"

"Sebastian, is it true you're going to be the face of DuVal's fashion line? What about the rumored exclusive contract with Burberry?"

"Sebastian, a comment on the scandal that happened during New York fashion week?"

“Sebastian, you were seen with—”

Putting on his best smoldering, mysterious look, Sebastian strode toward the club’s entrance. To be totally honest, despite years in the industry, he still felt like a fraud when he did it. Growing up, he’d been very far from being smoldering and mysterious. He’d been a total geek as a kid, preferring quiet evenings with a book to hanging out with friends that he didn’t have. Puberty hadn’t treated him well: he had been an awkward, gangly, pimply teenager obsessed with videogames and Harry Potter books, a loser who was pushed around and tripped in the corridors.

Who would have guessed back then that he was just a very late bloomer?

Now, looking at Sebastian’s luscious black hair, dark bedroom eyes and toned physique, no one believed how painfully uncool and unattractive he used to be. His teenage self would have never believed that a few years down the road he would have the reputation of being a womanizer. Sebastian wanted to laugh every time he heard himself called that. Well, to be fair, the reputation wasn’t entirely undeserved. Sebastian had been a bit of a slag in those first few years of modeling, shagging everything that moved, because all of a sudden people wanted him and it had been a little heady. It still was, sometimes. Sebastian couldn’t deny he still loved the thrill of attracting admiring looks from men and women who wouldn’t have spared him a second glance in his youth. Maybe it was petty, but fuck that, he was allowed to be petty after years of ridicule and rejection.

Sebastian shook his head, smiling a little. “You’re twenty-five years old, idiot,” he murmured to himself. An adult. A real grown-up. It was well past time to get over his shitty teenage years. He wasn’t the first or the last person whose teenage years

sucked.

Shaking his thoughts off, Sebastian entered the club. His aloof face firmly on, he navigated through the crowd, a bit relieved that there were so many guests. Surely his tardiness hadn't been noticed when there were so many other famous guests: football players, models, executives, politicians, and socialites. Sebastian wasn't surprised. From what he knew of Tristan DuVal, the bloke wasn't one to miss the opportunity to network. It wasn't all business, to be fair: Sebastian could see the engaged couple's family and quite a few familiar faces from LGBT charities. It was certainly an interesting and diverse crowd.

Sebastian looked around the room, his gaze skimming over the groups of chatting people. He should probably find Tristan and his fiancé—

His gaze snapped back to the tall blond man leaning against the wall. There was something familiar about him...

The man turned his head a little and Sebastian sucked a breath in. Shit. It was him. The homophobic prick he'd sucked off in Moscow.

Sebastian bit his lip, eyeing the other man.

The thing was, Sebastian usually never slept with taken people. He hadn't known Nina was taken; he had noticed the picture of her and her boyfriend only after the sex. He had felt so shitty about the whole thing, but after getting to know her close-minded boyfriend, Sebastian couldn't exactly blame Nina for straying. The guy was a giant bully.

Sebastian hated bullies. That man—Vlad, if his memory served right—had brought an onslaught of painful, humiliating memories from his youth: of being shoved against the lockers, called a faggot, and kicked around by a bunch of homophobic

straight jerks just like that man. Sebastian couldn't fight bullies as a teenager, but now that he was no longer stick-thin and shy, he could more than stand up for himself. He was proud that he hadn't let his teenage insecurities overwhelm him in Moscow, proud that he hadn't let that homophobic asshole kick him around. He had won. The asshole had left his hotel room thoroughly confused and disgusted with himself. It served him right. Sebastian had been so proud, certain that he'd taught the homophobe a lesson and Vlad would know better in the future.

Well, so much for that. The asshole was openly sneering at Tristan and his fiancé, Zach. The couple wasn't even doing anything outrageous: Zach had his arm slung casually around Tristan's waist, his thumb resting on Tristan's hip as the couple talked to a few guests. As far as public displays of affection went, it was very tame, but, judging by Vlad's face, they might as well be making out. Tosser.

Pursing his lips, Sebastian picked up a glass of champagne from the passing waiter and headed toward Vlad.

"What's a nice straight man like you doing at a place like this?" he said, leaning against the wall next to the other man.

Vlad's body went rigid. He didn't turn his head toward Sebastian, so Sebastian took a moment to sweep his gaze over the guy. Vlad was clad in a black suit, black undershirt and black shoes, his cropped blond hair very fair in contrast.

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Sebastian sighed inwardly. Why couldn't bullies look as ugly as they were on the inside?

"What are you doing here?" Vlad said, finally turning his head. His jaw was clenched so tight a muscle pulsed at his cheek. Blue eyes glared at him.

Goosebumps ran up his spine, but Sebastian ignored his nerves and smiled lazily. "I'm a guest. What about you? I'm surprised you're at a party like this. Aren't you afraid to catch gay cooties?"

Vlad's face didn't change, but Sebastian didn't miss the way his hand balled into a fist in his pocket.

"I'm working," Vlad ground out, jerking his head to the side, toward the pretty, petite young man talking with the engaged couple. "His bodyguard."

Sebastian raised his eyebrows, surprised. "Luke Whitford's? But he's gay."

"Don't tell me you two are best friends or something."

Sebastian laughed. The guy's obvious worry was hilarious. "Not really," he said. "We know each other, though. He's more of a friend of a friend." He thought for a moment, pondering why Luke would even need a bodyguard. "Is it about the murders? A bit counterproductive to hire a homophobe to protect a gay man from other homophobes."

Vlad glared at him. "Thinking that fucking men is gross isn't the same as wanting

them dead.”

“Gross, huh?” Sebastian smiled and took a sip from his champagne, looking at Vlad over the rim of the glass. He swallowed the liquid and Vlad’s gaze flicked to his working throat.

This was fun.

Ignoring the unsure voice in the back of his head that kept telling him he was playing with fire, Sebastian let his gaze wander all over Vlad’s wide, muscular chest. He didn’t try to be subtle. Being subtle wasn’t the aim here.

“Stop that,” Vlad said, his face turning a little red and his eyes glinting murderously.

Sebastian blinked and smiled innocently. “Stop what?”

“Look,” Vlad gritted out, as though every word pained him. He grabbed a drink from the passing waiter and downed it in one go. “I’m not a fag.”

Sebastian chuckled. “I’m aware you aren’t a cigarette, mate.”

If looks could kill, he would be dead twice over. “Don’t get cute with me.”

Sebastian grinned and crossed his legs, cocking his hip a little. “I’m always cute,” he murmured, licking his lip and looking Vlad in the eye. “Don’t you think?”

“I’m not a fag,” Vlad repeated flatly, holding Sebastian’s gaze. “Don’t get some ideas just because I fucked your mouth once.”

Sebastian ran a hand through his hair, a little surprised. He hadn’t expected Vlad to acknowledge aloud what had happened at all.

“Okay,” Sebastian said. When Vlad gave him a suspicious, narrow-eyed look, Sebastian murmured, “Nice cock, though. I enjoyed it a lot.” And he sauntered away, smiling to himself. He did enjoy messing with bullies’ poor little brains. Vlad’s face had been priceless.

* * *

Vlad hadn’t intended to drink here. Roman would have his hide if he found out Vlad was less than sober while he was bodyguarding Luke. Granted, a glass of champagne wasn’t even going to get him tipsy, but still. It didn’t sit well with him that he could be so easily driven to alcohol.

Vlad went to the bar and asked for a glass of water. Downing it in one go, he leaned against the bar and swept his gaze around the club, looking for anything unusual, anyone who looked out of place.

The problem was, it was too damn dark and crowded in the club, the atmosphere getting rowdy as the guests’ inhibitions were loosened by alcohol. The dance floor, which was empty at the beginning of the evening, was now crowded, music blasting at full volume. It wasn’t much of an engagement party anymore, just a crowd of tipsy celebrities and businessmen grinding against each other.

Vlad’s gaze skimmed over the dance floor before halting on the figure in the middle of it. Sebastian Sumner had his eyes closed as his hips swayed to the rhythmic beat. His black shirt was unbuttoned almost to his belly button, revealing his toned pecs and stomach. His head was thrown back against the shoulder of a tall, beefy man, and his arm was wrapped around the waist of a pretty blond woman in front of him.

Vlad’s lips thinned as he watched them, watched Sebastian’s wide mouth grin obscenely while the man and the woman sandwiched him between them.

Whore.

Dragging his gaze away, Vlad returned it to where Luke had been sitting a few moments ago. He tensed when he saw that the table was empty. Where had the kid gone?

After fifteen minutes of fruitless searching all over the dance floor, Vlad's mild annoyance turned into full-blown anxiety. Luke wasn't answering his mobile phone, either.

Only when he was certain that Luke wasn't anywhere in the crowded room, Vlad went to search the rest of the club.

It was one of those pretentious luxury clubs with too many restrooms, terraces and private rooms—a nightmare when one was trying to find someone. With every passing minute, his concern grew. He was going to fucking kill the kid himself if he'd gotten into trouble. Luke had been supposed to warn Vlad if he wanted to go somewhere.

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Vlad was walking past one of the back doors when he heard the noise. Years of experience made him pause and pay attention. It had sounded a little like a muffled yelp. Silently, he made his way to the back door and opened it without a sound.

Dark alley. Five men, one of them wearing a waiter's uniform. A gun in the waiter's hand, pushed against Sebastian Summer's back. A knife pressed to Tristan DuVal's throat. Two hostages, three hostiles.

Vlad was no hero. He didn't have a saving people complex. Later, he would rationalize his actions as logical: maybe these men had already gotten Luke, who was still nowhere to be seen.

So he didn't think. He acted.

It was pretty dark and the men were already a good twenty feet away. Good thing he was an exceptional shot.

Vlad pulled his gun out and aimed it at the gun in the waiter's hand.

The rest was a blur of instincts, blood and violence.

Three minutes later, the fake waiter was on the ground, bleeding from a head wound, his hands tied together by his tie. One of his buddies was knocked out, while the third one was whimpering under Vlad's boot as Vlad drove the knife in his thigh deeper before knocking him out, too. Fucking amateurs.

"Well," drawled a voice, breaking through the red haze that tainted his vision. "Not

that I'm not grateful, but that's a little excessive, don't you think? Also, who the hell are you?"

Vlad straightened and turned his head, assessing the two other men. The shorter one, the one who had spoken, Tristan DuVal, was looking at him curiously. He seemed remarkably calm for someone who'd nearly been kidnapped.

A glance at Sebastian revealed that he wasn't as composed as Tristan. He was pale, his wide dark eyes flicking from the men on the ground to Vlad. His mouth was red with blood.

Vlad felt his groin tighten and looked away, back to Tristan. "I'm Luke Whitford's bodyguard."

"Thanks, Luke Whitford's bodyguard," Tristan said with a nice smile.

What the fuck? What was wrong with this kid? He seemed completely unbothered by what had nearly happened.

Before Vlad could say anything, several security guards burst out of the door, followed by a few men, Luke among them.

"Where the hell have you been?" Vlad growled at Luke.

"I was on the phone with Roman," Luke said distractedly. "Are you okay, guys?"

"Just fine, thanks to your Rambo," Tristan replied. "I'm fine, Zach," he said with an eye-roll when his fiancé started patting him for injuries. "I'm fine, babe," he said, softer, as the man pulled him close and hugged him hard, murmuring something into his ear.

Vlad looked away. His gaze landed on Sebastian again. The model was gazing around, looking lost. He seemed...small, despite being taller and far more muscular than Tristan. The confident teasing, the cockiness from earlier, were nowhere to be seen.

Vlad frowned and looked away. It was none of his business.

He walked to the nearest assaulter and slapped him across the cheek. The guy groaned.

“Who sent you?” Vlad said.

The man glared up at him. “You’re Russian. Aren’t you supposed to be smarter than saving a couple of poofs?”

Vlad just looked at him for a moment before putting his hand on the knife still stuck in the guy’s thigh and driving it deeper. The guy screamed.

Vlad said, “Talk.”

“Vlad,” Luke said from behind him, sounding nervous.

“Talk,” Vlad repeated, pushing on the knife again. “Or I’m going to pull out this nice knife and put it through your throat.”

The guy whimpered, eyes wide with fear and pain. “You wouldn’t dare, Russian.”

Vlad smiled coldly. “Wanna bet?”

“Vlad, stop,” Luke hissed furiously. “You can’t just torture people for information!” He glanced around before hissing quieter, “We aren’t in Russia. Roman doesn’t need

that kind of attention on him and his employee! Let the police handle that.”

Vlad nodded reluctantly and stepped away but not before saying, “They weren’t working alone.”

“How do you know that?” Sebastian cut in.

Vlad didn’t look his way when he answered. “They have headsets on. Someone was coordinating them.” Probably from a nondescript SUV that was already long gone.

“So you think they’ll be targeted again?” one of the men who followed Luke out of the club said. Vlad thought it was Luke’s friend.

He shrugged. “Probably. Cults are usually pretty obsessed and tend to fixate on something in case of a failure.”

“We’ll increase security measures,” Tristan’s fiancé said with a frown, his arms still around Tristan.

Tristan nodded before looking at Sebastian. “You shouldn’t live alone anymore. Can you move in with your family?”

Sebastian shook his head, still looking a bit off. “My family doesn’t live in London. I wouldn’t want to involve them anyway.”

“You can live with me,” Luke said, and Vlad’s stomach dropped.

“No,” Vlad cut in. “That’s too dangerous for you. I won’t allow it.”

Luke glared at him. “Luckily I don’t have to ask your permission if I want to invite people to my place.”

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Vlad opened his mouth and closed it. That was true. There was nothing he could do. “Roman will be furious.”

Luke smiled. “I know. But if it were up to Roman, he’d lock me up in a tower to keep me safe. My flat has ridiculous security measures—Roman insisted on it. It’s probably the safest place in England now. That’s why it makes perfect sense for Sebastian to move there while this mess is sorted out.”

Vlad ground his teeth. He had to admit the kid’s logic was sound.

Knowing that he had won, Luke smiled at Sebastian. “See? Even my grumpy bodyguard has no objections. Come on. Roman’s out of the country and I’m bored to death in my huge, empty flat. Vlad is no fun.”

Sebastian seemingly hesitated before looking from Luke to Vlad. Vlad glowered at him. Don’t you dare accept the offer.

A ghost of a smile touched Sebastian’s lips, his eyes flashing with familiar challenge. “Okay,” he told Luke. “Thanks, mate.”

Vlad wanted to punch something.

As if hearing his thoughts, Luke looked at him. “Don’t forget what we talked about, Vlad: if you act like a homophobic ass around my friends, I’m firing you and you’ll be the one doing the explaining to Roman.”

Vlad nodded tersely, ignoring the curious, speculative look Sebastian shot him. He

turned away.

Fucking hell. He couldn't believe his rotten luck. What were the odds of Luke knowing the guy who'd sucked him off in Moscow?

Pretty good, actually, now that he thought about it. Luke and Sebastian both belonged to the privileged London elite. Of course they knew each other. Just his goddamn luck. And just his luck that Luke would invite Sebastian to live with him while Vlad was staying under the same roof.

Vlad normally didn't believe in higher powers, but if they existed, they must be laughing at him.

Chapter 5

Vlad's eyes snapped open.

It was still dark out. He couldn't have been asleep for very long. He had stayed up until the wee hours of the morning to go over the police reports he'd managed to get his hands on. Luke might have forbidden him to interrogate those men, but it didn't mean Vlad was going to remain in the dark.

He lay still, trying to understand what had awakened him from his exhausted sleep.

Straining his hearing, Vlad waited. The flat was quiet, no sound coming from the other two men's rooms.

There. The sound of footsteps. Someone was walking toward the bed.

Vlad thought of his knife under the pillow and the gun in the drawer beside the bed.

He didn't move. The element of surprise was more valuable than the knife.

The footsteps stopped.

Then, the intruder crawled into the bed.

What the actual fuck?

Vlad peered at the man—and it was a man. He could barely make him out as the man rolled closer to him and tucked his face against Vlad's shoulder, but he was reasonably certain it was Sebastian fucking Sumner.

Bewildered, Vlad stared at the guy in the darkness. He felt like he was missing something. He and Sumner weren't exactly on snuggling terms. He'd barely spoken a word to the guy after Sebastian had followed them to Luke's penthouse. In fact, Vlad's stony silence while Luke showed Sebastian to his room had made it clear to everyone involved what he thought of Luke's invitation.

"I don't know what you think you're doing, but get out." Vlad didn't raise his voice, but Sebastian whimpered and pushed his face harder into Vlad's shoulder. Tremors were racking his body. What in the world?

Reaching out to the lamp, Vlad switched it on. A soft yellow light illuminated the room and he turned back to the other occupant of the bed.

Sebastian's eyes were open, but they were glassy and unfocused, his breathing even. For all intents and purposes, he seemed asleep. He was sleepwalking.

Vlad put a hand on Sebastian's shoulder and shook him a little. "Wake up," he said, growing irritated when there was no reaction. He was tired as hell, his knuckles were aching, and he was in no mood to baby someone, especially this man.

Sebastian didn't wake up. Instead, he closed his eyes. He was still trembling, trying to burrow deeper into Vlad's shoulder. It was making Vlad increasingly uncomfortable, considering that they both were wearing only their underwear.

He contemplated shoving Sebastian off his bed and damn everything else, but he had a feeling Luke would make a fuss if he treated his guest that way.

Sighing, Vlad shook the guy harder. "Wake up."

Sebastian stirred a little, his dark eyelashes fluttering. He rubbed his eyes like a kid, his lips pursing into a pout.

"Get up," Vlad growled into his ear.

Sebastian jumped, flailing rather comically, his eyes wide and confused as he sat up.

"What the fuck are you doing in my bed?" he said, glaring at Vlad.

Vlad lay back and crossed his arms behind his head. "I should be the one asking that."

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Sebastian's brows furrowed before he glanced around the room. The lamp wasn't very bright and Vlad couldn't tell whether Sebastian was blushing or not, but he did look mildly embarrassed now. Mostly he looked confused.

Finally, his face cleared. "I sleepwalked, didn't I?" he said with a resigned sigh. "It happens sometimes, when I'm stressed."

Vlad shrugged. "Don't know, don't care, get out."

Sebastian studied him. "Am I making you uncomfortable?" he said, cocking his head to the side, a strand of dark hair falling over his eyes. The innocent, almost childish sleepiness from moments ago was gone.

"Yes," Vlad said. "I'm not in the habit of having half-naked gays in my bed."

"For the record, I'm not gay. I told you: I'm bi."

"Same difference," Vlad said, closing his eyes. "Get out. I barely slept thanks to you and the idiots who attacked you."

A pause.

"Do you know anything new? About those men?" Sebastian's voice sounded strange.

"Yes," Vlad said, without opening his eyes.

He almost smiled when he heard Sebastian make an annoyed, impatient noise.

“And?”

“They confessed,” Vlad said, snorting. Fanatics like that were idiots. “They all are from religious backgrounds, they all think they’re doing God’s work.” Vlad sneered. While he was far from being an LGBT supporter, he despised religious bullshit like that even more. “Apparently their cult wants to eliminate ‘demons’ with big reach, people who can influence the society by coming out and speaking up. Apparently you and Tristan DuVal fit the profile.” It was all pretty standard and not challenging at all. All things considered, those people were amateurs, not the professionals Vlad was used to dealing with. Boring.

“You could’ve at least pretended to be a little concerned,” Sebastian said.

Vlad opened his eyes.

Sebastian’s lips were pursed, his dark eyes stormy. “But then again, why would you be when you agree with those bonkers?”

Vlad gave him a flat look. “You have a short memory. I saved your ass from them just a few hours ago. If I wanted to, I would’ve let them take you and kick you to death. Hmm, maybe I should have.”

“You’re such an ass,” Sebastian said. “And you can’t even deny you agree with those lunatics.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.” Vlad closed his eyes again. “Good night. And you’re welcome. No need to thank me for saving you.”

There was a long silence.

“Thank you,” Sebastian finally grumbled, barely audibly.

Vlad smiled and opened his eyes. “What was that?”

“Don’t be a prick,” Sebastian said. He was glowering at Vlad, but there was a hint of something sincere in his eyes. But then it was gone, replaced with devilish mirth. “I’m very grateful,” Sebastian said. “Thank you so much, Vlad.”

Vlad looked at him suspiciously.

Before he could say anything, Sebastian leaned in and pressed his soft lips against his unshaven cheek. “Thank you,” he murmured, his voice low and a little husky. “You were amazing. It was kind of hot. Made me all hot and bothered.”

Vlad shoved him away. “Fuck off.”

Snickering like a kid, Sebastian rolled off the bed and strode out of the room. “Good night, straight guy,” he said at the door, blowing him a kiss.

Vlad just glared, wiping his cheek furiously. His face was hot, he realized with annoyance. He was fucking blushing. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d blushed and felt so off balance.

With an irritated sigh, Vlad switched the lamp off, lay back on the bed, and closed his eyes, determined to erase from his mind everything that had happened in the last few minutes. He was about as successful as when he had tried to forget what happened all those months ago in a certain hotel room in Moscow.

And it was just the first night under the same roof as that little shit. He had no idea how he was going to survive this without killing anyone.

Chapter 6

A few hours later—much too soon for Vlad’s liking—his alarm went off and he got out of bed, grouchy and still a bit unsettled but determined to ignore Sebastian. He wasn’t going to respond to provocations. Sebastian likely wanted to provoke him into saying or doing something homophobic, to give Luke an excuse to get rid of him. Well, if that was the case, they both were going to be disappointed.

Finished with his morning routine, Vlad padded out to the kitchen, seduced by the mouth-watering smell of a fry-up.

He had expected to find Luke by the stove, but it was Sebastian.

Vlad stopped in the doorway for a moment before entering the kitchen and taking a seat at the table. He glared at the empty plate in front of him.

“Morning,” Sebastian murmured, sounding amused and entirely too chipper for this hour.

Vlad fucking hated morning people. He didn’t trust them. And it looked like Sebastian had decided to continue what he’d started last night and keep getting on his nerves.

“I see you’re particularly charming in the morning,” Sebastian said, filling up a plate for himself.

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Vlad just glowered at him and grabbed the cup of coffee off the table. He took a greedy sip.

“That was mine, actually.”

Vlad paused before taking another long sip.

“Tosser,” Sebastian said.

Vlad shrugged. “Don’t know the word, but back at you.” He lifted his gaze to the other man and pushed the empty plate toward him.

Sebastian’s eyebrows flew up. “You aren’t actually expecting me to feed you, right?” His tone was so incredulous and annoyed that Vlad almost laughed.

“I am,” he said, keeping a straight face. He couldn’t deny he enjoyed getting this guy riled up. “I’m a big man, and I burned a lot of calories saving your fat ass last night.”

“Excuse me?” Sebastian spluttered. “My ass isn’t—” He stopped and smiled sweetly. “Why, I didn’t know you noticed my ass, Vlad. Careful, or people might get the wrong idea, mate.”

Vlad gritted his teeth. “It’s in front of me and it’s huge. Hard to miss, mate.” It really was hard to miss; those thin gray sweatpants left nothing to the imagination. Vlad scowled at it before lifting his gaze. “You sure you’re a model, with a fat ass like that?”

Sebastian's smile widened. "I actually have a contract with Calvin Klein. They don't seem to mind my fat ass."

"Odd," Vlad said, pushing at his plate again. "I'm hungry, hurry up."

"Unbelievable," Sebastian said. "First you steal my coffee and now you demand to be fed. I understand that you were probably a stereotypical jock who bullied people into doing what you wanted, but you're a bit too old for that. Grow up and feed yourself."

"You make a lot of assumptions about me," Vlad said, casting the other man a curious look. Not that Sebastian was entirely wrong, but there was something about the way he'd said it that made Vlad wonder.

"Do I?" Sebastian said, leaning his hip against the table right next to Vlad's chair. His t-shirt rode up a little, flashing a glimpse of his toned pale stomach. "Are you going to deny you're used to bossing people around? That you get angry when you don't get your way?"

"I was the head of security for a billionaire for a decade. It was my job to boss people around." Vlad added irritably, "Can't you stand somewhere else? You're crowding me."

Sebastian cocked his head to the side. "Are you afraid of catching gay cooties?" he said, a mischievous glint appearing in his eyes. "I'm afraid that ship has sailed." He licked his lips with a wink.

That little faggot.

"Is that supposed to be seductive?" Vlad bit off.

"I don't know," Sebastian said, stepping closer, between Vlad's thighs. "Are you

seduced? Or are you about to call me a faggot and punch me?”

Vlad gave him what he hoped was a flat look. “It won’t work. So you can quit trying to get me fired.”

Sebastian frowned. “What?”

“Cut the crap,” Vlad said. “You know Luke is just looking for an excuse to complain about me to Roman and get me fired. You aren’t going to provoke me into losing my temper and doing something you fa—fucktards can call homophobic.”

“Nice catch,” Sebastian said, his lips twitching.

“I have no idea what you mean,” Vlad said with a straight face. “Anyway, nothing you do will provoke me, so stop.” And step back. He wasn’t comfortable with this guy all over his personal space. It made him itchy in his own skin.

Sebastian just looked at him for a long moment. “Nothing?” he said softly, a devilish glint appearing in his eyes again.

It made Vlad wary, but he could hardly take it back. Challenge issued. “Nothing. Whitford’s brat already got me fired once. I’m not letting it happen again.” He was going to keep his opinions to himself even if it killed him. He wouldn’t give Sebastian and Luke the satisfaction of ratting him out to Roman.

“Am I supposed to be impressed by your newfound restraint?” Sebastian said, raising his eyebrows a little. “I would have been impressed if you actually realized how close-minded and hurtful your opinions were and decided to change.”

“Everyone is entitled to their opinion,” Vlad said. “We live in a democratic world.”

“Sure,” Sebastian said amiably. “But sometimes your opinions can do actual damage. Have you ever stopped to think how many people you made feel shitty about themselves just for being born that way? How many people you made feel worthless?”

Vlad rolled his eyes. “Stop over-dramatizing. They’re just words. If you can’t take a different opinion, it’s not my problem.”

“Just words,” Sebastian repeated flatly, his expression darkening. His voice was very soft as he continued. “You know, when I was seventeen, there was a boy living down the street from us. He was my first kiss, my first boyfriend. When some dumb jocks like you found out about us, they called us faggots, disgusting poofs, freaks, told us that we were going to hell and so on—just words, you know.”

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Vlad leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “So?”

“He killed himself,” Sebastian said hoarsely, holding his gaze. “Because of bullies like you who don’t think before opening their mouths. Words can have a lot of power and do a lot of damage.”

Vlad pursed his lips. He averted his gaze before looking back at Sebastian. “Then he was weak,” he said gruffly. “You clearly didn’t kill yourself over that.”

“No, I didn’t,” Sebastian said. “Because unlike him, I wasn’t from a religious family. I was also out, and I was used to that kind of bullshit. He wasn’t. So next time, before you go off about freaks and faggots, please stop and think twice.”

Vlad hated being lectured. He hated feeling wrong-footed even more.

“You done?” Vlad got to his feet swiftly. He wasn’t prepared for how close they would end up. He was practically looming over the other man. Although Sebastian was almost as tall as him, he was nowhere near as big, and Vlad couldn’t deny he got a perverse pleasure from the knowledge that he could easily manhandle and subdue the mouthy little shit.

Sebastian licked his lips nervously, no doubt aware of it as well, but he held his ground, a mere few inches separating their faces.

“Yeah, you’ve got nothing to say so you’re resorting to physical intimidation,” Sebastian murmured. “How predictable.”

“I’ve got plenty to say,” Vlad said. “I just don’t want to hurt your sensitive gay feelings.”

Sebastian’s eyes flashed. “For the record, while I don’t particularly care about labels, some bisexual people might find it offensive to be constantly mislabeled as gay—or straight. Bisexuality is a valid sexuality. All sexualities must be respected.”

Vlad shrugged nonchalantly, well aware that it would make Sebastian mad. “Gays take it up the ass. You take it up the ass. Same difference.”

A tick started in Sebastian’s cheek. “You ignorant—urgh!” He lifted his hands in frustration, looking positively murderous.

Vlad smiled, crossing his arms over his chest. “What?”

“I’m gonna—” Sebastian shoved at him. “Urgh, you’re doing it on purpose, aren’t you?!”

“What’s going on here?” Luke’s concerned voice cut in.

Vlad didn’t turn to him, still smiling at Sebastian’s red, furious face.

“Is Vlad bothering you, Sebastian?” Luke said. “Just say the word and I’ll have him fired. No one insults my guests.”

Sebastian looked from Vlad to Luke, hesitation on his face.

Vlad raised an eyebrow, daring him.

Sebastian glared at him, his lips pursing briefly. “No. He’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Looking in Sebastian's eyes, Vlad wasn't sure which of them had issued a challenge to the other.

Chapter 7

Sebastian had never been so utterly, totally mad. Generally, he was kind of shit at being mad and staying mad. His sister always made fun of him when he got angry, saying that he looked like a puppy trying to look menacing before forgetting about it and wanting to play.

The strength of his own anger took him by surprise. Not that it was difficult to stay angry when the reason for his anger was around pretty much all the time.

Stroking his cat, Sebastian glared at Vlad, who was lounging on the couch in front of the TV. Luke had confided in him that the murders weren't the only reason Vlad was appointed as Luke's bodyguard, but he didn't clarify. Although Sebastian was curious, he hadn't asked. It was none of his business. Either way, Luke was forced to work from home for the time being. Sebastian had overheard Luke and Vlad arguing about it as he was leaving to get his things and his cat—Luke did say it was okay to bring Hermione. It hadn't taken Sebastian long to pack his stuff and return to Luke's flat. He had considered staying out for a while to avoid Vlad, but if he was honest, he felt a little uneasy being alone outside after what had happened.

When some lunatics had started targeting prominent LGBT figures a few months ago, Sebastian had been dismayed and concerned, of course, but he hadn't really been afraid for himself. The other night's events had finally made him realize that the danger was very much real.

That was how Sebastian found himself hanging out at Luke's place pretty much all day with only Vlad for company. Well, Luke was there too, but, as the CEO of Whitford Industries, Luke had a crazy amount of paperwork and spent most of the

time in his study on the phone with his employees. Sebastian wished he could go to work too and take his mind off the unpleasant things, but, as luck would have it, he was between gigs. He'd fulfilled most of his contractual obligations during New York Fashion Week, and normally he would be delighted by the reprieve, but there was nothing normal about this situation.

“Is there a reason you're here?” Vlad said suddenly.

“Hmm?”

“You aren't watching the movie,” Vlad said, his eyes still on the TV. “Why don't you go to your room, do yoga, paint your nails or something?”

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God, Sebastian fucking hated this man. “What happened to your dedication not to be a homophobic ass?”

Vlad turned his head. Their couches were about five feet apart, but suddenly all Sebastian could see were the other man’s startlingly blue eyes. They threw him off every time. A bully like Vlad wasn’t supposed to have such nice eyes. It was weird and ill fitting—and just unfair.

“I didn’t know painting nails was something homophobic,” Vlad said.

“Don’t play dumb,” Sebastian said.

Vlad smiled. “But I’m a dumb Russian you need to lecture and educate,” he said, his accent far heavier than usual.

“Urgh!” Sebastian grabbed a decorative pillow and threw it at his head. Hermione meowed, sinking her claws into his chest. Sebastian hissed in pain. “Fuck!”

Vlad laughed.

Sebastian threw another pillow at him, which the asshole caught. Fuck his reflexes.

“I hate stereotypes,” Sebastian said. “Telling a gay—or bi—man to go paint his nails is very ignorant, to say the least. Yes, there are gay men who like painting their nails, but newsflash: there are straight men who like it, too!”

Vlad groaned and closed his eyes. “I didn’t fucking sign up for this,” he said. “You’re

such a self-righteous bore. Aren't you supposed to be a constantly stoned model with two brain cells and—"

"Urgh, just shut up!" The next thing he knew Sebastian was on top of Vlad, trying to claw his eyes out. "Shut up, shut up, shut up! You're so dumb it's—Urgh! I can't fucking stand you—"

In one swift move, Vlad grabbed his flailing arms and rolled them over, pinning Sebastian down with his heavy body.

"Let go," Sebastian gritted out, panting and trying to throw the tosser off.

Vlad snorted. "You can't even throw a punch like a man and then you tell me not to believe in stereotypes."

"I don't know how to throw a punch because I don't believe in violence, not because of some macho bullshit!"

"Sure," Vlad said, and was he looking at his lips?

"Are you looking at my lips?"

Vlad's gaze snapped back to his eyes. He scowled. "Actually, yes. I was thinking how unnaturally red your lips look. You look like a painted whore."

Sebastian took a deep breath and counted to ten.

"I've never despised anyone as much as I despise you," he said, very calmly. He scrunched up his nose. "I can't believe I had your cock in my mouth. I want to throw up just thinking about it."

Vlad opened his mouth and closed it. “The sentiment is mutual, trust me.”

“Good,” he spit out.

“Great.”

Sebastian lifted his chin. “Perfect.”

“Fantastic.”

Sebastian glared.

Vlad smiled smugly.

Urgh—

Their lips collided in a wet, messy, awful kiss. It was truly awful, because Sebastian hated, hated, hated this man, absolutely despised him, but he wanted his mouth, his tongue in his own mouth, couldn't help but suck on it and make inhuman noises, yanking Vlad closer, on top of him, blunt nails raking over Vlad's back, digging and tugging.

Vlad pulled back, swore in Russian before diving back in, biting and sucking on his lips. Sebastian moaned, sucking on Vlad's tongue and raking his fingers over Vlad's short hair. God, he wanted a fuck. He wanted a hard, dirty fuck so badly he was shaking with it.

Something crashed.

“Oh,” Luke's voice said faintly.

Panting, they jerked apart.

Luke was staring at them with wide eyes, his coffee mug on the floor.

Vlad rolled off him and sprang to his feet.

Slowly, as if in a daze, Sebastian sat up. His face was so hot he probably looked like a tomato. Fuck, he'd never been so embarrassed in his life. What must Luke be thinking of him...Luke knew what a homophobic asshole Vlad was.

"It's not what it looks like," Sebastian said lamely, brushing his fringe off his eyes. He needed a haircut and possibly a therapist. What the hell had he been thinking, snogging that awful man?

"That's none of my business," Luke said, looking almost as embarrassed and uncomfortable as Sebastian felt. "I'll go—"

"Wait!" Sebastian said, springing to his feet. "You don't have to go—you aren't interrupting anything important."

Luke cast him a dubious look.

"I can't stand him!" Sebastian said and hey, he didn't sound all that defensive.

"The feeling's mutual," Vlad grunted without looking his way.

"See!" Sebastian said, nodding and grinning like a madman. "It was a mistake and it was disgusting. Worst kiss of my life, honestly." He pretended the situation in his pants didn't exist.

Vlad snorted. "Same here. I'm not a fa—gay man."

Sebastian rolled his eyes.

“Sure, Vlad,” Luke said with a crooked smile. He ran his hand through his golden curls, still looking a little uncomfortable. “Actually, can I talk to you, Seb? Alone?”

Sebastian cringed inwardly. Talking about it was the last thing he wanted. But Luke was his host and a friend—sort of. It would be impolite to say no.

Sebastian nodded reluctantly. “Sure.”

Vlad stalked out of the room without another word. Ass.

“Look,” Sebastian said once they were alone. He gave an awkward smile. “We really don’t need to have this talk. I know he’s a homophobic jackass. It was a mistake, really. Never going to happen again.”

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Luke seemed to be hesitating. “His homophobia actually isn’t the biggest issue. The thing is...” He sighed. “I’m not sure I should be talking about it with you—Roman will be pissed off—but I can’t say nothing. Vlad...he’s bad news.” He let out a laugh. “Yeah, it’s probably hypocritical of me—my boyfriend isn’t exactly a saint—but Vlad always made me uncomfortable in a different way.”

Sebastian frowned, confused. “What do you mean?”

Luke looked at his phone before lifting his gaze again. “Vlad’s done some really ugly things in the past.” He smiled crookedly. “Don’t get me wrong—Roman is hardly a saint, either, but he’s cool-tempered and calculating. He doesn’t lose his cool easily, and he’s actually capable of love. Roman can be cruel with his enemies, but he loves his family and me, and he’s ridiculously protective of the people he loves. Vlad is different. He doesn’t have a family to mellow him out. He has a foul temper, and he loses it pretty easily. Obviously I can’t know whether it translates into his relationships—”

“What?” Sebastian said, chuckling. “There’s no relationship between us!”

Luke gave him an odd look. “I didn’t say there was.”

Right. Talk about embarrassing.

Sebastian crossed his arms over his chest. “Is that all you wanted to talk about?” he said uncomfortably.

“One more thing,” Luke said, his brows furrowed. “Roman has told me something

about Vlad...He said Vlad was raised by a very old-fashioned family in a very old-fashioned village, and he's Russian, so...I mean, it's a stereotype that all Russians are homophobic—I've met some really lovely, supportive people while I was in Moscow, and Roman's family is pretty open-minded, too—but there's some truth to it, unfortunately. And apparently, Vlad's family was as homophobic as they get. So be careful with him, okay? I think he's actually gay, but I doubt he'll ever admit it. The more he wants you, the more he'll hate you and blame you for that."

Sebastian shifted from one foot to the other.

"Anyway, I warned you now," Luke said with a shrug. "Just so you know. What you do with that information is your choice."

"You didn't need to warn me off him," Sebastian said after clearing his throat. "Really, what you saw was a mistake." He forced out a chuckle. "I know what an asshole he is. I'd be crazy to get involved with him."

Luke smiled. "Yeah, you would be. You can do so much better."

Sebastian smiled back before grabbing Hermione and retreating to his room. Once inside, he put Hermione down and looked at her.

"I can do so much better," he told her.

Hermione meowed. He chose to take it as an agreement.

"Yeah," Sebastian said. "No more snogging homophobic bullies."

Hermione meowed.

He sighed before banging his head against the door behind him.

Chapter 8

Vlad woke up with his mouth full of fur. Coughing, he pushed the offending thing off and glowered at it.

It was a cat. A fat, ugly ginger cat.

By the looks of it, it had pissed on his bed.

Grabbing the cat and causing it to yowl in protest, Vlad stalked toward the room opposite his.

The door was cracked open, which explained how the cat had gotten out, but after the last few days, Vlad wasn't in the mood to be understanding. He pushed the door open and strode to the bed.

The occupant of the bed didn't even stir. Sebastian was sleeping peacefully on his stomach, his lips a little slack as he snored softly. The sight spiked a fresh surge of restlessness and anger.

Vlad's gaze traveled from the wavy raven hair, down the curve of Sebastian's bare back, to the twin dimples above the generous swell of Sebastian's ass clad in pajama bottoms. For a model, the guy really had a huge fucking ass.

"Keep your stupid cat in your own room."

Sebastian didn't stir, just mumbled something sleepily.

"Wake up." Vlad put his fingers around a slim ankle and squeezed. Hard.

No reaction.

He looked at Sebastian's ass. His hand twitched. No, smacking it would be too gay.

Vlad moved his gaze to the cat in his hand, contemplative. The ugly thing looked back.

Vlad smiled and threw it on top of Sebastian's hair. The cat yowled.

"What the...?" Sebastian grunted, rolling onto his back and rubbing at his eyes. He cradled the spooked animal to his bare chest and glared sleepily at Vlad. "Do you have to be an asshole to innocent animals, too?"

"That innocent animal pissed on my bed."

Sebastian patted his cat on the head, smiling. "Bad girl, Hermione. You should have pissed on his dumb face."

Vlad snorted. "Hermione? I thought you couldn't get lamer. What grown man names his cat after a children's book character?"

Sebastian smiled, very sweetly. "Oh, you're a fan, too! What's your favorite Harry Potter pick-up line?"

Vlad gave him a flat look. Did this guy think he was funny?

"This must be the room of requirement, because you're exactly what I need," Sebastian said, looking stupidly pleased with himself. "Wait, I know more. Let me think..."

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“Please don’t,” Vlad said. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

Sebastian didn’t seem fazed. His gaze grew heavy-lidded as he leaned back against the pillows and murmured, looking at Vlad, “I must be under the Imperius curse, because I’d love to do anything for you.”

“That was terrible,” Vlad said, crossing his arms over his bare chest.

“Was it? I’ve got a different one.” Sebastian’s dark eyes lingered on Vlad’s arms. “I can be your house elf,” he said. “I’ll do whatever you need, and I don’t need any clothes, Master.”

“You’re hilarious,” Vlad ground out. “Not.”

As though not having heard him, Sebastian let his gaze travel down Vlad’s chest to his crotch clad in black boxers. “I’d even let your basilisk into my chamber of secrets,” he said, licking his lips obscenely and smirking. “Is that your wand or are you just happy to see me?”

Vlad wanted to strangle him. “You’re a child. An overgrown, ridiculous child.”

“That’s a bit disturbing, mate,” Sebastian said. “I hope you don’t get a boner around actual children.”

“It’s called morning wood,” Vlad gritted out, feeling his neck heat up. He stood tall, refusing to cover his dick, because it was just morning wood. It had nothing to do with the half-naked man sprawled on the bed and his stupid innuendos. Vlad tried to

imagine the most disgusting things he could and finally felt his cock soften.

Sebastian yawned, raking his hand through his bed-hair. “Whatever you say, big guy. It’s not like you ever had a boner around me before.” He blinked, all doe-eyed and innocent. “Oh, wait.”

Vlad’s fists clenched. “Yesterday was a fluke. I’m not a—”

“Homo,” Sebastian finished amiably. “I know, I know. You’re a very straight man who just happens to sometimes put his body parts in my mouth.” He nodded so solemnly it was nearly impossible to tell that he was taking the piss. “I don’t blame you. I’ve been told I have a very attractive mouth. Its prettiness must have confused your poor little brain and tricked you into thinking it was a woman’s. Don’t worry, it happens to the best of us.”

Vlad snorted. “Sarcasm is a sign of insecurity. Also, your mouth isn’t all that pretty. It’s too wide and weird. Reminds me of a frog’s.”

He suppressed a smile when Sebastian’s expression turned outraged.

“Come here,” Sebastian said, sitting up.

Vlad looked at him warily. “What for?”

“Come here,” Sebastian repeated. “Unless you’re afraid?” He raised a haughty eyebrow, looking annoyingly superior and mocking.

Vlad heaved a sigh and stepped closer. “Now what?” he said, looking contemptuously at all the pale skin and dark locks. The guy reminded him of Snow White—if Snow White were six feet tall and male.

“I dare you kiss me,” Sebastian said.

Vlad tensed. “No thanks.”

Sebastian smiled serenely. “Why not? Are you afraid to kiss my weird frog-like lips?”

Vlad couldn’t remember the last time he’d had to consciously restrain himself from shutting someone up. God, he wanted to fuck that little shit up, but he had a feeling that touching Sebastian would be...unadvisable.

“Well?” Sebastian said, looking at him challengingly.

“I don’t have to prove anything to you,” Vlad said.

Sebastian snorted. “I knew he’d say that, Hermione,” he told the cat.

The stupid cat meowed, as though agreeing.

Vlad gritted his teeth. His arm shot out, grabbed a fistful of dark hair and yanked the other man up. Sebastian grunted in pain, looking at him wide-eyed. Once again, the confident, sassy facade faded away, revealing something that seemed an awful lot like fear.

It made Vlad pause, but his grip on Sebastian’s hair didn’t loosen. “Cut the crap,” he said quietly, looking Sebastian in the eye. His free hand twitched with the need to touch that flawless skin, to bruise it. He balled it into a fist by his side. “You really don’t want to provoke me,” he said testily. “You wouldn’t like what I’d do to your pretty skin, Snow White.”

Sebastian’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “I’m not afraid of you,” he said. “I won’t let you

bully me.” He lowered his dark eyelashes. “Fine, don’t kiss me. I knew you were a coward. All bullies are. Men like you always resort to physical intimidation when they feel wrong-footed and stupid.”

Vlad sighed irritably. “Fine.” He leaned in and stopped, looking at Sebastian’s lips. They looked very red and very soft. No way the guy wasn’t using something for his lips. No fucking way.

The lips smirked.

“Are you chickening out?” Sebastian said.

“What are you, twelve? No, I’m not chickening out.” He took a deep breath and pressed his lips against the other man’s. He pulled back quickly. “Happy now?” he said. “This does nothing for me.”

Sebastian raised his brows. “You call that a kiss? No wonder your girlfriend cheated on you.”

“Weak,” Vlad said, letting go of Sebastian’s hair and stepping away. “Now stop fucking provoking me. It isn’t going to work. If you’re that desperate for a fuck, stick to gay men. I’m sure you wouldn’t be as repulsive to them as you are to me.”

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He watched Sebastian's expression darken with fury and humiliation.

"You know what? I will," Sebastian said. "Get out of my room."

Vlad did, letting the door slam shut behind him.

He stood in the corridor for a moment, willing his body to relax.

"What?" he snapped when he noticed Luke watching him from the end of the corridor.

Luke's brows drew together as he warily eyed Vlad's clenched fists and furious expression. "Not sure I want a bodyguard that doesn't make me feel safe around him."

"Go ahead, fire me," Vlad growled before stalking into his room.

He slammed this door shut, too, before sagging against it and pressing the heel of his hand against his erection. Fuck.

Chapter 9

Vlad half-expected Sebastian to sulk in his room for the rest of the day.

He was wrong.

Sebastian emerged out of his room by evening, dressed to the nines in a black sheer

shirt and black jeans that were so tight they looked painted on his long legs. Vlad had to drag his eyes away from his thighs, scowling. The guy's thighs were more shapely than most women's.

"I'm going out," Sebastian announced to the room at large, ignoring Vlad completely.

Luke, who was lounging on the couch in front of the TV, frowned. "Are you sure it's a good idea?"

Sebastian shrugged. "I'm not going to hide forever and put my life on hold because of those pricks. I'm going out."

"At least take Vlad with you," Luke said.

Entirely unamused, Vlad said, "I'm your bodyguard, not his."

Sebastian didn't look his way. "You know what? It's a great idea," he told Luke. "Thanks!"

"My job is your safety," Vlad said, glaring at Luke. "Not babysitting the strays you pick up."

"Don't mention it," Luke said, smiling and winking at Sebastian. They both pretended to not have heard Vlad. Little shits.

"I'm not going," Vlad said.

"You are," Luke said. "You know I'm perfectly safe here, so go with Seb—"

"You can't order me to go."

“I can, actually,” Luke said, yawning. “While Roman is out of the country, I’m the one giving you your orders. And I’m ordering you to go with Sebastian and make sure he doesn’t get hurt while he’s out.”

Vlad wasn’t sure which of them he hated more at the moment.

He stood up and went to his room.

A few moments later, he returned, putting his gun in his holster and shrugging into a dark jacket. He said nothing to the two men, but his stony face must have said it all because they both looked uncertain.

Sebastian eyed him warily before squaring his shoulders and heading out of the flat. Vlad followed him silently, glowering at his nape. His eyes dropped to Sebastian’s ass. He wondered how the guy even got into those jeans. His ass really was fucking huge. And the way Sebastian walked, swaying his hips just so, was clearly designed to attract attention to his ass and plump thighs. Vlad was pretty sure the little shit wasn’t wearing underwear.

The twenty-minute drive passed in stony silence. If the cab driver noticed the tension, he didn’t say anything.

Once they arrived, Vlad silently followed the model inside the club, trailing some distance behind him.

The club was packed. Sebastian was immediately swept away by the current of people, and Vlad was pretty sure he lost Vlad from his sight. Vlad didn’t, of course. He leaned against the wall and watched him from afar, slipping into the mindset of a bodyguard: detached, but watchful and alert.

Sebastian drank some colorful beverage at the bar before moving to the dance floor.

It didn't take him long to attract attention. Before long, he was swaying his hips to the rhythmic music, his eyes closed and head thrown back on another man's shoulder. Male hands touched his hips as their owner ground his crotch against Sebastian's ass.

Vlad watched the display with growing distaste. It wasn't even a gay club, for fuck's sake. How did that man know that it was okay to dance that way with a total stranger? That he wouldn't get punched in the face for grinding against another man? It wasn't like Sebastian looked like a twink or something.

Maybe it was because he looked like a fucking slag. Vlad's eyes roamed over Sebastian's sheer shirt with contempt before settling once again on the hands holding Sebastian's hips. Disgusting.

He glared at the guy's hands, but instead of disappearing under the force of his gaze, they slipped under the sheer shirt to grope Sebastian's pale tummy.

Realizing his body had gone rigid, Vlad tried to relax but couldn't quite manage it. He watched the guy knead Sebastian's stomach, his hand slipping up to stroke his nipples. Sebastian's lips parted. The slut was clearly enjoying himself—enjoying having his chest groped by a total stranger in public. Vlad lifted his eyes to Sebastian's and found him already looking at him through sultry, heavy-lidded eyes. Sebastian smiled at Vlad and bared his neck to the other guy, letting him kiss his neck while the guy's hands stroked his nipples. Vlad didn't need to hear to know that Sebastian was moaning, grinding back against the other man.

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“Slut,” Vlad mouthed.

Sebastian, who never looked away from him, smiled wider, his eyes slipping shut as the other man cupped the bulge under Sebastian’s jeans.

Vlad didn’t realize he was moving until he found himself halfway to the pair.

Before he could think twice, he was yanking Sebastian out of the man’s arms.

“What the fuck, mate?” the guy yelled over the music.

Vlad ignored him. “You done?” he growled into Sebastian’s ear.

“Done what?” Sebastian said. “Let go of my arm.”

“Proving to me that other men want you. This is fucking pathetic.”

Sebastian scowled at him. “Get your head out of your ass, you self-centered prick. I’m not proving anything to you. I’m here to get laid. Now let go of my arm and kindly fuck off.”

Vlad glared at him.

Sebastian glared back, his neck covered in marks that made Vlad’s fists clench. Slut, slut, slut, beat in his ears. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so mad, for no good reason.

“Get lost, mate,” the other guy said, trying to pull Sebastian back to him. He failed, of course. Vlad pulled Sebastian closer, fingers digging into Sebastian’s side under the shirt.

“Is he your boyfriend or something?” the guy said, scowling at Vlad’s arm around Sebastian’s waist.

“Yes,” Vlad lied, just to get rid of the annoying fucker.

“No!” Sebastian said. “He’s no one!”

The man shot him a skeptical look. “Sorry, I’m here to have fun, not to get involved with whatever the fuck this is.” And he disappeared into the crowd.

“Urgh,” Sebastian said, glowering at him, before dragging Vlad off the dance floor. His jaw set, he pulled Vlad toward the nearest unoccupied restroom, yanked Vlad inside and locked the door. Then he turned around and punched Vlad in the gut. It was clumsy and inexperienced, but it took Vlad by surprise.

“Care to explain yourself?” Sebastian growled. “What did you do that for?”

Vlad crossed his arms over his chest. “Because you looked desperate and pathetic.”

“I didn’t.” Sebastian lifted his chin and pursed his lips. “But even if I did, what is it to you? Why are you behaving like—like some old-fashioned father protecting the virtue of his little girl?”

Vlad opened his mouth and closed it.

The truth was, he had no reasonable explanation for his behavior. He just knew that watching Sebastian being groped by that man disgusted him. Hell, he still felt

disgusted as he looked at the red love bites on Sebastian's pale neck.

"You two were fucking gross," Vlad said. "Grinding like perverts."

Sebastian lifted his fist, clenching and unclenching it. "I swear to God, I've never been so tempted to become violent until I met you."

Vlad snorted. "Sorry, buddy. I'm a poor choice to become violent with."

A muscle started working in Sebastian's cheek. "So sure I can't hurt you?"

"You can't," Vlad said. He wasn't at all smug; it was just a statement of the fact.

But apparently Sebastian took it as smugness, because he made a frustrated, angry noise and swung his fist toward Vlad's jaw.

Vlad caught it and shoved him against the door easily. Catching Sebastian's other flailing wrist, he pinned them together above their heads.

"Fuck you!" Sebastian growled, bucking and all but hissing like a feral cat. "I hate you, hate you, hate you—"

Vlad slammed his mouth onto Sebastian's neck, teeth sinking and lips sucking over the red mark there.

Sebastian made a startled noise before it turned into a long moan.

Fuck, his skin felt amazing and the way he smelled...Vlad needed to bite him there, needed to fuck that pale neck up, needed to replace the marks with his. That need pulsed through his body, making his head spin, and he sucked harder, hard and fast, and he needed—he needed—he—

He ground his hips against Sebastian's and heard a groan—he wasn't sure whose, but soon it didn't matter, because they were rutting like fucking animals, like horny teenagers, low inhuman noises leaving their mouths as they rubbed their clothed cocks together. It wasn't enough.

Vlad fumbled between their bodies with his free hand, making a growl of frustration when Sebastian's stupid jeans refused to be pulled down. Finally, he yanked them down, making Sebastian yelp.

“Hurts, you asshole!”

“If you weren't wearing slutty jeans two sizes too small, it wouldn't have,” Vlad shot back, before shoving Sebastian to face the wall. He latched onto the soft, delicious-smelling skin at Sebastian's nape and fumbled with his own zipper.

They both groaned when Vlad pushed his leaking cock against Sebastian's crack. Vlad looked down, watching in fascination the perfect globes of Sebastian's ass. His red cock looked obscene and filthy against it.

“You aren't fucking me dry,” Sebastian said hoarsely.

Fucking him?

The mere thought jolted through Vlad's body, clearing some of the lust-induced fog from his brain.

What the hell was he doing?

“Here,” Sebastian said, pulling something out of his pocket. Only when Vlad noticed that Sebastian's hands were free, he realized where his own were. They were gripping Sebastian's hips, thumbs kneading his silky-soft, lush buttocks greedily.

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“Are you going to fuck me or not?” Sebastian said, his voice strained. “If you aren’t, I’ll go get another man to do it. Someone who knows what he’s doing.”

Over his dead body.

Vlad grabbed the condom and packet of lube from Sebastian’s hand. “For the record,” he said, hissing a little as he rolled the condom on and slicked up his aching cock. “This doesn’t make me a faggot.”

“Of course not,” Sebastian said as Vlad smeared the rest of the lube on his hole. “You’re the definition of straight. Straighter than straight—ngh—” His words turned into a quiet moan as Vlad pushed inside him.

“Wait,” Sebastian said, panting heavily. “Gimme a sec.”

Vlad wasn’t certain he could. He gritted his teeth at the tightness around his cock, his vision swimming with want. He buried his face against Sebastian’s sweaty nape, mouthing the skin there, desperate to move, to fuck. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so desperate to fuck someone, get his cock inside them, and fuck, fuck, and fuck.

“Come on,” Sebastian said finally, relaxing. “Move.”

Thank fuck.

Vlad pulled back and then pushed in, fingers gripping the soft flesh of Sebastian’s ass.

“Oh,” Sebastian breathed, leaning his forehead against the door and pushing his ass back onto Vlad’s cock. God, the way he looked...Sheer black shirt ending just above his flawless ass, black jeans pulled down his muscular, shapely thighs, long, endless legs...Fuck.

Vlad had to fuck him. He just had to. So he did, grunting as he thrust into the perfect tightness—perfect tightness of a man’s ass, fucking hell—biting and kissing Sebastian’s neck, fingers leaving bruises on his fair skin.

Neither of them were particularly quiet, groaning and grunting as Vlad pounded into Sebastian, their moans becoming obscenely loud—

It took Vlad several moments to realize the banging he could hear was coming from the outside: someone was banging on the door, wanting to use the loo.

He went rigid, cock still inside Sebastian. Shit. Someone was just on the other side of the door while he had his cock in another man. Shit.

“Don’t you dare stop,” Sebastian rasped, sounding completely fucked out. “Please—please, don’t stop. So good.”

Vlad’s hips moved out of their own volition, his cock pistoning in and out of Sebastian’s hole as someone demanded to be let inside the restroom. It was wrong, sick, perverted, but he couldn’t stop, could do nothing but want and take. He barely registered Sebastian stroking his own cock desperately, whines slipping out of his mouth as Vlad thrust harder inside him. “Yeah, there—come on—harder,” he croaked out, and Vlad fucked him harder, rotating his hips a little, feeling like he’d die if he had to stop.

“Harder,” Sebastian demanded, whining.

God, he was fucking insatiable, born to take a cock.

Vlad gritted his teeth, fucking Sebastian at a brutal pace now, like an animal fucking a bitch in heat. Finally, Sebastian cried out and went boneless against the door. He came, Vlad realized dazedly. He'd made another man come on his cock.

"Fucking perverts, get a bloody room," yelled the man on the other side of the door. "Faggots!"

His body shuddered with perverse arousal and Vlad found himself coming, too, groaning quietly.

It took him several long minutes to regain brain function.

The first thing he registered was music. A club. They were in the club. And he just had sex with a man.

Vlad opened his eyes. His mouth was still on Sebastian's nape.

He stepped back slowly, looking at the red bite marks on Sebastian's neck.

He pulled the condom off, tied it, and threw it into a trash bin. Turning his back to Sebastian, he did his fly, his fingers slow and clumsy. He could hear movement behind him, a grunt, a rustle of clothes.

His body rigid, Vlad waited for the other man to say something mocking. He tried to think of his answers. I'm not a homo. This was a mistake. This is your fault. I'm not gay. I'm a normal, heterosexual man.

But Sebastian said nothing. The next thing Vlad heard was the sound of the door opening and closing.

When he turned around, Sebastian was gone.

Chapter 10

Sebastian closed the door of his bedroom and slowly walked to his bed. Flopping down on it, he looked at his fancy Saint Laurent boots but felt like a stupid, delusional sixteen-year-old again.

When he was sixteen, he'd had a huge crush on the captain of the school's football team, Mike Fletcher. God, it was such a cliché: the weird, geeky resident faggot (and they never cared when Sebastian said he was bi) pining over the most popular boy in school, who was straight as an arrow as far everyone was concerned. Mike Fletcher hadn't been straight as an arrow—at least he was gay enough to allow Sebastian suck him off when he wasn't calling him a faggot in school corridors. Mike had never reciprocated, never touched him, because, according to him, he wasn't queer. Mike had never even kissed him, but Sebastian's sixteen-year-old self was naive and delusional enough to think Mike was just in denial about his feelings—that he wouldn't let Sebastian suck his cock if he didn't have genuine feelings for him. It was much later that Sebastian had realized what he and Mike had wasn't even sex; it was a slavish, one-sided devotion. When Sebastian told Mike that he was in love with him and wanted more from their relationship, Mike laughed at his face and said,

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“What relationship?”

It'd been years, but Sebastian still remembered the inflection of Mike's voice and the sneer on Mike's face as he had said it. And as if it hadn't been enough for Mike to stomp all over Sebastian's heart, Mike and his cronies literally kicked his feelings out of him later that day. Mike laughed as his friends used him as a punching bag.

After that, Sebastian had done his best to stay away from Mike Fletcher, but Mike wouldn't leave him alone. Almost a year later, Mike was the one who caught Sebastian giving head to his first boyfriend, Bill. Mike took a picture of them, and the rest, as they say, was history. Bill, who hadn't been out, was forced out of the closet and ostracized by his own family. A month later, standing by Bill's grave and feeling people's judgmental looks on him, Sebastian promised to himself: never again. He was done getting involved with guys who bullied others to hide their own sexuality. Guys like Mike never changed. They were the type to marry early, produce two-point-five kids, and fuck some naive faggot on the side before returning to their perfect wife. Never again.

And now, almost ten years later, Sebastian felt sick to his stomach, burning with shame, because it was Mike Fletcher all over again, wasn't it? Apparently he still was as stupid and weak as he had been back then.

Jesus, how could he? How could he go against his very principles and let another homophobic, closeted asshole fuck him? In Moscow he hadn't been ashamed, because he felt he was teaching the homophobic jackass a lesson. What he'd been doing in the past few days—teasing Vlad and provoking him—was dangerously close to flirting. What had happened back at the club wasn't a lesson. He'd just been

mindless with it, wanting to scratch the itch and get fucked, deep and hard.

Vlad had called him a slut. Vlad was right.

Even now, just thinking about it and remembering what it had felt like caused Sebastian's spent cock to twitch, shameful arousal washing over him once again.

Idiot. He was an idiot. He wasn't the weird looking, pale as death, unpopular teenager anymore. He had dozens of men and women vying for his attention. And yet he had to go and get fucked by a man who was completely unapologetic about his homophobia.

Something soft rubbed against his ankle. Sebastian looked down.

"I'm hopeless, aren't I?" he said, picking up his cat and cradling her against his chest. He fell back on the mattress and started petting her, trying to empty his mind from all thoughts.

It didn't work.

The worst part was...he'd loved it. He had loved making Vlad mad, making him lose it, feeling Vlad's low growls against his ear, feeling Vlad's fingers grip his hips as Vlad couldn't help but fuck into him. It had been such an empowering feeling. It had gotten him off almost as much as the thick cock inside him.

He had left before Vlad could spout his usual homophobic bullshit—and also because he felt too ashamed. Ashamed of loving it so much, ashamed for falling into the same rabbit hole that he'd done as a teenager, and ashamed for breaking the promise he'd made to himself on the dead boy's grave.

"Why am I such a dumbass?" Sebastian whispered with a humorless smile.

Hermione meowed.

“Yeah,” Sebastian said, closing his eyes. He tensed when he heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor.

Vlad was back, too.

The footsteps stopped outside his door.

Sebastian went rigid, his heart pounding in his ears.

Would he come inside? What for? To tell Sebastian he wasn't gay? To beat him up? Or maybe...to crawl on top of him for another round?

Sebastian hated himself for the tiny thrill he felt at the thought.

The footsteps sounded again, and then the door opposite his room closed.

Sebastian breathed out, unsure whether he was disappointed or relieved by the lack of confrontation with Vlad.

Figuring the coast was clear, Sebastian headed out of the room. He was thirsty as hell.

He padded out toward the kitchen but stopped when he saw that Luke was there. He was sitting at the kitchen table, talking on the phone. He was talking to his boyfriend, Sebastian realized. Before he could leave to give Luke privacy, he heard his own name and paused.

“That's not up to you, Roman,” Luke said.

Sebastian had met Luke's boyfriend only once and wasn't sure what to think of the

man. Roman Demidov was an imposing, handsome man with the air of power and authority about him, but his cold blue eyes gave Sebastian the creeps. They seemed to read his every thought and see right through him. Roman gave the impression of a man who wouldn't hesitate to use your weakness against you. Sebastian couldn't imagine a man less suitable for a soft, romantic bloke like Luke, but they seemed to work.

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“Come on, Roma,” Luke said, sounding amused and a little resigned. “I feel like Rapunzel as it is.” He chuckled softly. “I even have the golden hair.”

Whatever Roman said, it made Luke’s smile dim. “Enough,” he said. “I’m neither careless nor dimwitted, Roma. Sebastian is a friend and he needs help. I know you’re worried, but I’m not budging on this.”

A pause.

“About that,” Luke said. “I don’t want Vlad around my place.”

Roman’s response made Luke roll his eyes.

“He’s a homophobic prick,” Luke said.

A pause.

“No, he hasn’t, but my home is my safe place,” Luke said. “I don’t want people like him looming over me and my guests. I know he’s bothering Sebastian.” Luke sighed. “Fine. But when are you coming home?”

There was a pause again.

Luke pouted. “That’s not soon.” He bit his lip. “I miss you. The bed is cold and empty without you.”

Roman’s response made Luke smile softly.

“Yeah,” he said. “Please be safe. Love you.”

Sebastian felt something in his chest clench. There had been a time when he’d dreamed of love, too, of having a steady partner to spend his life with. A time when he hadn’t been afraid to get hurt—couldn’t even imagine getting hurt by love. It felt like it had been in another life.

Luke hung up and sighed, dropping his head into his hands.

Sebastian cleared his throat and stepped into the kitchen. “Sorry—I didn’t mean to overhear, but… I’ll move out if your boyfriend is against—”

“Never mind him,” Luke said, lifting his head. “He’s just worried for me.” His expression became curious as his eyes swept over Sebastian, lingering on his neck. Luke smiled. “Got lucky tonight?”

Not exactly.

Sebastian shrugged and went to pour himself a glass of water.

“Did Vlad behave? I saw him when he returned. He was like a dark cloud.” Luke chuckled. “When he growled at me, it sounded like thunder.”

Sebastian gulped his water down and set the glass on the counter next to the sink. “Yeah,” he said, glad that his back was to Luke and he didn’t have to look him in the eye. A fresh wave of shame and mortification washed over him. Luke would judge him if he found out about what Sebastian had allowed to happen. Heck, Sebastian would judge the hell out of himself if he were in Luke’s place. But then again, Luke was dating a Russian.

“Can I ask you something?” Sebastian said after a moment of hesitation. He’d always

liked Luke—he was easy to like—but he and Luke were more of casual friends. Sebastian didn't think they'd ever talked about something serious.

“Sure,” Luke said, looking at him curiously.

“How can Roman not mind Vlad's homophobia?”

A wrinkle appeared between Luke's brows. “It's not that Roman doesn't mind—he just gets why Vlad is the way he is.” He sighed. “You have to understand that things are different in Russia, especially in the countryside. Homophobia is considered the socially acceptable norm rather than something close-minded and bad. It's terrible, I know, but it is what it is.”

“Why isn't Roman homophobic, too, then?”

Luke made a face. “Roman has his moments, too. And his situation is pretty unique: most of his family lives in Switzerland, and he spends a lot of time in the U.S. and Europe. He's been subjected to homophobia to a lesser degree than most Russians.” Luke shrugged. “It helps that Roman is very open-minded when it comes to sex, so it wasn't such a big leap for him.” He winced. “There are still times when I want to smack him. Roman doesn't consider himself gay—he says he's with me because he wants me, not my prick.” A soft, rather dopey smile appeared on Luke's face. “It makes me a bit mad, but it's also kind of sweet? I love him, and he loves me. No one is perfect. Some things are worth it. Love is worth it.”

Sebastian smiled faintly. He didn't know whether he felt jealous or terrified for Luke. How could Luke allow himself to be so gone for a man who didn't even identify as gay? It was a recipe for heartbreak—or happiness, if Roman's feelings were genuine.

“Anyway, why are you asking?” Luke said, giving him a long look.

“Just curious.” Sebastian faked a yawn. “I’m knackered. Good night.”

“Good night,” Luke said, something like amusement flickering in his eyes.

Sebastian hurried out of the kitchen, hoping he wasn’t an open book.

He came to an abrupt halt in the corridor. The door to Vlad’s room was cracked open.

Wetting his lips, he walked to it as quietly as he could and peered into the crack.

Shirtless, Vlad was doing push-ups with one arm, his back muscles shifting and flexing with beads of sweat dripping down his spine.

Sebastian swallowed and tore his eyes away.

He returned to his room, wondering if the risk of being kidnapped by homophobic lunatics was preferable to staying under the same roof as Vlad.

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“I’m going to ignore him tomorrow,” Sebastian told Hermione.

She gave him a flat stare. Sebastian sighed, flopped onto his bed, and covered his head with a pillow.

Even his dumb cat was judging him.

Chapter 11

Normally, Sebastian was a morning person. However, after spending half of the night wide awake, tossing and turning, he really didn’t appreciate being rudely awoken by a phone call from his agent.

“...come on, get up—”

“Wait, what?” Sebastian said blearily, rubbing at his eyes.

Zoe sighed. “Did you listen to a word I said? The shooting for Gentleman’s Gentleman starts in four hours. Did you forget about the photo shoot? I hope you’ve been keeping yourself in shape and eating healthily.”

Sebastian thought guiltily about the ice cream he’d eaten the previous day while he fumed over Vlad’s words. “Of course,” he lied. He had known that he had the photo shoot coming soon, but the date had slipped his mind with all the excitement of the past few days.

“Good,” Zoe said. “Though we don’t want you looking too perfect. You know

Gentleman's Gentleman likes a more authentic, natural look. They'll be shooting the first part of the photo shoot in your hometown—you do remember that, do you?"

Sebastian yawned, trying to wake up completely and failing. "Sure," he said. He did remember. That magazine toed the fine line between fashion and art. The editors liked when their photo shoots told a coherent story or at least sent a meaningful message; they liked to use the model's background for inspiration. It was quite different from Sebastian's usual spreads in fashion magazines.

He had been a little hesitant about accepting the job at first. He wasn't sure he wanted to share with the world what a loser he had been in his youth. It was Zoe who had convinced him that besides financial benefits, such a spread would also send a powerful message to all the struggling, depressed teenagers out there: that someone on the bottom of the social ladder could become very successful as an adult. That had finally convinced Sebastian to take the gig.

"Great, then!" Zoe said. "Just one more thing, love: you'll need a bodyguard. The attack on you is all over the news. You can't be seen in public unprotected—it'll reflect badly on the agency. We've found someone for you, and he should be there to pick you up in half an hour."

"Fine," Sebastian said with a sigh.

"Good luck."

"Thanks," Sebastian said and hung up.

He looked at the clock. He hoped the agency would be able to find a decent bodyguard on such a short notice. Sebastian was neither stupid nor careless. The photo shoot was public knowledge. He would be outdoors for most of it. It was a perfect opportunity to attack him.

Trying to shake the knot of apprehension in his gut, Sebastian got out of bed.

After finishing his morning routine and getting dressed, Sebastian emerged from his room. He had to tell Luke he would be gone for the day.

Luke was in the kitchen. He wasn't alone.

Sebastian didn't let his steps falter when he saw Vlad deep in conversation with Luke. They both looked up when he entered the kitchen.

"Morning," Sebastian said, pouring himself a cup of tea.

"Are you leaving?" Luke said.

"Yeah, for a photo shoot in my hometown."

"Cancel it," Vlad said.

Sebastian, who up until this point had been successfully ignoring Vlad, turned to him.

"Excuse me?"

He had expected Vlad to avoid his eyes after what had happened last night, but he met Sebastian's gaze dead on. "Cancel it," he repeated. "My contact in the police just called. One of the arrested men talked. Apparently his friends are planning something big for today."

Sebastian frowned. "Why today?"

"It's National Coming Out Day, Seb," Luke reminded him.

"Oh," Sebastian said softly. "That completely slipped my mind." He looked at Vlad.

“Did the guy say what exactly those lunatics were planning?”

Vlad shook his head. “He only knows that they will attack two public LGBT figures today. After the attack on you failed, you’re an obvious choice. Those kinds of cults tend to get fixated on things.”

“How many people know you have a photo shoot today?” Luke said.

Sebastian pursed his lips. “It’s public knowledge. There’s no point in keeping it secret anyway, because most of the shooting is done in public places.”

“You’ll have to cancel it,” Luke said with a frown.

“I can’t,” Sebastian said.

Vlad scoffed. “Quit being a stubborn little idiot—”

“I really can’t,” Sebastian said, glaring at him. “I signed a contract. The magazine won’t delay the shoot. They have deadlines they have to meet.” He looked at Luke. “Don’t worry, the agency is going to send a bodyguard for me.”

The intercom buzzed. “That’s probably him,” Sebastian said, and went to answer it.

It took a good ten minutes before Luke’s security downstairs gave an all clear and the bodyguard was allowed to come up to the flat.

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“Do you know if he’s any good?” Vlad said suddenly while they all waited in the living room.

Surprised that Vlad cared at all, Sebastian shrugged. “Never met him.”

Vlad gave him a hard look. “Let me get this straight: you’re trusting a man you’ve never seen before with your life, a man you don’t even know the credentials of. Do you know how many amateurs become bodyguards to make a quick buck?”

Feeling his face turn warm, Sebastian glowered at him. How did Vlad always manage to make him feel stupid so easily?

“The agency wouldn’t hire an amateur,” he said stiffly.

“Fine,” Vlad said. “Let’s test it.” Clad in all black as usual, he strode to the lift and took a position beside it.

As if on cue, a few moments later, the lift doors slid open.

The second the bodyguard stepped across the threshold, Vlad had him in a chokehold with his gun pressing violently into the man’s temple. The guy was even bigger than Vlad, but it didn’t seem to help him at all, and Vlad shoved him away.

“That’s your professional bodyguard?” Vlad said with disgust.

Sebastian scowled at the stranger. “I was cheering you on,” he told him sulkily. “Now I have to put up with that guy’s gloating.”

“Sebastian, looks like Vlad is right,” Luke said reluctantly. “This bloke is clearly not very good. No offence,” he added with a glance at the stranger, who seemed to be torn between looking sheepish and pissed off.

Sebastian sighed. “What do you suggest I do? I don’t have time to find another bodyguard.”

Luke smiled apologetically. “There’s always Vlad.”

“No,” Sebastian and Vlad said together before glaring at each other.

Luke went to the couch, picked up his discarded book, and said, “Vlad, I’m lending you to Sebastian. And before you protest, Roman gave me permission to lend you out as long as I stay at home, and I have no intention to move from this couch anytime soon. If you have any issues with it, take them up with Roman.” Luke smiled serenely before turning to his book.

Sebastian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Luke obviously thought he was doing him a favor, and Sebastian couldn’t exactly tell him why it was anything but.

With a sigh, he dismissed the bodyguard the agency had sent, picked up his car keys, and strode toward the lift.

Sebastian felt rather than heard Vlad follow him, Vlad’s big body putting him on edge rather than making him feel safe. His skin still felt too hot, his muscles jittery, and his thoughts foggier than he would have liked.

God, it was going to be a long day.

Chapter 12

Sebastian's hometown turned out to be a small seaside town. A cold breeze blew in Vlad's face as he stood a few feet away from where the photographer had set up his equipment. The shingle beach was abandoned as far as Vlad could see, but he remained alert, his gaze scanning the beach and avoiding settling for too long on the photo shoot that was taking place a few feet away.

But he still couldn't help looking.

He gathered from what he had overheard that this part of the photo shoot was supposed to capture the man Sebastian was now. Apparently that required skinny trousers, Gucci jackets, Saint Laurent velvet boots, and smoldering looks into the camera. Vlad had had to hold his tongue, because all those outfits were very impractical for the setting. He hadn't said anything. He had come to the conclusion that the less he talked to Sebastian, the better. It felt like every time they talked—quarreled—they had somehow ended up all over each other's personal space, which was something Vlad was determined to avoid after what happened last night.

He pressed his lips together and scanned the length of the beach again.

He wasn't going to think about what had happened. If Vlad could bleach his brain, he would. But at least he was good at compartmentalizing. He wasn't going to spend the day thinking about things he shouldn't be thinking about—things that shouldn't have happened. He was a professional.

"Part your lips a little, love," the photographer said, and Vlad's gaze snapped to the model again.

Sebastian was lounging on a big rock, his long, dark hair swept back by the breeze, his pale fingers pulling the collar of his black turtleneck up over his chin. The contrast between his snow-white skin, dark hair, dark eyes, dark fabric, and red, bitten lips was incredible. Vlad was no photographer or artist, but even he could see

how beautiful the...the shot was.

“Perfect,” the photographer said. “You’re gorgeous, love.”

Sebastian smiled at him. “You’re a flatterer, Matt, but it isn’t going to work.”

The photographer laughed. “You can’t blame a bloke for trying. Maybe one day I’ll wear you down and you’ll agree to go on a date with me.”

Vlad sneered. And that man was a professional?

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“Maybe I would have if you weren’t happily married,” Sebastian said with a snort.

“Come on, Alisa and I are a modern, open-minded couple,” Matt said, grinning. “She’d ask to watch. Hell, she’d want to join us.”

Sebastian shook his head, getting to his feet. “Sorry, but you know my rules, Matt: I don’t get involved with taken people. It gets too complicated.” His dark eyes flicked to Vlad. “I always ask if they’re single. Sometimes they lie, but there’s nothing I can do about that.”

Vlad pursed his lips and looked away, for the first time truly considering that maybe Sebastian really hadn’t known that Nina had been taken.

“All right, our work here is done. We should move to your old school before it rains,” Matt said, his tone becoming professional again after being turned down.

Matt, Sebastian, and the stylist chatted amiably as they headed toward the town. Vlad trailed after them silently, watching their surroundings.

The town was small and picturesque, the type of place where everyone likely knew everyone else’s business. Vlad looked at Sebastian and tried to imagine him being out and proud in a town like this.

It seemed he wasn’t the only one thinking that.

“We don’t want to focus too much on homophobia in small towns,” Matt said as they walked toward Sebastian’s sixth form college. “We would like for our message to be

positive. So we decided to focus on the time right after you decided not to hide who you are and forced people to accept your sexuality.”

“But I’ve never hidden my sexuality,” Sebastian said with a small frown.

The stylist nodded. “We know. He means the time after your homophobic classmates bullied your boyfriend into—” She cut herself off, looking uncomfortable.

“Killing himself,” Sebastian finished for her softly.

“Yes,” she said, swallowing. “You told us that after that you became more defiant and bold with your clothes. We want to replicate that, obviously with designer clothes, but as close to the seventeen-year-old you as we can.”

Sebastian nodded, but Vlad noticed that he looked rather uncomfortable and tense. The tension in his shoulders seemed to grow when they entered his old school.

“We will have an empty classroom to ourselves,” Matt said.

Sebastian said nothing, his eyes flickering all over the school’s corridors, his face paler than usual. He clearly didn’t have good memories of this place.

“The PE teacher said it was okay if we shoot in the gym too,” the stylist said. “A very helpful man, about your age, said he knew you in school. Mr. Fletcher was—”

Sebastian’s head whipped toward her. “Sorry, what? Mr. Fletcher?”

Did his voice sound a little strained?

The stylist nodded. “Yeah, the PE teacher. I think his name is Mike. Did you know him?”

“Yeah,” Sebastian said after a short pause, looking the other way. “Yeah. I knew him.”

Vlad frowned at his back, wondering.

The second part of the photo shoot was completely different from the first. Gone were the fancy designer jackets and trousers. Now Sebastian was decked in jeans and patterned shirts that practically screamed flamboyant. But that wasn’t what made Vlad stare. Sebastian wore eyeliner and nail polish.

Catching Vlad’s stare, Sebastian raised his brows, determination and challenge on his face. “What?” he said, cocking his hip against the desk while the other two men argued about the setting and lighting. “A problem?”

He was picking a fight, Vlad realized, watching Sebastian with narrowed eyes. Something had put Sebastian on edge. Maybe it was the surroundings—it didn’t take a genius to guess that Sebastian had been bullied here—but Vlad had a gut feeling it wasn’t just that.

“Not really,” Vlad said. “But if you looked like that in school, no wonder you were bullied. That’s practically an invitation.” He couldn’t imagine a schoolboy wearing eyeliner and nail polish in Russia.

Sebastian chuckled humorlessly. “I had been picked on well before I started wearing nail polish. This”—he waved a hand over himself— “was just a big fuck you to the assholes who bullied Bill, nothing more.”

Vlad stared at him. There was something he didn’t get. “You’re bi,” he said. “Why didn’t you just date girls? You could have avoided all of that.”

“Even if I dated only girls, it wouldn’t have made me straight,” Sebastian replied. “It

doesn't work like that. Even if I someday meet a wonderful woman, marry her, and stay with her for the rest of my life, it won't change the fact that I'm bisexual. I actually prefer men to women. Why would I hide who I am and be satisfied with pretending to be something I'm not? It's the principle of the thing."

"Principle of the thing," Vlad repeated. "I don't know if that's stupidly idealistic or just stupid."

Sebastian's lips twitched. "Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"It's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

Vlad shook his head. "If you were in Russia, that would have gotten you beaten up or arrested; maybe worse if you were unlucky."

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Sebastian gave a crooked smile. “Unfortunately, homophobia isn’t limited to Russia,” he said. “But yeah, growing up in that kind of environment couldn’t have been easy for you.”

Vlad stiffened. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Sebastian licked his lips and opened his mouth—

“Love, we’re ready for you!” Matt called out and Sebastian walked away without a second glance at him.

Vlad didn’t watch the shoot. There was only so much of Sebastian making bedroom eyes at the camera he could take. Feeling agitated, Vlad left the classroom to have a smoke in the corridor.

“You’re not suppos—whoa, easy there, mate!” The newcomer was staring wide-eyed at Vlad’s gun. “Trigger-happy much?”

Vlad swept his gaze over the man. He was tall and muscular—of a similar build to Vlad, actually, except the guy was perhaps a few years younger than Vlad.

“Who are you?”

“I’m the PE teacher, Mike Fletcher. I really don’t appreciate your pointing that thing at me, mate.”

Right. The PE teacher the stylist had mentioned. Vlad lowered his gun but didn’t

holster it.

The man relaxed. “So what’s the deal here?”

Vlad glanced back into the classroom where the shoot was still going on. Nothing had happened while he had been distracted.

Fletcher sucked a sharp breath in.

Vlad looked back at him and found the guy staring at Sebastian. Vlad pursed his lips, annoyance flaring inside him. There was something about that stare that he didn’t like.

“You know the model?” Vlad said.

Fletcher’s eyes snapped back to Vlad, his hand flying up to rub his nose and an ugly flush creeping up his neck. “We were in the same class. Not that we were friends or anything.” He snorted smugly. “We weren’t exactly in the same social circle, if you get what I mean.”

Vlad didn’t say anything, and the guy went on, speaking fast, as though he’d been dying to talk to someone about it, “He looked nothing like that back then. Was a pale little thing, all eyes and lips, and a flaming faggot to boot. You know he’s a poofter, right? We all knew that back in school. Everyone knew he was gagging for cock. Begged to suck mine, ya know? I mean, I’m no homo, but I felt sorry for him and let him a couple of times.”

“Really,” Vlad said without any inflection, feeling his grip on the gun tighten. He loosened it and holstered his gun.

“Yeah. Obviously it didn’t mean anything for me. But then he got into his dumb little

head that I was a poof like him. Had to teach him a lesson.” Fletcher chuckled before sneering. “Except that faggot was too much of a slut. A few months later, I caught him sucking some loser’s cock. Fucking whore.”

Vlad made a noncommittal noise. “What did you do?”

Fletcher grinned mischievously. “I took a picture of them and emailed it to everyone in school. You should have seen the reaction; it was priceless.” Fletcher chortled. “After that everyone knew what a cockslut he was.”

Vlad stared at the guy. The thing was, Fletcher wasn’t calling Sebastian anything Vlad hadn’t called him, but hearing it from this man...he didn’t fucking like it.

Only I can do it. I.

Shoving the ridiculous thought away, Vlad said coldly, “Is there a reason you’re telling this story to a total stranger?”

Fletcher’s laugh cut off at his tone. For the first time, he looked a little uncertain. “Well, he’s a celebrity these days. It’s not like everyone doesn’t already know he’s a poof, right? Just setting some facts straight here. He was a nobody everyone laughed at back then.” He patted Vlad on the shoulder like they were best bros. “And hey, you’re Russian, you must get it. I wish we had laws against faggots like you do in Russia. If we did, people like him wouldn’t be all high and mighty now.”

Vlad stared at that bitter, pathetic man, and thought: Am I just like him?

“Nice to see you, too, Mike,” Sebastian said softly, making them both turn their heads.

Sebastian looked very calm, very beautiful and very untouchable. “How is your wife?

Heard she's pregnant with your fourth. Congratulations. It mustn't be easy to provide for such a big family." Sebastian smiled serenely.

Vlad wanted to bruise his petty, sassy mouth with his.

Fletcher glowered at Sebastian, muttered something uncomfortably, and stalked away.

Sebastian kept smiling, but when Vlad looked closely, he could see how pale and shaken he really was, his lips trembling and his dark eyes looking anywhere but at Vlad. He seemed mortified. He was probably mortified that Vlad had heard the story of his humiliation.

It would be so easy to humiliate him further, to get back at him for everything he'd done to Vlad: for making him look and for making him want.

"Come on, just say it," Sebastian murmured without looking at him. "Say what a slut and desperate loser I am."

"You done there?" Vlad said. When Sebastian looked at him with confusion, he clarified, "The shoot?"

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“Almost,” Sebastian replied, his shoulders losing their tension a little. “They need a couple of shots in the gym.”

Vlad glanced into the classroom. The photographer and the stylist were arguing about something, deeply engrossed in their conversation.

He looked back at Sebastian.

Their gazes locked.

Vlad’s mouth dried up. He was suddenly acutely aware that this was the first time since last night they had truly looked at each other without any other distractions.

“About last night,” Sebastian said.

Vlad wanted to leave. He wanted to be anywhere but there.

He didn’t. He wouldn’t give Sebastian the satisfaction of knowing that he could fluster him so easily.

“What about it?” he said, looking Sebastian in the eye. He decided he didn’t like the eyeliner. The guy’s eyes were startlingly big as it was; with the eyeliner they looked ridiculous. How had Fletcher described him? Yes, all eyes and lips.

“Let’s just forget about last night, okay?” Sebastian said, shoving his hand into the pocket of his jeans. His lips twisted into a grimace. “It was the worst mistake in my life, which says something, considering...” He gestured in the direction Fletcher had

gone.

Vlad stared at him, thrown off balance. He had expected Sebastian to taunt him, mock him, or maybe even try to seduce him again. He had thought he would be the one who would need to insist that last night had been a mistake. He certainly hadn't expected that Sebastian would want to forget it ever happened.

Vlad should have probably felt relieved to be let off the hook so easily. Instead, he felt annoyed. How could he be worse than that pathetic, petty asshole?

"I'm the worst mistake?" he said before he could stop himself. Sure, he and Sebastian had had their share of differences, but at least he hadn't emailed the picture of Sebastian giving someone head to everyone in school, hadn't driven Sebastian's boyfriend to commit suicide, and didn't trash-talk Sebastian to total strangers.

Sebastian's mouth fell open. He blinked. "Are you actually offended?"

Vlad's lips thinned into a line.

A slow grin spread across Sebastian's face. "Aw, you're offended. Cute." He patted Vlad on the cheek.

Vlad wanted to turn his head and bite his fingers.

Fuck.

What the hell?

Oblivious to his freak out, Sebastian stopped smiling, his expression becoming serious. "Don't take it personally. Mike is a bigger asshole than you, but I was young and stupid. I don't have that excuse anymore and should have known better."

“Love, you can go ahead and change into the outfit I chose for you,” the stylist called out before Vlad could say anything. “It’s in the gym’s changing room. We’ll catch up to you after I convince this dumbass that we need—”

“Don’t teach me how to do my job,” Matt bit off, glaring at her. “I’m right, dammit!”

Their argument resumed.

Rolling his eyes, Sebastian headed off, presumably toward the gym. Vlad followed.

Since it was Sunday, the school was completely empty, their footsteps echoing in the long corridor. Vlad bored his eyes into Sebastian’s nape, still annoyed as fuck. His gaze dropped to Sebastian’s plump ass hugged by a pair of worn jeans. In broad daylight, it seemed surreal that he had been inside that ass just last night.

Faggot, a derisive voice said in his head, and Vlad tore his gaze away as if burned.

Fucking hell, what was wrong with him? What was he doing, ogling a man’s ass? Last night’s insanity was more than enough. He wasn’t a goddamn faggot like Sebastian. Although...Vlad had to admit it took some serious balls to dress stereotypically flamboyant after being outed to everyone in your school and after your partner had been bullied into committing suicide. That took a lot of courage and Vlad respected courage, even if Sebastian’s courage was stupidly idealistic.

“You know that guy is jealous of you, right?” Vlad said, breaking the charged silence. He could see Sebastian’s shoulders tense up, his steps faltering a little.

“Jealous of me?” Sebastian said in a strained voice.

Thinking of the ugliness in Fletcher’s voice, Vlad shrugged. “It eats at him that the gay loser that he considered far beneath him could have become famous, beautiful,

and rich, while he's stuck in this town, with no prospects, a wife he doesn't want, and a brood of kids he has to provide for."

Sebastian stopped and turned around slowly, an incredulous expression on his face. "Did you just call me beautiful?"

Vlad felt heat travel to his face. "No," he bit out. "But Fletcher thinks you are."

Sebastian cocked his head with a tiny smirk. "Did he tell you that?"

"No," Vlad said, wishing he'd never brought it up. "I have two eyes and a functional brain. He was all but drooling looking at you. It was fucking disgusting."

Sebastian stepped closer, eyeing him curiously. "People look at me all the time, Vlad. I've been told I'm pretty pleasant to look at. That's my job. Why did it bother you? I thought you two would get along smashingly."

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“Why would we?” Vlad bristled. “Do I look like that petty, childish jackass clinging to his glory days in secondary school?”

Sebastian grinned. “You are really offended. You’re actually offended to be compared to him. Oh my God, this is adorable!” He lifted a hand and patted Vlad on the cheek again, amusement all over his face. “Don’t worry, your dick is bigger—”

Vlad grabbed Sebastian’s wrist.

They both went still at the contact, Vlad’s fingers gripping Sebastian’s wrist in a way that was reminiscent of what had happened last night. An image of himself grabbing Sebastian’s wrists and shoving him against the restroom door flashed through Vlad’s mind. He licked his dry lips.

Sebastian swallowed and whispered, “Let go.”

Vlad didn’t.

“Let go,” Sebastian said again, something like desperation crossing his face.

He should. He fucking should.

Vlad looked down at Sebastian’s parted lips. The stylist had put something on them and they looked even redder than usual, a stark contrast to Sebastian’s pale skin.

Sebastian moistened them with the tip of his tongue. “Let go,” he said again, his bottom lip trembling.

Vlad had to taste it. He needed to. The force of that need was beyond anything he'd ever felt—he was fucking shaking with it—and he was helpless to stop himself as he surged forward to suck on that luscious lip.

“You’re so beautiful,” he heard himself mutter, kissing those lips again and again. He sounded drunk. He felt drunk.

Sebastian let out a small whine before freezing and shoving him away.

They stared at each other, both out of breath and flushed.

“What the hell are you playing at?” Sebastian all but hissed, looking beyond furious. “What happened to ‘I’m not a faggot’?” He shook his head. “You know what? Don’t answer that—it doesn’t matter, I don’t care. I’m not dealing with that bullshit again. I’m done being fucked over by ‘straight’ assholes who can’t keep their cocks out of my mouth. Go find some poor woman to fuck and be miserable with—and keep your bloody hands off me.” Huffing, Sebastian strode away, quickly disappearing around the corner.

Vlad exhaled through his teeth, turned, and punched the wall. It failed to make him feel better—or less confused.

He stood there for a while, trying to get a grip on his body and make sense of what the hell he was doing.

A muffled scream broke the air and made his blood freeze.

And then he was running.

Chapter 13

They attacked him the moment Sebastian entered the changing room. A blow to his temple made him stumble and fall, his vision swimming and his eyes moistening from the blinding pain.

“What a pansy,” said a man above him before kicking him hard in the stomach. Sebastian curled into a fetal position, trying to protect his head as kicks rained down on him from all directions. There were three of them, he realized distantly through the fog of pain. One of them shoved a rag inside Sebastian’s mouth, making him gag.

Do something, he told his stupid body, but it was paralyzed with shock and an onslaught of memories, as though he was sixteen once again and it was Mike and his friends “teaching the faggot a lesson” while everyone just watched. No one had helped him then and no one would help him now.

“Enough,” one of them said. “Knock him out. We need to get him out of here.”

That finally broke whatever spell he had been under. No, he wasn’t going down without a fight, dammit. Sebastian rolled onto his back and kicked one of them in the crotch, hard. The man howled before his buddy growled at him to shut up and delivered another punch to Sebastian’s head that almost made him black out. They grabbed him and hauled him toward the open window.

Sebastian wasn’t sure what happened next. His ears were still ringing from the punch, his head was pounding, his whole body was aching as hell, so he didn’t register immediately when the hands on him disappeared. There was the sound of flesh hitting flesh, accompanied by grunts and sounds of pain.

When the nausea and pain subsided and Sebastian was finally able to focus his gaze on what was happening, he saw Vlad’s massive fist deliver a blow to the man’s head, knocking him out. The other two were already on the floor.

Sebastian blinked dazedly, watching Vlad strip the men's belts off them, swiftly tie them up, and gag them with their own shirts.

Finally, Vlad turned and looked at him, studying him from head to toe. Annoyingly, he looked fucking impeccable in his black suit and didn't even seem out of breath. It shouldn't have been hot.

Sebastian pulled the gag out of his mouth and crossed his arms over his chest, feeling inadequate and embarrassed for the bruises he probably sported. It was so dumb. He had no reason to be embarrassed. He didn't bodyguard people for a living, and he couldn't be expected to protect himself against three men even if he hadn't been opposed to violence on principle.

“You’re late,” Sebastian said.

“Is that your gratitude?” Vlad grunted, his Russian accent heavier than usual.

Sebastian arched a brow and barely suppressed a grimace when he felt a dull pain. “For what? Doing your job?” He knew he should probably thank Vlad, but after the bullshit Vlad had pulled in the corridor he wasn’t feeling particularly genial toward him. Because there had been a part of him that had been terribly, awfully tempted to forget his promise to himself and take whatever crumbs Vlad threw at him. And he despised himself for that. How could he be tempted? Hadn’t he learned anything with Mike?

“If it weren’t for me, you would’ve come here with that useless bodyguard.” Vlad walked over, lifted Sebastian’s shirt and started feeling up his ribs. “Wanna take bets on your odds of being just a little less pretty in that case?”

A little less pretty?

“At least he would have been professional,” Sebastian retorted, squirming away from Vlad’s touch. “Stop touching me. I’m fine. I’ve had it worse.”

Vlad lifted his blue eyes from Sebastian’s ribs.

Sebastian met his gaze steadily, although he was painfully aware that Vlad’s hands were still on his skin, which felt annoyingly oversensitive all of a sudden, breaking into goosebumps under Vlad’s hands.

“You’re trembling,” Vlad said.

Sebastian tried to shrug nonchalantly. “It’s shock and adrenaline. I’ve been attacked twice within a few days. I think I’m entitled to feel a little traumatized.” True enough, but that wasn’t why he was quivering.

Vlad didn’t argue. His hand moved down, pressing against his stomach. “Does it hurt here?”

Sebastian bit the inside of his cheek. “A little.” He wished it hurt more so the pain distracted him from how good the touch felt. His belly had always been a bit of an erogenous zone and having Vlad’s hands there was driving him mad, his stomach quivering and heat rushing to his groin. He wanted to yank Vlad to him, crush their bodies together, feel Vlad’s thick cock drag all over his belly, before nudging between his legs—

“Love, are you rea—What the hell?”

His neck hot, Sebastian stepped away from Vlad and forced a smile when he saw Matt’s flabbergasted face. He could only imagine what the scene looked like from the photographer’s perspective: three gagged, tied-up men on the floor, and Sebastian who probably looked like he’d been hit by a truck. “Looks like you won’t be getting those shots in the gym, Matt,” Sebastian said, hating how breathless his voice sounded.

“Oh my God,” Matt said, a horrified expression appearing on his face. “Love, are you all right?”

“Yeah,” Sebastian lied. He felt anything but all right.

Four hours later, after Sebastian had given his account of the incident to the police,

seen a doctor and had been declared healthy enough to go home, Sebastian felt absolutely beat. He had no energy to drive back to London, so he decided to stay at his childhood home. It was more convenient. Besides, he missed his parents and his sister. It'd been a while since he'd visited them. Not to mention that staying at his parents' meant that he could have some respite from Vlad.

Except apparently Vlad had other ideas.

"Seriously, go back to London," he told Vlad as they walked toward his parents' house. "You're not my bodyguard. You're Luke's."

"I am your bodyguard until we return to London," Vlad said, his face unreadable. "I spoke to Luke on the phone. He told me to stay with you. He'll stay with the Hardaways until our return."

"My parents' house is very small," Sebastian argued. "There will be no room for you." It was true. His parents had refused when he had offered to buy them a bigger house; they loved their quaint little house too much to move elsewhere.

"I'll live," Vlad said with a shrug. "I don't need much."

Sebastian gritted his teeth. He was giving Vlad a perfect excuse to leave and put some distance between them. Why wasn't Vlad taking it? Why hadn't Vlad been making any sense all day long?

He shot Vlad an irritated look, but Vlad was looking straight ahead. Sebastian stared at his hard profile before tearing his gaze away and quickening his stride.

The sight of his childhood home made him relax a little.

Sebastian's mother was the one to open the door. She gasped when she saw his face.

Sebastian smiled quickly. “I’m fine, Mum, really.”

Half an hour later, after everyone had finally calmed down, his mother insisted that they all have tea first before going to bed. As far as Melinda Sumner was concerned, tea fixed everything.

“I don’t understand how anyone can be so cruel,” his mother said, still looking upset. “I can understand if some people believe that we should love only the opposite gender—which is still wrong, but people can believe whatever they want to believe—but actually hurting innocent people because of who they love? Why would they do that? Why would they form some sort of cult just to hurt people who are different?”

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His sister caught Sebastian's eye, and he dropped his gaze, looking down into his cup. Their mother was still oblivious to the time Mike and his buddies had beaten him up.

"People hate what they don't understand," his dad said.

"Or maybe they're just crazy jerks," Julia said. "There doesn't have to be a reason. Some people are just vile."

"Maybe they just never knew any better," Vlad said quietly.

Tensing, Sebastian shot Vlad a look over the rim of his cup. He had been basically ignoring his bodyguard since their arrival, trying to pretend he wasn't there. Having Vlad in his childhood home felt strange on so many levels. He'd never imagined Vlad having an actual conversation with his family.

"What do you mean, dear?" his mother said.

Vlad shrugged slightly, his expression closed off. "Some people grow up knowing nothing but hate toward...anything different. They don't know how messed up some of their beliefs are. They simply don't know any better. They don't question what they've been told by adults."

Sebastian stared at him.

His father was the one to ask a question that was undoubtedly on everyone's minds.

"Are you speaking from personal experience, son?"

Vlad's face was positively stony. He gave a clipped nod, his blue eyes fixed on his tea. "My uncle used to tell me and my brothers that gay people were like rabid dogs that ought to be shot. He was the only male authority figure we had, and we had no reason not to trust his words."

A heavy silence fell over the room.

"That's...awful," Sebastian's mother said, her dark eyes wide and her hand covering her mouth. "He couldn't have been a good parental figure."

"What a psycho," Julia muttered.

Their mother shot her a reproachful look. "The important thing is that now you know better," she said, turning to Vlad with a soft smile.

When Vlad said nothing, her smile slipped off.

A hysterical laugh bubbled in Sebastian's throat. God, the whole thing was almost hilarious.

"He hates me, Mum," Sebastian said with a snort.

"Don't be silly, Sebastian," Melinda said. "How can anyone hate you?"

"He does," Sebastian said.

Melinda was frowning deeply, looking from Sebastian to Vlad. "Surely my son is mistaken? You can't possibly hate him."

Vlad shrugged. "I don't want him dead."

“Well, that’s a relief,” Julia said, not without sarcasm.

Vlad was frowning. “I don’t ‘hate’ him. Hate is the wrong word. But he’s a pretentious little shit, too idealistic for his own good.”

Melinda opened and closed her mouth.

Julia started snickering. “I like you,” she told Vlad.

Sebastian kicked her under the table and looked at Vlad exasperatedly. “You could’ve refrained from insulting me at least while you’re in my mother’s house.” But he was a little bewildered. Vlad didn’t hate him? The day was getting stranger and stranger.

“Don’t see any point in lying,” Vlad said, his eyes fixing on Sebastian with an intensity that was a little unnerving. “If you weren’t against violence, you could have learned to protect himself. You’re not a wimp.”

“Well,” his mother said, looking uncomfortable. Sebastian felt so sorry for her. She was clearly very torn. Melinda Sumner prided herself on being a gracious, warm hostess, but she was also fiercely protective of her children.

Melinda took a sip from her tea. “At least tell me you know that your uncle was wrong.”

“Of course I do,” Vlad said. “But if I hadn’t moved to Moscow when I was thirteen, I would’ve likely kept believing everything he told us.”

“And might have been one of those fanatics now,” Julia murmured.

“Doubt it,” Vlad said. “Killing someone for religious, ideological reasons is beyond

stupid. They don't even gain anything from it."

Sebastian's mother, father, and sister all stared at Vlad unblinkingly, shock plain on their faces.

Sebastian couldn't hold it back anymore: he threw his head back and started laughing. He'd grown so used to Vlad that he'd become desensitized to such remarks from him.

"It's not funny, Sebastian," his mother said, looking flustered and frustrated.

Taking pity on his poor mother, Sebastian stood up, grabbed Vlad's arm, and pulled him to his feet. Vlad let him, which was a relief, because Sebastian didn't feel like looking like an idiot in front of his family.

"I'm knackered," he said. "I think I'll go to bed early." He pulled at Vlad's arm, leading him out of the room.

"Wait, sweetheart!" Melinda called out. "Are you sure it's safe to..." She trailed off, blushing when Vlad looked at her.

Sebastian almost laughed. If only his mother knew what he had allowed Vlad to do to his body...

"He won't kill me in my sleep," he said with a wry grin. "That I'm sure of. Good night." And he headed to his old room, Vlad following him behind closely.

When the door of his childhood bedroom closed behind them, Sebastian cleared his throat. His bedroom had never seemed so small before. "There's a sleeping bag in the closet. The bathroom is down the corridor."

Vlad didn't say anything.

Then there was the sound of the door opening and closing, and Sebastian breathed out. Fuck. He and Vlad sleeping in the same room was the worst idea ever. They would either try to kill each other or fuck.

Sebastian wasn't sure which would be worse.

Chapter 14

By the time Vlad returned from the bathroom, Sebastian had already changed into an old white t-shirt and a pair of shorts he'd found in the closet. The clothes were a bit small, stretched tight over the muscles that hadn't been there when he'd worn them years ago.

Avoiding looking at Vlad, Sebastian headed to the bathroom.

While he was brushing his teeth, he caught his reflection in the mirror and winced. His lips were swollen, and there were bruises all over his stomach and his legs. At least the ones on his face didn't look as ugly. Hopefully they would fade soon or the makeup artists would kill him. He had another photo shoot coming up soon.

Sebastian almost collided with his sister when he left the bathroom.

"You look awful," Julia said, sweeping her gaze over him.

"Thanks," Sebastian said. "That's just what your baby brother needed to hear after

such a traumatizing day.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please. You’re tougher than all of us put together. Also, your worst is still better than my best. I’m not the pretty one in the family.” She pulled him into a one-armed hug and kissed him on the cheek. “I’m glad you’re okay, dumbass. Don’t fuck your homophobic bodyguard.”

Sebastian suspected that he looked like the proverbial deer caught in the headlights, because Julia started laughing.

Sebastian pursed his lips. “Whatever gave you that idea...?”

“Please,” she said. “I know you, remember? The sexual tension at the table was kind of embarrassing. Besides, he’s exactly your type: an asshole, Viking look-alike, tall, built like a tank, big hands, big dick—”

“You don’t know that. Maybe his dick is tiny.”

She peered at him curiously. “Is it? Strange. I usually can tell the size of the man’s penis by the way he carries himself. I’m positive he’s at least eight inches.”

Sebastian snorted. “Oh my God, shut up. I’m embarrassed to be related to you. Also, I deeply resent the implication that our confidence depends on the size of our pricks.”

Julia grinned and patted his cheek. “Listen to the wisdom of your elders, baby brother. When you reach my advanced age, you’ll realize the wisdom of my words.”

“I’m looking forward to that point in two years’ time,” Sebastian deadpanned, moving away. “Good night.”

“Good night. Don’t fuck your bodyguard!”

Sebastian flipped her the bird and entered his bedroom.

The room was dark and quiet. He could barely make out Vlad's figure on the sleeping bag next to the bed.

Inwardly cursing the stubborn Russian for tagging along, Sebastian padded to the bed and slipped under the covers.

He stretched out on his back, closed his eyes, and told himself to sleep.

After half an hour of valiant attempts to count sheep, Sebastian gave up and opened his eyes.

The room was so quiet he could hear Vlad's breathing. It was even and regular, but he knew Vlad was awake. He was positive he wasn't imagining the tension in the air, taut and ringing, like a string pulled to its breaking point.

He was half-hard, had been since entering the room.

Sebastian pushed the covers off his overheated body.

When it failed to cool his flushed skin, he pulled his t-shirt off, letting it drop to the floor.

He stretched, enjoying the feel of fresh sheets against his skin and trying not to think about the fact that he was almost naked while Vlad was a few feet away.

It shouldn't have given him such a thrill, but of course it did. God, he was so horny, had been low-key horny since the morning, with Vlad's body looming over him all day. At times like this, he truly felt like such a slag, his body having a mind of its own and just wanting a hard fuck, and to hell with the consequences. His body didn't

seem to care that his rational side was against the idea of getting involved with the mess that was Vlad and his internalized homophobia. His body just wanted a fuck, and his dirty mind kept creating fantasies that only turned him on. Fantasies like getting out of bed, straddling Vlad's thighs, pulling out Vlad's thick, long cock, and riding it hard until he came all over Vlad's wide, muscular chest. Or maybe sitting on Vlad's chest and feeding his cock into Vlad's mouth while Vlad's finger massaged his hole. Or maybe turning around and taking Vlad's cock inside his mouth while Vlad gripped his thighs and licked his hole.

Biting his lip to keep himself from making any sound, Sebastian pressed the heel of his hand against his aching erection.

Don't fuck your bodyguard. Julia's voice echoed in his mind. Don't fuck your bodyguard, don't fuck your bodyguard.

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Sebastian thought about those muscular thighs wrapped around his waist, Vlad's strong, hard body under him that he couldn't accidentally break.

I'm not a faggot, Vlad would say even as he groaned and clenched around Sebastian's cock.

Sebastian squeezed his cock through his shorts, unable to help it. God, if only Vlad knew what he was thinking about right now...Vlad would probably beat him up. Maybe beat him up, then fold Sebastian in half and fuck him, hard and dirty, Sebastian's legs wrapped around Vlad's thick neck—

Sebastian bit on his lip and then realized his hand was inside his boxers and was stroking his erection. Fuck. He had no idea when it had happened. His cock was leaking, and the wet sound of flesh stroking flesh was unmistakable.

Panicky, Sebastian forced his hand to stop and strained his hearing, praying Vlad had fallen asleep.

But he couldn't hear Vlad's steady breathing anymore. Which meant Vlad had likely heard him.

Sebastian squeezed his eyes shut.

Vlad said hoarsely, "You have no shame, do you?"

"I'm a healthy man, and I have needs," Sebastian said, refusing to act like a little boy caught with a hand in the cookie jar. The less embarrassed he acted, the less

embarrassing it would be.

“You got off last night,” Vlad said. “Are you that much of a slut?”

“That’s called having a healthy sex drive.” Sebastian smiled at the dark ceiling. “But I get it: at your age, you probably don’t remember what it’s like to get it up more often than once a week.”

“I’m thirty-two,” Vlad bit off.

“Really? Then why are you acting like a prudish old man who never wanked in his life?”

“I never did with someone else in the room.”

Sebastian snorted. “Please. You said you had brothers. Surely you all didn’t have separate rooms?”

“My brothers died before they hit puberty,” Vlad said tonelessly.

Oh.

Sebastian cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. All of them? What happened?”

“Tuberculosis,” Vlad said curtly.

Sebastian didn’t know what to say. To his surprise, Vlad clarified without prompting, “We lived in a small village far from major cities. No vaccines, no proper medicine. My mother sent me away to our distant relatives in Moscow when it became clear I was the only one not infected.”

The only one?

“You mean...” Sebastian licked his lips. “You mean they all died? Your mother, too?”

“Yes.”

The tightness of Vlad’s voice said it all, and Sebastian felt a wave of pity. He couldn’t imagine losing his entire family all at once and being sent away to a big city where he knew no one. Maybe that explained why Vlad was such a moody, angry person. His life must have been tough. That didn’t excuse some of the things Vlad said and did, but it explained them a little.

“How did you become Roman Demidov’s right hand?” Sebastian said, curious despite himself. “I mean, that’s a pretty big leap from a village nobody to a billionaire’s head of security.”

“I was piss poor, I needed money,” Vlad said. “I got into illegal underground fighting. Turned out I was good at beating people up.” He sighed. “It’s all very banal, really. I got involved with the wrong sort of people and basically became a junkie by fifteen. Like most junkies, I would do anything for a hit. I ended up owing lots of money to the wrong sort of people. One of them ordered me to kidnap Roman’s little sister and bring her to him.”

When Vlad didn’t continue, Sebastian said, “And? What happened?”

“I couldn’t do it,” Vlad said, his voice clipped. “Anastasia was just five. I did kidnap her—I wasn’t working alone—but I delivered her to her brother. I thought—I knew her family would kill me for kidnapping her and putting her at such a risk, but Roman convinced his father that I could be an asset to them. He dealt with my debts, helped me with my addiction problem, and offered me a job.”

“Wow,” Sebastian said, a little surprised. Roman Demidov didn’t strike him as a merciful man. “That was very kind of him.”

Vlad chuckled, as if he’d said something funny. “Roman doesn’t do anything out of kindness. Loyalty is hard to come by in those circles. He basically guaranteed my loyalty by saving my ass and got himself someone capable that he could trust to watch his back. And he was right. I saved his life countless times and got promoted to his head of security after just seven years.”

Sebastian chewed on his lip, a bit weirded out that they were having such a civil conversation. “I got the impression that Roman fired you recently?”

“He did.” There was reluctance in Vlad’s voice; clearly the topic wasn’t his favorite.

“Why?” Sebastian pressed.

“Do you know how Luke and Roman met?” Vlad’s tone was cautious.

It piqued Sebastian’s curiosity. “Yeah,” he said. “Luke met him through work during his business trip to Russia.”

“Sure,” Vlad said, amusement in his tone. “If you don’t know, I can’t tell you much. But the gist of it is...I disliked that Luke somehow managed to wrap Roman around his little finger. I thought he was a bad influence, made Roman irrational and—” He cut himself off, but Sebastian could guess.

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“Gay?” he said, his lips twisting.

“Yes,” Vlad said. “I thought the brat bewitched him. Roman was straight until he met Luke. That’s why I helped Luke return to England behind Roman’s back.”

“It’s not that surprising, you know,” Sebastian said mildly, a little amused by the thought of Luke bewitching a man like Roman Demidov. It was obvious Vlad still subconsciously subscribed to the belief his homophobic uncle had instilled in him—that being gay was a contagious disease. Sebastian tried not to take too much offence. He knew that such deep-rooted beliefs weren’t easy to let go of.

“Luke is very pretty and cute,” Sebastian said. “He’s the perfect twink. He’s exactly the type that can be attractive to straight men. I doubt Roman would have been attracted to...say, someone like me. He does strike me as a mostly straight man.”

“You’re not exactly ugly,” Vlad said gruffly.

Sebastian chuckled. “Thanks, but I’m not cute like Luke. I’m also tall and pretty built—”

“Your face is more beautiful than Luke’s.”

Sebastian’s mouth fell open. He blinked several times, unable to believe he’d heard that right.

“I’m handsome, not cute,” he said, clearing his throat a little. “I don’t look remotely feminine or cute. That’s what I meant. If you find my face attractive, it doesn’t mean

a mostly straight man like Roman would.”

There were several seconds of tense silence.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re not exactly straight,” Sebastian said carefully. “Surely you’ve realized that by now? I’d say you’re far gayer than Roman is. He barely pings my gaydar—he’s the perfect example of a straight man turning gay for one man—but you...”

“I’m not gay,” Vlad said, very slowly, grinding out every word.

Sebastian thought for a moment before propping himself on his elbow and looking down at Vlad. He couldn’t make out his expression in the dark. All he could see was Vlad’s wide, muscular chest, rising and falling.

Sebastian tried not to stare, but it was hard not to. Fuck, he didn’t understand what was going on with him. He had seen a lot of beautiful bodies in his line of work and was mostly desensitized to them by now. He rarely stopped and stared at them. Why did he suddenly feel like he was sixteen all over again? The embarrassing truth was, his body was completely fixated on Vlad. It tensed with awareness when Vlad was close, his skin tingling and hypersensitive to everything Vlad did, as though he were a silly teenager who had just discovered sex.

Sebastian gave himself a mental kick, told himself to stop acting like a schoolboy with a crush, and said, “Okay, let’s say you aren’t gay. Are you going to pretend you didn’t like the sex yesterday?”

He watched Vlad’s Adam’s apple bob up and down. “It was a mistake. You said so yourself.”

“Yeah, of course it was a mistake, but that’s not what I asked,” Sebastian said mildly. “Didn’t you like fucking me?”

“What kind of question is that?” Vlad said harshly. “I came, didn’t I?”

Sebastian drummed his fingers over his own thigh. “Orgasm is just a physical reaction to stimulation. I don’t have to tell you that not all orgasms are equal.”

“Blyad, what do you want me to say? That I liked fucking you?”

Sebastian noted with interest that Vlad’s accent got thicker the angrier he got.

“I—” he started, but Vlad cut him off.

“You know what I think?” Vlad sat up suddenly and leaned toward him, his hand burying in Sebastian’s hair and yanking his head to the edge of the bed, closer to Vlad’s so that their faces were inches apart.

Sebastian swallowed, his mouth going very dry and his cock hardening again.

“What?” he whispered.

“You keep saying it was a mistake, that I’m a worse mistake than Fletcher, but you can’t let it go. You keep trying to make me admit how much I want you. Why do you care? Are you that conceited?” Vlad tugged at his hair, pulling Sebastian’s face closer. “Or do you have a crush on me or something?”

Sebastian felt his face turn warm.

“I think you do,” Vlad said, pressing his forehead against Sebastian’s. “I think you actually want me to fuck you again, but you’re too ashamed to admit it. You want to

provoke me into fucking you and then put all the blame on the bad, mean Russian.”

“Screw you,” Sebastian hissed, his anger coming back in full force. He wanted to hurt Vlad. God, he wanted to hurt him so badly, wanted to make him eat his words and completely humiliate him.

“You can’t even own up to your own actions,” Sebastian said, breathing hard against Vlad’s mouth. “You know why you’re worse than Fletcher? He was a teenager. You’re a grown man. You’re fucking pathetic—”

Vlad shoved him back and slammed their mouths together.

Sebastian bit him. Vlad growled and bit his lip back. Sebastian bit him again, wanting to hurt him. God, it was pure madness, the anger clashing with heady arousal and making his head spin with contradictory wants. He wanted to kill Vlad, wanted to strangle him, wanted to fuck him and be fucked, hard and dirty, until neither of them could remember their names.

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Sebastian wasn't sure at what point their biting contest turned into deep, hungry kisses, but soon he was moaning and tugging Vlad on top of him, hands stroking Vlad's wide, muscular back, blunt nails digging in as their mouths molded into each other in a heated, needy kiss. They both were groaning and grunting, writhing on the bed and shoving and pulling each other close. Sebastian couldn't remember the last time he wanted something so badly his body shook with it. He was nearly crying with the desire to have, to take, to fuck.

Sebastian shoved at Vlad, rolling him onto his back, and straddled Vlad's thick thighs.

He looked down at Vlad's heaving chest, Vlad's face shrouded in the darkness. His own breathing was so loud he could hear nothing else. He almost expected Vlad to shove him away now that they'd stopped kissing, but Vlad's hands seemed glued to Sebastian's hips, thumbs stroking his sensitive belly while the other fingers were splayed on Sebastian's buttocks, big and hard. Vlad's hands moved down and kneaded Sebastian's thighs greedily, as if Vlad couldn't quite help himself.

Sebastian leaned down and murmured against Vlad's ear, "Wanna fuck me, don't you? Too bad. I'll be the one doing the fucking this time."

He felt Vlad go rigid under him. "You can't make me do anything," Vlad said, fingers digging into Sebastian's buttocks. "And I'm not taking it up the ass."

"Why, are you afraid you'll like it too much?" Sebastian bit Vlad's earlobe.

"I..." Whatever Vlad was going to say was cut off when Sebastian pulled Vlad's cock

out and wrapped his hand around it.

“I’m not a homo,” Vlad gritted out, his cock twitching in Sebastian’s hand.

“Sure.” Sebastian turned on the bedside lamp and rummaged in the drawer, praying he’d left some lube the last time he’d visited his parents.

Apparently he had. Miraculously, there were also a couple of condoms.

Sebastian grabbed the bottle, opened it, and slicked up his fingers.

Vlad’s hand caught his wrist in a vise-like grip. “You are not fucking me,” he said, accentuating every word, as if his cock wasn’t rock hard in Sebastian’s other hand.

“Fine if you’re scared...”

Predictably, Vlad bristled at the mere suggestion of being scared of anything. Sebastian would have rolled his eyes if his dick wasn’t hard to the point of being painful. God, he wanted to fuck. He needed it, wanted to stick his cock inside Vlad and fuck him into the mattress until the homophobic fucker begged him for his cock.

“I’m not afraid of anything,” Vlad said. “Fine, whatever. But I’m not going to like it.”

Was that a challenge?

“We shall see.” Sebastian tugged Vlad’s boxers off, pushed his thighs apart and settled between them. He licked his lips, looking at Vlad’s chest—he wanted to kiss it, suck on those nipples, bite those pecs—but forced himself to go straight to prepping Vlad. He wanted to make Vlad beg for his cock and he had a feeling it wasn’t going to be easy.

The truth was, not all gay men liked anal sex. Some found it uncomfortable, some found it too messy and too much work. Personally, Sebastian loved having cock inside him, and normally he didn't pressure his partner if the other guy didn't want to bottom for whatever reason. He was more than fine with bottoming. This was the first time he actually burned to fuck another man, make him fall apart on his cock. He wanted to see this proud, manly, homophobic and supposedly straight man turn into a slut for his cock. The mere thought of it made his cock ache.

Judging by the bored look on Vlad's face, he was determined to dislike it.

Vlad's expression didn't change when Sebastian pushed a finger in. Stroking Vlad's erection with his other hand, Sebastian pushed in another finger and started gently scissoring them. No outward reaction.

Growing frustrated, Sebastian crooked his fingers—

Vlad shuddered, his entire body tensing.

“Good, yeah?” Sebastian smiled and repeated it, stroking Vlad's prostate gently.

Vlad glared at him, his jaw clenched tight. It was obvious he hated that he was enjoying this. Too bad. By the time Sebastian was done, Vlad would be a total slut for cock, whether he wanted it or not.

Sebastian pushed a third finger inside Vlad's hole and a moan slipped out of Vlad's tightly pursed lips.

“Still hate it?” Sebastian murmured, thrusting his fingers in and out.

Vlad glowered at him, his cheekbones flushed, his cock rock hard and his pupils dilated. “Yes.”

“Liar,” Sebastian said, massaging Vlad’s prostate.

Vlad didn’t quite manage to swallow another moan and his hips started moving to meet Sebastian’s fingers.

“Look at you,” Sebastian murmured hoarsely. “You’re gagging for it. Look how hard you are.”

If looks could kill, the one Vlad gave him would have. “Just get on with it,” Vlad gritted out.

Sebastian would have laughed if he weren’t so impatient himself. His fingers were shaking as he rolled on a condom and slicked his cock up.

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“Spread your thighs wider,” Sebastian said, lining himself up.

They both watched his cock disappear slowly inside Vlad’s hole. Sebastian sucked a breath in as incredible tightness enveloped him.

Vlad was panting, his eyes glazed over. “This feels unnatural,” he said through his teeth.

Sebastian pulled out and thrust in, hitting Vlad’s prostate. Vlad sucked a breath in, arching under him.

“You were saying?” Sebastian said, bracing himself over Vlad and smirking down at him as Vlad’s ass clenched around his cock.

“Fuck you,” Vlad said, grabbing a fistful of Sebastian’s hair and pulling him down for a furious kiss. Sebastian kissed back, his hips moving, grinding into Vlad helplessly, wanting to fuck so badly he could barely think.

They fucked, hard and fast. It wasn’t sex; it was a fuck, as primitive and base as it could get. Vlad was grunting under him, quiet moans slipping from his mouth when Sebastian’s cock nailed his prostate. For all Vlad’s protests, he was clearly loving this, loving being fucked. The noises he was making were bloody beautiful.

“Still not a faggot?” Sebastian whispered, thrusting harder and deeper, beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. Topping was too much work; it was one of the reasons he preferred bottoming when he had sex with men. Well, that and he loved cock. “Admit it, Vlad. You’re loving this. You love being fucked. You pretend to be straight—but

you're actually"—Sebastian slammed into him—"a total cock slut."

Vlad moaned but stubbornly said nothing, even as his hips moved to meet Sebastian's thrusts, powerful thighs enclosing Sebastian's hips. God, he was so incredibly tight. Sebastian went still for a moment, reveling in the tightness around his cock and catching his breath.

Vlad made an impatient noise. "Move."

Sebastian stroked Vlad's leaking cock lazily. "Gimme a moment. I'm tired." It didn't help that he could still feel the numerous bruises on his body.

"Such a princess," Vlad said before rolling them and straddling Sebastian's thighs. He sank back onto Sebastian's cock with a relieved moan. God, the sight of him... Sebastian watched, transfixed, as Vlad's big, muscular body rode his cock, Vlad's head thrown back in ecstasy, his mouth slack, Vlad's hard cock looking delicious against his six-pack. Sebastian stared at that beautiful cock hungrily, wishing he could do two things at once: fuck Vlad's ass and ride that thick cock.

The thought made Sebastian arch and come so hard he cried out despite his efforts not to. Fuck, what if his parents had heard him?

Vlad pulled off his softening cock, breathing heavily, his own cock still hard as rock. Before Sebastian could manage a word, Vlad grabbed another condom, rolled it onto his cock and started slicking it up.

Oh. God, yes.

Sebastian sighed when Vlad threw his legs over his shoulders, bending him practically in half, and pushed inside him slowly. The stretch was uncomfortable but not painful—he was used to bottoming and didn't need much prep—and before long

Vlad was slamming into him, using him like a boneless rag doll, his body heavy and perfect on top of him. There was something about this, about just being on his back and taking it, that turned him on like nothing else could. He stared at the ceiling, panting, as the bed creaked under them. God, his parents were just down the corridor while he was fucked within an inch of his life by his homophobic bodyguard. But instead of killing his arousal, it seemed to intensify it even more, making him feel deliciously naughty and wicked.

By the time Vlad came, Sebastian was hard again. He whined when Vlad pulled his softening cock out.

“Who’s the cock slut now?” Vlad growled with a faint smirk, rolling off him.

Sebastian felt like hitting him. “I hate you,” he said with feeling.

“Do you?” Vlad said, stretching out on his sleeping bag.

“Asshole,” Sebastian said, closing his eyes and trying to ignore the vaguely dissatisfied, empty feeling in his ass. “For the record, I don’t have a crush on you.”

Vlad said nothing. His silence seemed almost mocking.

Sebastian breathed in and out, willing his arousal away. When he managed that, regret and shame came. He had promised himself not to let it happen again. He had promised. How could he be so weak?

Sebastian turned to his side, his back to Vlad, and curled into a ball.

Idiot. He was a bloody idiot.

Chapter 15

The drive to London was tense and silent. Sebastian turned up the radio while Vlad sat in the back seat, sunglasses hiding his expression. In his impeccable black suit, he seemed the definition of a perfect bodyguard. Except the perfect bodyguard wouldn't fuck him and then spend hours in tense, charged silence. He and Vlad hadn't exchanged a single word since they'd had sex last night. The morning was awkward enough with Sebastian's parents blushing and avoiding looking at either of them. Julia had just sighed and shaken her head. The fact that she hadn't made fun of him somehow made Sebastian feel worse—it meant his sister was genuinely worried.

He was worried, too.

Because even now, in broad daylight, his eyes kept lingering on the line of Vlad's square jaw, which accentuated his full lips, and his mind kept conjuring up dirty thoughts like stopping the car, straddling Vlad's lap and slowly unbuttoning that pristine suit. He imagined dragging his splayed fingers up and down that muscular chest, stroking the taut six-pack before moving his hand down and—

Sebastian squirmed in the driver's seat and adjusted his dick as subtly as he could.

Stop being such a teenager, he told himself, frustrated with his horny, idiotic body. Having sex with Vlad seemed to have made the problem worse, not better.

The sound of Vlad's mobile phone going off broke the tension in the car.

Sebastian glanced at the mirror. Vlad took his shades off and answered the call.

"Yes," Vlad said tersely, his gaze flicking up to meet Sebastian's in the mirror. They both averted their eyes quickly.

"Thanks," Vlad said before hanging up.

"That was my contact in the police," Vlad volunteered, to Sebastian's surprise. "One of the men that attacked you yesterday talked, and the police managed to stop another high-profile kidnapping last night. My contact says it shouldn't be long before they catch the rest of them."

Oh.

“So I can finally go home,” Sebastian said.

“Not everyone in the cult has been caught yet,” Vlad said.

“I know, but they’re less dangerous now that their numbers have dwindled,” Sebastian said. Bullies fed off each other’s hatred and anger and, more often than not, were too cowardly to act on their own.

Vlad didn’t disagree, his expression impossible to read.

Sebastian bit his lip as a new thought occurred to him. If—when—he moved back home, he wouldn’t have to put up with Vlad anymore. In fact, he was unlikely to see him again unless he went to see Luke.

Instead of making him feel relieved, the thought was...a little strange. In such a short time he’d gotten used to Vlad’s constant presence, to the little thrill he got whenever he managed to rile Vlad up and—

Sebastian shook his head with a grimace. The bigger the distance between them was, the better. Last night proved that he couldn’t trust himself where Vlad was concerned: couldn’t trust himself not to end up on his back under Vlad if Vlad decided that he wanted him. The thought was humiliating and infuriating.

“I’m moving out as soon as the rest of them are caught,” Sebastian said.

Vlad said nothing, his face giving nothing away. Looking at Vlad’s inscrutable expression now, it was hard to believe he’d been inside this man just last night.

But it had happened. It had.

Sebastian didn't know what Vlad was thinking, but, given Vlad's background and upbringing, it was probably safe to presume he was freaking out behind that unflappable façade.

Sebastian felt a twinge of sympathy. He knew he was lucky to have such an understanding, supportive family. He couldn't imagine growing up in an environment so hostile and abusive toward what he was.

He could sympathize, but it didn't mean he had to like the guy. Because he didn't. He didn't. Granted, after what he had learned about Vlad's childhood, it was hard to keep hating him, but Sebastian still didn't like him. And he definitely didn't have a crush on him.

The thought made Sebastian blush and scowl. The sooner he put some distance between them, the better it was for everyone involved. If Vlad was anything like Mike—and all the evidence suggested he was—he would repress the hell out of his homosexual feelings and pretend to be “normal” for the rest of his life.

Sebastian's phone buzzed in his pocket, interrupting his thoughts.

“Damn,” he muttered, looking at the busy street, and pulled the phone out clumsily. Putting it on speaker, he returned both hands to the steering wheel. He'd never been a very confident driver.

“Hey, babe,” someone said with a strong Italian accent. Someone very familiar.

Sebastian smiled. “Hi, Antonio.”

He and Antonio Bonaventura had known each other for ages, having entered the modeling industry about the same time. Sebastian wouldn't call them friends, but they were good acquaintances—and casual fuck-buddies whenever they were in the

same town.

Sebastian smiled a little as he listened to Antonio's melodic voice talking about everything and nothing. Antonio was a bit of a gossip, but a harmless one.

"I'm coming to London next week," Antonio said at last. "I was negotiating with Armani, but DuVal made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Can I crash at your place? You know I hate hotels. And it'll give us a chance to catch up." The leer in Antonio's voice was unmistakable. "I missed you, beautiful."

Sebastian snorted, but before he could say anything, he felt a warm breath against his ear.

"Tell him no," Vlad said, meeting Sebastian's eyes in the mirror.

What?

"Tell him no," Vlad repeated, harder, putting a hand on Sebastian's shoulder, his fingers brushing his bare throat.

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Sebastian swallowed. What the hell was Vlad playing at?

“I’m sorry, Tony, but I likely won’t be staying at my place next week,” he said. It was true. He wasn’t saying no because of Vlad or anything.

“Oh, well,” Antonio said. “We can still hang out, yeah? I’ve missed your beautiful face.”

“Sure,” Sebastian said, ignoring the painful grip on his shoulder. Fuck Vlad. “Text me anytime.”

“Okay, babe, I will. Ciao!”

The line disconnected.

Vlad let go of his shoulder and leaned back in the seat.

“What the fuck was that?” Sebastian hissed.

“It’s pretty reckless to be seen with another gay model when all of the members of the cult haven’t been caught yet.”

Vlad sounded so calm and reasonable, as if Sebastian was the one being unreasonable.

Sebastian pursed his lips. “But Antonio and I don’t have to go out to have fun,” he said with a smile. “He has a nice cock.”

He frowned as soon as he said that. The latter part had been completely unnecessary. Was he really trying to provoke Vlad? What was he hoping to achieve? To make Vlad jealous?

Shit, maybe Vlad was right: he really was behaving like a little boy with a crush. Christ, Sebastian couldn't remember the last time he'd acted so ridiculously because of a man. No, he did remember: he'd been as stupid with Mike.

The realization made his stomach clench with anxiety. Maybe he really should call Antonio and hook up with him. He needed to fuck all this stupidity out of his system.

"You call yourself bi, but all you talk about is cock," Vlad said, looking out the side window. "I'm surprised you managed to get it up for Nina."

"I am bi," Sebastian said, a little bemused that Vlad was talking so casually about his ex-girlfriend. "Like, I know a bloke who is just like me—mostly into men and only sometimes into women—but he identifies as gay while I identify as bi. Neither of us is wrong." Sebastian sighed. "Sure, some people would say that I'm just not brave enough to call myself gay, but that's bollocks. Yeah, I do prefer men, like, eighty percent of the time, but sometimes I can be genuinely attracted to a woman too, so..." He shrugged. "Bisexuality is far too complex to be a fifty-fifty split. It's actually pretty rare when a bisexual likes men and women exactly the same. Anyway, it's not anyone's business how people choose to identify themselves. The important thing is to be honest with oneself."

"Was that a dig at me?" Vlad said.

"If the shoe fits," Sebastian murmured.

Silence fell between them for a long while.

“Don’t fuck the Italian,” Vlad said suddenly.

Sebastian glanced at him in the mirror. Vlad was still looking out the window, his body fraught with so much tension it was almost tangible.

Could he really be jealous?

It was concerning how much the mere thought pleased him.

“Why not?” Sebastian said.

Vlad pressed his lips together.

A car horn broke the tension and Sebastian snapped his gaze back to the road, narrowly avoiding a crash. “Thanks for your honest answer,” Sebastian said sarcastically, starting to get pissed off by Vlad’s strange attitude.

Vlad remained silent.

Whatever. It didn’t matter. Sebastian wasn’t touching that. If Vlad was trying to convince himself that he was straight, Sebastian wasn’t going to tell him otherwise. He was done getting involved with men who were so deep in denial they were practically drowning in it. Soon he would move out of Luke’s flat and would likely never see Vlad again, which was...good. It was good.

He couldn’t wait.

Chapter 16

The pretentious little shit was ignoring him, had been ignoring him since they returned to London.

It was perfect, actually, since Vlad had decided to ignore Sebastian, too. The less he talked to the guy, the better. Well, at least that was the theory.

In practice, he didn't fucking like being ignored by Sebastian.

He was going mad. That was the only explanation.

Vlad bored his eyes at the source of all his frustration.

Sebastian was stretched out on the couch with a thick book in his hands. Unlike Vlad, he seemed completely relaxed and engrossed in his book. He hadn't looked at Vlad once, hadn't spoken a word to him since their return. It pissed Vlad off, because—because he was supposed to be the one doing the ignoring. Sebastian was supposed to be the frustrated one, not him.

Vlad grimaced, catching himself on that childish, irrational train of thought.

Annoyed with himself, Vlad averted his gaze, fixing it on the TV.

Thirty seconds later, he found himself staring at Sebastian again.

There was a tiny mole on Sebastian's pale neck, next to the faint reddish mark. The mark his teeth and lips had left.

Vlad looked away.

Maybe the reason for his frustration was the lack of open confrontation. Since Sebastian had decided to pretend their little trip hadn't happened, Vlad hadn't been given an opportunity to tell Sebastian that the sex meant nothing. He wished Sebastian would just confront him and call him gay so he could deny it.

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But Sebastian wouldn't even look at him, and boy, did it piss him off. He wanted to stand up, walk over to Sebastian and shake him, push him around, pin him to the couch under him and—

Vlad stood up and left the living room quickly. He rapped his knuckles against the study's door and pushed it open. "Are you going out today?" he said.

Luke lifted his eyes from his laptop, a phone pressed to his ear. "One moment, Andrew," he said, setting the phone down. "I'm working from home today," he told Vlad, frowning. "Roman asked me to. Why? Is there a problem?"

Vlad wished he could say yes. He wished he could tell Luke he needed to leave the flat immediately so Vlad could leave with him, get away from Sebastian and his skin, his mouth, and his eyes. Hell, he almost wished for Charves's people to be spotted in the neighborhood.

"No," Vlad said. "Just getting stir-crazy."

He shut the door firmly and sighed.

This madness had better pass.

* * *

It didn't pass.

By the evening, he was beyond frustrated.

He could barely taste the food as he wolfed it down, feeling distracted and annoyed. He glared at Sebastian, hating himself for his inability to ignore him. He watched Sebastian and Luke talk about their common acquaintances and tried to convince himself he was looking at them both.

He wasn't looking at them both.

Sebastian did this slow blink, sometimes, letting his eyelashes sweep against his cheeks before looking up at whoever he was speaking to, slow, and sleepy and doe-like.

To make things worse, Vlad was pretty sure Luke had noticed his staring. He kept shooting Vlad inquisitive looks throughout the supper while Sebastian continued ignoring him. Sebastian hadn't looked at him once all day and it was bothering Vlad more than he would have liked.

Look at me, he wanted to growl. Look at me, look at me, look at me.

He felt like a goddamn schoolboy with a crush on a pretty girl.

Except he wasn't a schoolboy, and Sebastian wasn't a pretty girl by any stretch of imagination. He was just pretty. So fucking pretty. And he had such a pretty smile—

Vlad nearly groaned aloud. Had he really just thought that?

"Take a picture, Vlad," Luke said suddenly. "It'll last longer."

Sebastian's smile kind of froze. He still wouldn't look at Vlad.

"I don't know what you mean," Vlad said, scowling at Luke.

Luke raised his eyebrows. “You were glaring at Seb for half an hour.”

“I was just wondering what he was going to do when his pretty face stops making him easy money,” Vlad said.

Slowly, Sebastian turned his head to him, a flush appearing on his cheekbones. “Really? What a coincidence! I was just wondering what were you going to do when you can’t make easy money by standing stupidly by the wall and flexing your muscles.”

“Okay, kids,” Luke said, getting to his feet. “I have better things to do than watch you two pull each other’s pigtails.”

“We weren’t—”

“We aren’t—”

“Sure,” Luke said, sounding far too amused for Vlad’s liking as he walked out of the kitchen.

Vlad looked at Sebastian.

Tension stretched between them, almost palpable in its thickness.

Sebastian wet his lips with his tongue, sprang to his feet, and left the kitchen.

Vlad’s gaze fell to Sebastian’s cup of tea.

It was almost full.

* * *

The rest of the week passed in much the same manner: Sebastian alternated between avoiding him and ignoring him. Vlad wished he could do the same, but the less attention Sebastian gave him, the more it fucking bothered him. He barely managed to stop himself from doing something impulsive, telling himself it was for the best.

Nights were harder. During the night, there was no escaping the memories and thoughts he managed to suppress during the day. He didn't sleep well—hadn't slept well all week.

Vlad heaved a sigh and turned onto his back, looking at the dark sky through the window by the bed. The penthouse was eerily quiet, the other two men having gone to bed hours ago. He was the only one wide-awake, his mind too busy with thoughts he'd rather not have.

There was no denying it anymore: he wasn't quite as straight as he'd believed all his life. But that was the extent of what he was willing to admit, even to himself. Anything beyond that was...

Vlad halted that train of thought. He'd never been good at self-reflection. In fact, he preferred not to be alone with his own thoughts. If he was, he tended to become restless and vaguely dissatisfied. When he let himself dwell on it, he'd always felt like there was something inherently wrong with his life—with him—but he could never quite put his finger on it.

This past week might have finally given him an answer, but he didn't like the answer at all.

The sound of footsteps brought his thoughts to a screeching halt. Someone was moving in the flat.

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Tensing, Vlad took his gun from the nightstand and quietly rolled off the bed.

The corridor was dark and empty.

There was a noise in the living room.

When he got there, he found Sebastian standing in the middle of the room.

Vlad set the gun down and switched on the light. This time he wasn't surprised to see Sebastian's glassy, unseeing eyes. He was sleepwalking again.

Vlad stared at him, unsure what to do. Sebastian was wearing only loose pajama bottoms that were riding very low on his hips.

Licking his suddenly dry lips, he tore his gaze from Sebastian's hipbones and walked closer. He recalled what Sebastian had told him: he usually sleepwalked only when he was stressed by something. Wondering what had him stressed out this time, Vlad put his hand on Sebastian's shoulder and shook him gently. "Wake up."

Sebastian flinched, closed his eyes, and sagged against Vlad, his breathing evening out again. He was truly asleep now, snoring softly into Vlad's neck.

Vlad breathed shakily, his boxers suddenly a little tight. Cursing every deity he could think of, he repeated, "Wake up."

Sebastian mumbled something sleepily and nuzzled into him. His parted lips dragged across Vlad's skin, sending goosebumps all over his neck.

Vlad closed his eyes and took a deep breath. This was pure torture.

“Wake up,” he said, trying not to think about how much he wanted to pull Sebastian closer and feel him up. “Sebastian,” he croaked, clinging to the remnants of his control by the skin of his teeth.

Finally, Sebastian’s eyelids fluttered open. He stared at Vlad, eyes still sleepy and a little confused.

“I hate my brain.” Sebastian sighed, looking resigned. He lifted his hand and put it on the back of Vlad’s head. “C’mere, then, kiss me.”

Vlad froze. Then he realized Sebastian thought he was dreaming.

“C’mere,” Sebastian mumbled sleepily, pulling his head down.

Vlad had never felt so weak in the face of attraction. After days of just looking at Sebastian—looking and wanting his attention—his control was pitiful. He was drawn to this man like a bee to honey.

Just a kiss, he told himself dazedly, staring at Sebastian’s mouth. Just one.

He pressed his lips against Sebastian’s, swallowing the moan threatening to leave his lips. He licked into Sebastian’s mouth, cradling his face in his hands. Sebastian was wonderfully responsive, his lips and tongue just as hungry, his arms locking around Vlad’s neck, pulling him closer. Small moans filled the air as they kissed—his or Sebastian’s, Vlad had no idea. Fuck, this felt almost painfully good.

Suddenly, Sebastian went rigid against him. He pushed at Vlad, tearing his lips away. “Wait,” he said, panting. “I’m not dreaming.”

With a sigh, Vlad stepped away, his hands balled into fists. He couldn't look at Sebastian. Unlike Sebastian, he couldn't claim being confused and thinking he was asleep.

"How did I—Did I sleepwalk here?"

"Yes," Vlad said curtly. He could feel Sebastian's gaze on him and suppressed the urge to cover his crotch. There was no hiding his half-hard cock.

"I..." Sebastian trailed off.

Vlad looked at him. Sebastian's shoulders were stiff with tension, his fingers touching his lips. When their gazes met, Sebastian licked his shiny lips and cleared his throat. "Good night," he said hoarsely and strode out of the room.

Vlad let out the breath he'd been holding, tension draining away.

Chapter 17

Sebastian felt like death warmed over when he left his room the next morning. He'd barely slept last night after returning to his room, mortified of getting caught sleepwalking again and asking Vlad to kiss him. Vlad probably thought he was a freak for more reasons than one now. Sebastian half-hoped that Luke—and Vlad—had left for Luke's office so he didn't have to face them.

But they both were in the living room.

Luke beamed at him when he saw Sebastian. "We have good news!" he said brightly, tucking a stray curl behind his ear. "The remaining members of the cult were finally caught last night!"

Sebastian blinked at him. He could see Vlad's black-clad figure in his peripheral vision but carefully didn't look that way. "That means I can go home, right?"

Luke nodded. "But you can stay—"

Sebastian turned around swiftly. "I'll go pack my things," he threw over his shoulder and retreated into his room.

Once there, he stared unseeingly into space.

He could finally go home. Away from Vlad.

Hermione's meow pushed him into action. He packed quickly, grabbed his cat, and went to thank Luke for his hospitality.

"You don't have to move out immediately," Luke said, frowning.

"I want to," Sebastian said. He felt Vlad's heavy stare on him. It was more than a little disconcerting. He didn't understand what was going on in Vlad's head. "Thanks so much, mate, but I miss my own bed."

"I get it, but I wish you could have stayed for a bit longer," Luke said as they walked to the lift. He made a face. "I liked not being alone with Vlad."

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Sebastian did his best not to look over his shoulder at Vlad, who could likely hear every word. “Why does he have to stay here if the cult was caught?”

“I thought I told you that the cult wasn’t the only reason Vlad was here? There’s—”

“You shouldn’t be talking about it,” Vlad cut in from behind them, and Sebastian flinched. Vlad’s voice sounded a lot closer than Sebastian had expected.

Luke sighed. “I feel like a prisoner in my own home,” he muttered before raising his voice. “When Roman is back, you’ll stop being my bodyguard. I would convince Roman to fire you completely, but I know you and Roman go way back and he has a soft spot for you, for some reason. He thinks you’re loyal.”

“I am,” Vlad said before sighing. “Luke.”

Luke turned around, and Sebastian did, too, curious despite himself.

Vlad glanced at him, his face unreadable, before focusing his gaze on Luke with a resolute expression. “Look, I know we didn’t get off to a good start,” he said. “I didn’t make your situation easier. I didn’t stop my men when they roughed you up—”

“You joined them, once,” Luke hissed, crossing his arms over his chest.

Vlad got a pinched look on his face. “I wasn’t exactly sober that time. We were celebrating my birthday and one thing led to another. You were an easy target.”

Luke chuckled. “Is that your idea of an apology? Because if it is, you’re doing it

wrong.”

Vlad shrugged, his shoulders hunching a little. “I’m not trying to apologize or pretend to be a better man than I am. I’ve done far worse things than roughing someone up, and if I apologized for all of them, we’ll be here all night.” His gaze flicked to Sebastian for a fraction of a second before settling back on Luke. “Recently someone told me I was a bully. Maybe they were right. But what happened back in Russia was a singular lapse of judgment, not something that happened regularly—Roman would have fired me a long time ago if it was. So you can stop looking at me like I’m going to jump you and beat you up. I won’t, no matter how much I disliked you.”

Luke bit his lip. “Disliked me? Past tense?”

Vlad rolled his eyes, smiling at Luke. “Can’t stand the thought of someone not being wrapped around your little finger whenever you bat your pretty eyelashes?”

Luke scowled, but his lips were twitching up.

Sebastian watched the exchange, his stomach twisted into unpleasant knots. When he realized what exactly the ugly emotion was, Sebastian looked away, freaked out. He couldn’t really be stupid enough to get jealous over Vlad. He wasn’t.

But he couldn’t deny that he didn’t like watching Vlad smile at Luke the way he never smiled at him, Sebastian, and he didn’t like Vlad noticing that Luke’s eyelashes were pretty.

Fuck, he was being ridiculous. Of course Luke’s eyelashes were pretty; Luke was probably the prettiest bloke Sebastian knew, with the exception of Tristan DuVal. Of course Vlad noticed how pretty Luke was: he wasn’t blind, and he was gay, no matter what Vlad told himself.

Maybe Vlad even secretly fancied Luke and that was the reason for his antagonism toward him.

His cat yowled protestingly when Sebastian crushed her too tightly to his chest. He forced himself to relax his grip.

“All right, I’ll go,” Sebastian said awkwardly, feeling like it was secondary school all over again and he was the invisible, geeky loser. “Bye, Luke. Thanks for everything!”

He got into the lift before either of them could say anything.

Once inside, he banged his head against the wall and sighed.

“This was pathetic,” he told Hermione, pressing his cheek to hers. “I’m such a loser.”

It didn’t seem to matter how good he looked now; he would always feel like an ugly duckling at heart. Yes, it was obvious Vlad had been attracted to him, but it was just that, a superficial attraction to a good-looking guy. He was nothing special for Vlad. It could have been anyone.

He was nothing special.

Chapter 18

“Have you spoken to your friend?”

Luke lifted his gaze from his laptop and settled it on Vlad.

The Russian was lounging on the couch, his eyes fixed on his phone. Luke studied him with interest. Ever since they had talked and cleared the air between them a week ago, Luke felt much more comfortable in Vlad’s presence, but they weren’t exactly

friends and he still couldn't get a good read on him.

"What friend?" Luke said. "I have lots of friends."

"Sebastian," Vlad said, his tone casual, perhaps too casual.

Luke eyed him curiously. He wasn't blind: he had noticed that there was something going on between his grumpy bodyguard and Sebastian. Luke couldn't say he approved—he thought it would end in tears for Sebastian—but then again, everyone told him the same thing about Roman, and Luke had never been happier. Sure, Roman wasn't an easy man to be with, but Luke felt good with him. Good, safe, and so very in love.

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Forcing himself to stop thinking about Roman, Luke focused his attention back on Vlad.

“Yes,” he said innocently, biting back a smile when Vlad’s jaw clenched. The guy clearly wasn’t happy about the brevity of his answer.

Seven seconds passed before Vlad finally spoke again.

“He hasn’t come over,” Vlad said, his eyes still on his phone.

“No,” Luke confirmed, looking away for a moment to hide another smile. “Did you expect him to come over often? We aren’t really that kind of friends. He’s busy with Tristan’s fashion line, I think.”

Vlad said nothing.

Luke studied his hard profile. Although Vlad didn’t unnerve him anymore, he couldn’t help noticing that there was a coiled promise of violence in the line of his body. Luke wondered what kind of life Vlad had led for that tension to be so deeply ingrained in his mannerisms even while Vlad was supposedly relaxed and safe. Vlad was different from Roman in that regard: Roman was all controlled power and dominance, while Vlad gave off tense, aggressive vibes, as if he might explode any moment. Having seen what Vlad was capable of, it made Luke a little wary, although he knew Vlad wouldn’t put a finger on him.

“Do you like Sebastian?” Luke said, against his better judgment.

Vlad's shoulders stiffened, even the illusion of him being relaxed gone. Luke kind of expected Vlad to deny having any homosexual inclinations, so he was very surprised when Vlad simply said,

“No.”

His curiosity spiking, Luke said, “Did you forget I saw you and him? Kissing?”

Once again, he waited for “I’m not a faggot” or another homophobic slur.

Vlad surprised him again. “You’re such a kid,” he said, without scorn. “You don’t have to ‘like’ someone to kiss them.”

Luke rolled his eyes. If he had a penny for every time someone underestimated his experience or his age, he would be the richest man on Earth.

“You know, I wasn’t exactly enamored with Roman the first time we had sex,” Luke said. When Vlad turned his head to him, Luke smiled, amused. “Did you really think I was so gullible? Roman hated my father and I knew he was using me.” He cocked his head. “Actually, compared to that, I don’t understand why you and Sebastian didn’t get along from the beginning—”

“He fucked my girlfriend while I was babysitting you in Switzerland,” Vlad said flatly.

Luke blinked. That was news to him. He hadn’t even known Vlad had a girlfriend.

“That doesn’t sound like Sebastian,” he said, his brows furrowing. “I mean, he does sleep around, but he’s not an asshole. He doesn’t fuck with other people’s relationships.” He paused. “So you had met him before you came to London?”

“Yes. I went to his hotel in Moscow, wanted to teach him a lesson.”

Luke winced, glancing at Vlad’s massive fists. Sebastian wasn’t a small man by any means, but he was no match for that kind of brutal strength. After seeing Vlad’s fists in action against those homophobic lunatics, Luke knew Vlad hadn’t used even half of his strength against him—Luke wouldn’t have been alive if he had.

“Did you?” Luke asked.

“No,” Vlad said gruffly. “He pissed me off so much I...” Licking his lips, he averted his gaze. “He distracted me.”

“How?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Clearly that was all Vlad was going to say on the subject.

“Seb is very handsome,” Luke said, a little wistfully. He’d always been a bit envious of Sebastian’s looks. Sebastian managed to look beautiful and strong. No one would call Sebastian a cute kid. He was only a couple of years older than Luke, but people thought he was years older and far more mature than him. Although Luke no longer had any hang-ups about not looking very manly, sometimes he wished to be taken more seriously. It would have certainly made his job much easier.

Luke looked at Vlad. “Don’t you think so? That he’s handsome?”

“He’s...” Vlad’s jaw clenched. “He’s very—” He cut off whatever he was going to say and pursed his lips.

“He’s very handsome,” Luke said.

“He’s not that handsome,” Vlad grumbled. “He looks like Snow White.”

Luke chuckled. "You're saying it like it's a bad thing."

"He's very pale. His eyes are too dark in contrast. His lips are so red they look painted."

Luke hummed noncommittally, covering his mouth with his hand to hide his smile.

"His ass is huge," Vlad said. "He has chicken legs."

"Yeah, he looks positively tragic."

Vlad peered at him suspiciously and scowled when Luke finally broke into helpless giggles.

"Come on, you like him, admit it!"

"I don't," Vlad said tightly. "I don't like him the way you're implying. He pisses me off most of the time."

"Which way do you like him, then?" Luke said, unwilling to drop the subject while Vlad seemed uncharacteristically talkative.

Vlad glared at him. "I said I didn't like him."

"You said you didn't like him the way I was implying," Luke said, smiling. "Which means you like him in some way."

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“That’s not what I meant,” Vlad gritted out, his accent suddenly much thicker. “I’m not a native speaker, you misunderstood me.”

Luke raised his eyebrows. “That’s awfully convenient. You’re forgetting I’m in a relationship with a Russian. Roman plays the foreigner card when it suits him, too. Come on, spill.”

Vlad heaved an irritated sigh, turning his face away. “Drop it. And don’t compare us to you and Roman.”

Luke grinned. “Us?”

Vlad shot him a withering look and closed his eyes demonstratively.

For a while, he was silent.

“The police thinks a few minor members of the cult might still be out there,” he said at last. “That’s why I asked about him. That’s all.”

Luke frowned. “You think Sebastian might still be in danger?”

“Maybe,” Vlad said, without opening his eyes. “Crazy fanatics are the hardest to predict.”

Luke studied him, but it was impossible to tell whether Vlad considered the danger serious or not.

“Maybe you should go check on Sebastian,” Luke said slowly. When Vlad didn’t react, he decided to make it an order. “I want you to go check on Sebastian. Make sure his place is secure.”

Vlad opened his eyes. He looked toward the private lift before dropping his gaze and shaking his head. “I’ll go after you go to bed. It’s safer that way.”

“Go now,” Luke said. He knew Vlad had installed some complicated security system in the flat in case Vlad had to leave him alone at night. Vlad had never used it before, because with the exception of the trip to Sebastian’s hometown, he was adamant about staying close 24/7 even though it wasn’t required by his contract. Roman had been right that Vlad was nothing if not dedicated to the job, going above and beyond requirements. “I’ll stay put,” Luke said. “You can go now.”

“I’ll go after you go to bed,” Vlad said with finality.

Luke eyed him for a moment before nodding and standing up. “I’m going to bed, then.”

Vlad looked at him suspiciously. “After I turn on the security system, you won’t be able to leave your room without tripping it.”

Luke shrugged and faked a yawn. “I’m really beat,” he said, and headed to his bedroom.

By the time Luke emerged out of the en-suite, Vlad knocked on the door and said, “You can’t leave your bedroom until my return.”

“Okay,” Luke said, climbing into his very soft, very empty bed. He sighed. “Vlad?”

“What?” Vlad said, his impatience barely concealed.

“When was the last time you spoke with Roman?” Luke said, without looking at Vlad. “He hasn’t called me in two days.” He had been wanting to ask Vlad all day, but his pride hadn’t let him. He didn’t want to seem like a clingy baby. He had hoped Roman would call by the evening—he had promised to call every day—and there wouldn’t be a need to ask Vlad. Except Roman hadn’t called. He had never missed a call before.

There was a pause before Vlad replied, “Three days ago.”

Luke closed his eyes, biting his lip hard.

“It’s not the first time Roman has gone missing for a few days,” Vlad said gruffly. “Stop being a worry-wart.”

Was he actually trying to comfort Luke?

“Thanks,” Luke said with a small smile. Roman was right: Vlad wasn’t that bad.

Vlad just grunted and shut the door.

Hugging his pillow, Luke squeezed his eyes shut and told himself to stop being stupid. Vlad was right. Roman was fine. He was probably worrying over nothing. Please let me be worried over nothing.

At times like this, Luke almost wondered whether it was worth it. But then he thought of Roman’s arms around him, his masculine, comforting scent, his firm lips, his beard tickling Luke’s face—and missed him so badly that something hurt deep inside him.

“Come back,” he whispered, barely audibly.

Trying to distract himself, Luke thought about Sebastian and Vlad. Truth be told, he

wasn't all that sure he'd done the right thing by urging Vlad to go check on Sebastian. He could see that Vlad had some sort of feelings for Sebastian—it had been impossible to be in the same room as those two and remain oblivious to the thick, almost suffocating sexual tension between them—but Luke wasn't sure Vlad and Sebastian could ever work. There was something disturbing about the way Vlad looked at Sebastian: like he hated him and craved him at the same time. Taking Vlad's deeply ingrained homophobia into consideration, it was a recipe for disaster. Luke could only hope he hadn't made a huge mistake and things wouldn't turn ugly at Sebastian's flat.

Chapter 19

Roman was going to kill him if something happened to his precious boy while Vlad was out. It didn't matter that the danger was minimal after the cult had been caught (he might have exaggerated a little when he'd told Luke about the police's concerns) and the security in Luke's building was top-notch. No security system was impenetrable. Not to mention that it was a little worrying that Roman hadn't contacted either of them in a few days.

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He shouldn't have been here. He should have stayed close to Luke and waited for news from Roman instead of stalking Sebastian Sumner. Stalking was probably too soft a word. He was being a total creep.

Because breaking into someone's flat and watching them sleep was pretty damn creepy, even by his pretty low standards.

Vlad stared at the sleeping man, trying to fight the resentment growing inside him. Rationally, he knew that this...obsession wasn't Sebastian's fault. He was a grown man, and he was the one responsible for his failings and for his lack of control. It wasn't Sebastian's fault that all this week he had felt like crawling out of his skin, wanting to see him.

It hadn't been an easy thing to accept. Vlad had been forced to stop living in denial when he'd caught himself expecting—wanting—to see Sebastian curled on Luke's couch, his face buried in a thick book, chewing on his thumb whenever something interesting was happening in the book. Vlad hadn't realized that he had mentally cataloged Sebastian's every little quirk—that he had spent an unhealthy amount of time watching Sebastian—until he found himself with too much time and nothing to do while Luke worked in his study. He could no longer deny he had liked watching Sebastian, liked looking at him, as if Sebastian was a beautiful piece of art. Vlad didn't like to think what it meant, because neither of the conclusions he had come to was particularly comfortable.

Sebastian mumbled something sleepily and shifted in his sleep, rolling from his stomach onto his back. The sheets fell to his thighs.

Light gleamed off the muscles of Sebastian's arms, the sculpted lines of his torso. Vlad swallowed. Damn him. Damn him for falling asleep with the lights on. Had it been dark, Vlad wouldn't be able to see his long eyelashes casting thick shadows across his cheekbones, or that lovely mouth, parted slightly. He looked so fucking edible. Vlad had always thought it was a hyperbole when people said someone looked delicious. It wasn't a hyperbole. Vlad felt almost physically hungry, all but drooling, his cock hard just from looking at the sleeping young man.

Dirty, perverted, sick, his inner voice whispered, sounding suspiciously like his uncle.

Shame curled low in his gut, but it couldn't overpower the heady, mindless want his body ached with.

It's sick.

Vlad wanted him.

It's a perversion.

He wanted him.

It's depraved and wicked.

He wanted him.

Vlad wrapped a hand around Sebastian's shapely, muscular ankle. "Wake up."

Sebastian stirred, muttered something, and continued sleeping.

Vlad stroked the ankle and said, louder, "Sebastian."

“What?” Sebastian mumbled, his eyes closed. “Sleeping. Go away.”

“I want you,” Vlad said.

For a few moments, there was no reaction from the other man.

Then, Sebastian opened his eyes blearily and stared at him with confusion. “Vlad? What are you—How did you...?” His eyes narrowed, his expression becoming more alert. “Wait. Did you break into my flat?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?” Sebastian spluttered. “And you see nothing wrong with it? What is wrong with you?”

Vlad found himself smiling. “It’s one of the mildest crimes I’ve ever committed, actually.”

“You realize that’s not very reassuring, right?” Sebastian said, sitting up. Dark strands of hair fell over his eyes.

“Not trying to be reassuring,” Vlad said, and started unbuttoning his shirt.

Sebastian watched him with wide eyes. “What are you doing?” he whispered, licking his lips.

“Undressing.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Vlad said, unbuckling his belt.

Sebastian's dark eyes fixated on his fingers as they unzipped his fly. "I don't understand," he said helplessly, sounding like a confused child. Gone was the confident, experienced, unashamedly promiscuous man. Sebastian looked wide-eyed and vulnerable.

Vlad wanted to kiss him.

Dirty, perverted, sick.

Vlad ignored the insistent voice. He could—would—feel shame later. Right now he wanted to get between those thighs and kiss that mouth.

Down to his boxers, Vlad got in the bed, tugged Sebastian to him until he was half in Vlad's lap, and put his hands on Sebastian's bare shoulders. "Look," Vlad said, holding Sebastian's wide-eyed gaze. "I know you don't like me. I know you said you didn't want to deal with my bullshit. After meeting Fletcher, I get it. I'm not much better than him. I'm no good for you. I probably remind you of every shitty, painful thing he's done. I get it."

Sebastian's dark brows furrowed. "What are you saying?"

"I'm being honest with you," Vlad said, his thumbs stroking the smooth skin of Sebastian's throat. Sebastian seemed to be one of those rare dark-haired men who didn't need to shave all that much. Vlad's gaze moved up Sebastian's neck. He cleared his throat, tearing his eyes away from Sebastian's mouth. "I'm saying you were right: I am the asshole and bully you accused me of being." He met Sebastian's gaze again. "I'm saying I want you, even though I'm not entirely okay with it. I don't want to want you. That's the truth. You should probably kick me out, because I look at you and want you and want to fuck you up for making me like this."

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“I didn’t make you into anything,” Sebastian said. “You were just repressed as hell. It could have been anyone.”

“Maybe,” Vlad conceded. “But there’s this thing in me that blames you, because it’s not just anyone who makes me feel like a horny, obsessed schoolboy with one track mind. It’s you.”

Sebastian looked at him unblinkingly, a faint blush appearing on his pale cheeks. “I still don’t get where you’re going with this. Did you come here to beat me up? Again?”

“I came here because I couldn’t fucking stay away,” Vlad said, fingers stroking Sebastian’s throat. He wanted to suck a collar of bite marks around that neck, see how much suction it took to make Sebastian’s pale skin bloom in bruises. “I want you. I want to put my cock in you and keep putting it in you until I get sick of it, until I’m cured of this—this obsession with you. But I don’t want to be an asshole. I want to make sure you understand that I’m not—that this isn’t more than that.” He looked Sebastian in the eye. “Kick me out now if you aren’t okay with it.”

He watched Sebastian’s Adam’s apple move.

He couldn’t read Sebastian’s face as he said, “You’re saying you want no-strings-attached sex. You basically want to fuck me out of your system.”

It sounded like a statement, but Vlad responded, “Yes.”

“Because you have too much baggage and you can’t offer more.”

“Yes.”

“And if—if I agree to this, I won’t have to deal with your gay freak-outs. You will go freak out about it somewhere else.”

“Essentially.”

“And you won’t take out your anger on me.”

Vlad winced inwardly. That wouldn’t be easy, but he was determined not to do it.
“No.”

“You won’t make feel like shit. No more homophobic slurs.”

Vlad looked Sebastian in the eye. “I’ll try.”

“I...” Sebastian chewed on his lip. “I don’t know.” He smiled a little crookedly. “This is kind of unexpected. I expected you to be too deep in denial to even admit you were attracted to me. I definitely didn’t expect to have a serious, adult talk with you that didn’t end in insults.”

Vlad smiled back. “The night is still young.”

Sebastian laughed. Immediately, he flushed, covering his mouth with his hand, clearly self-conscious about his awkward squawk of a laugh.

Vlad found himself smiling wider. It was a relief to see that Sebastian didn’t have a perfect, beautiful laugh to match his looks.

“So,” Vlad said, keeping his hands still with conscious effort on his part. They wanted to wander and touch all that exposed smooth skin.

“So,” Sebastian repeated, putting his hands on Vlad’s bare chest. Vlad’s heart thundered under his palm. Sebastian lifted his gaze and wet his lips with his tongue. “No strings attached?”

“No strings attached,” Vlad said, his eyes dropping to Sebastian’s lips.

Sebastian was the one to lean in and fit their mouths together—and the tension that had Vlad’s insides twisted up all week finally bled out. This was what he’d been craving, that mouth. Cradling Sebastian’s face, Vlad kissed him back thoroughly, curling his tongue around Sebastian’s.

“Fuck,” Sebastian said when they finally parted for air. He was breathing hard, eyes glassy, lips red and shiny with spit.

“Yeah,” Vlad croaked, staring.

They moved as one, smashing their lips together again, hungry, impatient, and clumsy. Moaning, Sebastian moved fully into Vlad’s lap, their bare chests pressing together and causing delicious tremors all over Vlad’s body. Fuck, Vlad had never wanted to consume a person like this, lay them out and have them in every way a person could be had. He wanted to understand Sebastian’s mind, wanted to mark him up from head to toe, get inside him and thrust, thrust, thrust.

“Want you,” Vlad said, nibbling along Sebastian’s jawline. “Wanna fuck you. Please.”

“Okay,” Sebastian said, falling back on the mattress and pulling Vlad on top of him.

The foreplay was short, clumsy and impatient. Vlad would have been embarrassed if Sebastian wasn’t equally awkward and impatient. They kissed and groped each other like horny adolescents, moaning and panting into each other’s mouths.

“Suck my cock?” Sebastian murmured against his lips, sending a shock of arousal through Vlad’s body.

He looked down at the red, hard cock standing proud against Sebastian’s abs. It looked so...depraved. His mouth watered.

Vlad leaned down and swallowed as much of the cock as he could. Sebastian whined above him, fingers digging into Vlad’s shoulders, spurring him on. Vlad closed his eyes and sucked.

Faggot, the familiar voice in his head said. Cocksucker.

Ignoring it, Vlad sucked harder, oddly turned on by the obscenity of the act. He liked the way the cock stretched his lips, the taste of it, the scent of male arousal. Sucking cock felt wrong but right at the same time—satisfying—and he found himself moaning around the length. His fingers massaged Sebastian’s thighs as he bobbed his head up and down, enjoying the sounds coming from his mouth as he sucked, licked, and hummed around the cock, ignoring his own, which was painfully hard, too.

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“Stop, stop,” Sebastian croaked suddenly, pushing him off. “Don’t wanna come like that.” He pushed his briefs lower and kicked them off. “C’mere, get me lube from the drawer.”

Vlad couldn’t remember getting his own underwear off, his vision tunneling on Sebastian as the other man prepped himself hurriedly, but at some point, he must have done it, because his cock was out and pushing inside Sebastian’s glistening hole. Sebastian’s lovely thighs squeezed around him, long legs hooked around Vlad’s waist.

They both groaned, panting against each other’s mouths, bodies locked together. Fuck, if there was heaven, it must feel like this. Vlad didn’t want to ever pull out.

Torn between wanting to grab Sebastian’s hips and just fuck him into the mattress, and taking it maddeningly slow to draw out the pleasure as long as he could, Vlad kissed Sebastian deeply. Sebastian dug his fingers into his shoulders, whining.

Hint taken.

Gritting his teeth, Vlad pulled out and slammed in. Sebastian moaned and arched under him. Vlad quickly found the rhythm that suited them best, a frenzied, hungry rhythm that lacked elegance, not that either of them cared.

“S’good,” Sebastian gasped out, his eyes glassy and unseeing. He was a fucking vision like this, and Vlad propped himself up on an elbow to stare at him as he fucked him. He’d never felt so...obsessed with anyone he fucked. So enamored. So drunk on lust and want.

For the first time he got why porn stars said all those ridiculous cheesy lines. “Tell me how much you love my cock,” Vlad said, his hips moving out of their own volition as his eyes fixated on the man under him.

Sebastian let out a hoarse laugh. “Seriously?” he rasped out, his words turning into a long moan when Vlad nailed his sweet spot. Vlad remembered how good it had felt when a cock brushed against that spot inside him. If he hadn’t wanted to fuck his way into Sebastian so badly, he would have made Sebastian fuck him. Maybe later, after he sated the desire to pound into Sebastian, to own him and fuck him up—if he ever sated that desire.

“Say it,” Vlad said, hissing at the perfect tightness around him as he hit Sebastian’s prostate again, and again, and again.

“Love your cock,” Sebastian mumbled finally, his face flushed and eyes rolled into the back of his head. “Love it so much—so perfect—so good.”

Fuck, he looked high, as if Vlad’s cock was truly the best thing he’d ever felt, as if he’d die if Vlad ever stopped.

“Say you’re a slut for it,” Vlad said, thrusting harder and feeling drugged, reckless, and invincible.

“I’m a slut for it,” Sebastian mumbled. “Slut for cock.”

“For my cock,” Vlad bit out, barely holding back his orgasm.

“Your cock,” Sebastian murmured, looking completely out of it. “Love it. Wanna have it inside me all the time.”

Fucking hell.

Vlad snapped his hips forward a few more times before slamming his cock full force into Sebastian and growling as he came, his world going black for a moment.

Once he somewhat recovered, he found that he had Sebastian pinned beneath him. Sebastian was whining, grinding his erection against Vlad's thigh. Before he could think twice, Vlad wrapped his hand around Sebastian's cock. It took only a few firm strokes before Sebastian was coming, too, with a low-pitched moan.

"We're totally doing this again," Sebastian said with a slightly mad smile.

Vlad could only nod and press his face into Sebastian's chest, breathing him in. The smell of sex and fresh sweat shouldn't have been so pleasant. The voice in the back of his head whispered that this was sick and deviant, but he couldn't bring himself to care when his whole body sang with satisfaction and pleasure.

He knew he would care later.

Just not now.

Chapter 20

Sebastian wiped his hands on the apron and looked at his creation. The cake wasn't much to look at, but it smelled delicious and he was positive he had nailed the recipe his mother had sent him.

Some people would probably think he was crazy, but baking was his favorite activity when he felt nervous. And he did feel a little anxious that evening, glancing at the clock every few minutes.

He wasn't sure Vlad would come. They had made no arrangements last night. Vlad had been long gone by the time Sebastian woke up this morning, and now Sebastian

wasn't sure what to expect. Was Vlad planning to come over every night? Was he coming back at all? Despite Vlad's words, Sebastian half-expected Vlad to freak out and change his mind.

It was ten in the evening already. Surely Vlad wouldn't come.

The doorbell rang.

Right.

"Don't eat the cake," Sebastian told the cat and went to open the door.

Vlad stood on the other side.

Sebastian wet his lips, taking Vlad in. He wasn't used to seeing Vlad in anything other than black suits, black jeans and black undershirts. Now he was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a very soft-looking dark blue pullover that accentuated the width of his shoulders and the color of his blue, blue eyes—eyes that immediately fixated on Sebastian. It was so easy to get lost in those eyes, in that look. Like everyone, Sebastian liked being the center of someone's universe, and Vlad could deliver that with a single glance. He loved this—being the focus of Vlad's undivided attention.

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“Um, hi,” Sebastian said, realizing he’d been just staring at Vlad in silence.

Vlad finally tore his gaze from his face to sweep it over his body. His lips twitched. “Nice outfit.”

Sebastian flushed, remembering that he was wearing only an oversized black t-shirt and an apron with the words “The prettiest cook” on it.

“It was Julia’s last year’s Christmas present,” he said defensively, taking the apron off. He regretted it immediately. Now he felt almost naked, self-conscious that his t-shirt did nothing to cover his bare legs. “I’ll go put on some jeans,” he said, pointing awkwardly toward his bedroom.

Vlad glanced at his legs and looked away quickly. “Yeah, do that.”

Relieved, Sebastian fled into his bedroom. After putting on a pair of jeans, he took a few breaths to calm himself, glanced at the mirror, groaned at the bird’s nest on his head and quickly tied his hair into a bun. A few dark locks escaped it, falling onto his neck, but Sebastian let them be, figuring he couldn’t hide in his bedroom any longer or Vlad might get the wrong impression: that he wanted to look good for him. Which he didn’t. Obviously. They were casual fuck-buddies.

When Sebastian returned to the living room, he found Vlad looking around, taking in the interior with a keen eye.

“It’s not much compared to Luke’s place,” Sebastian said, shifting from one foot to the other. “I’m no billionaire. As someone said, being professionally good-looking

isn't a very lucrative job for men."

"You're not doing too badly," Vlad said, glancing around.

Sebastian shrugged. "I can't complain. I'm paid better than most male models. But I have friends who are struggling and forced to take odd jobs." He picked up his phone from the table and looked at it just to have something to do. Fuck, he didn't remember his casual relationships ever being so awkward. For some reason, this felt different. He had never felt so off balance. It didn't help that up until this point most of his sexual encounters with Vlad had started with a fight. He didn't know how to behave in a situation like this. Should they go straight to the bedroom? Should he kiss Vlad? Or would it be too weird?

"Is there..." Sebastian said before schooling his face into neutrality and setting his phone down. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, thank you."

Sebastian led Vlad into the kitchen, feeling Vlad's heavy gaze on him and trying not to fidget too much. Maybe he should have just kissed him. He wanted to kiss him.

"Have a seat," Sebastian said, putting a kettle on.

Vlad picked up Hermione and took a seat at the table. "She's fatter," he said, stroking her belly with his strong, big fingers.

Sebastian tried and failed not to get jealous of his cat. He kind of wanted to take his cat's place on Vlad's lap, put his hands under that soft pullover, and lick along Vlad's square jaw before slipping his tongue into Vlad's mouth.

"Don't call her fat," he said belatedly. "She's just a little overweight."

Vlad eyed Hermione speculatively. “Her nipples are enlarged, Sebastian.”

“So? Why are you looking at her nipples anyway?”

Vlad palpated Hermione’s belly and chuckled. “I take it back. She’s not fat. She’s pregnant.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened. “What? No! She can’t be pregnant! She’s still a kitten!” Okay, maybe not a kitten, but she was still really young. Sebastian frowned. “She’s not like that. She doesn’t like boy cats.”

Vlad looked like he wanted to laugh. “I hate to break it to you, but she clearly liked at least one boy cat. She’s very much pregnant. She’s going to have kittens in a few weeks, at most.”

Sebastian sat down heavily. “A few weeks?” he said faintly. “Why didn’t I know that? How do you know that?”

Vlad was smiling—a wide, open, amused smile that made Sebastian a little breathless, distracting him from the crisis at hand.

“I grew up on a farm,” Vlad said. “We had plenty of cats and no vets. You learn to recognize these things.”

“But...” Sebastian looked at Hermione. “Are you absolutely sure?”

Vlad nodded. “You should have...” He paused, clearly searching for a word in English.

“Spayed her?” Sebastian said, scrunching his nose up. “I know I probably should have, but I felt sorry for her and she was just a kitten.” He felt himself blush. “Stop

looking at me that way. I feel like an idiot as it is. I thought she was just getting fat.”

Vlad gave a laugh. “Really? I thought she was just a little overweight.”

Sebastian glared at him but soon joined Vlad, laughing at himself.

He stopped laughing when he noticed Vlad’s stare. “What?”

Vlad said, “I like you.”

Sebastian’s breath caught in his throat. “You like me?”

“Yeah,” Vlad said, smirking. “You’re a little ridiculous, a little pretentious, but you’re all right.”

Oh.

Sebastian gave Vlad a small smile, feeling ridiculously flustered and annoyed with himself for that.

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“I guess you aren’t that bad, either,” he said, biting his thumb.

Vlad’s blue eyes followed the gesture.

Vlad set Hermione down on the floor and said, “Come here.”

Sebastian’s heart jumped into his throat. Finally. He went, his knees a little weak.

He straddled Vlad’s lap.

Vlad put his hands on Sebastian’s lower back.

They looked each other in the eye.

Their uneven breathing was all Sebastian could hear.

“So I guess you still want me,” he murmured.

“Yes,” Vlad said and kissed him.

Vlad fucked him right there, on the kitchen table, fast and hard and earth-shatteringly good. The cake was ruined, but Sebastian couldn’t bring himself to care as he came with his legs wrapped around Vlad’s back and Vlad’s tongue in his mouth.

After that, they moved to the bedroom, where Vlad buried his face in the pillow as Sebastian fucked him from behind.

Afterward, they lay next to each other in companionable silence, sated and spent.

Sebastian didn't remember falling asleep, but when he opened his eyes, he was alone.

Vlad was gone.

* * *

It was far less awkward after that.

Vlad came over every night. Most nights they said very little to each other, letting their bodies do the talking—too impatient and insatiable to talk.

But sometimes they talked.

Sometimes those conversations were fun and light-hearted.

“Let me get this straight,” Vlad said one night as they lay beside each other after the first orgasm of the night. “You’re going to name your cat’s kittens Rose and Hugo. As in, the names of fictional kids of Hermione Granger, the fictional character you named your cat after.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Sebastian said, tucking his face under Vlad’s armpit and breathing in. It should have been gross, but for some reason, it wasn’t. He liked Vlad’s scent there. Loved it. “Personally, I think that’s a brilliant idea.”

“Oh, nothing wrong with it,” Vlad deadpanned. “Except the kittens could be boys. It would be a little awkward to call a boy cat Rose, don’t you think?”

Sebastian pouted and said haughtily, “I don’t believe in gender stereotypes. There’s nothing wrong with calling a boy Rose.”

Vlad gave him an exasperated look. “You’re so fucking ridiculous.” Burying his fingers in Sebastian’s hair, he tilted his face up to kiss him. “So pretentious. Stop talking.”

Sebastian grinned against his lips. “Maybe you should put something in my mouth?”

“Maybe I will,” Vlad said. and did just that.

But sometimes their conversations turned ugly, or rather, the mood turned dark and tense.

Sebastian had always been pretty empathic, and it took all of his self-control not to say anything when he saw the hint of shame and self-loathing on Vlad’s face after sex. It was obvious Vlad hadn’t gotten over his homophobic views—not that Sebastian had expected him to: that kind of homophobia was ingrained too deeply in him to overcome it so easily, if ever. Some people could never overcome their upbringing.

Sebastian had to constantly remind himself it was none of his business. They had agreed that their arrangement was strictly casual and he wouldn’t have to deal with Vlad’s shit. Keeping emotional distance was the sensible thing to do in this situation. Vlad had warned him himself that he couldn’t promise him anything. Vlad would end this thing the moment he fucked his obsession out of his system. Sebastian was grateful for Vlad’s honesty, really. He had already been burned once; he didn’t need another homophobic guy to fuck him up and stomp all over his heart if Sebastian let him in. He couldn’t get too invested in Vlad. It was just sex—really intense, addictive sex, but just sex nonetheless.

That was why he bit his tongue and said nothing when Vlad went very quiet and tense after sex. That was why he said nothing when Vlad fucked him extra hard, his face stony and his blue eyes closed off. That was why he said nothing as Vlad trailed his

fingers over Sebastian's face and chest when he thought Sebastian was asleep. That was why he said nothing when Vlad whispered something in Russian, sounding angry and frustrated.

Some things were better left unsaid.

Chapter 21

Luke was positive Vlad and Sebastian were having an illicit affair. The thought made him giggle—it reminded him of those trashy romance novels he used to read—but “illicit affair” was a perfect expression to define whatever was going on between Vlad and Sebastian. It wasn't that there was something morally wrong with having a sexual relationship between two consenting adults, but Vlad certainly seemed to think so if his efforts to hide their affair from Luke were any indication.

Vlad left Luke's flat only at night, after Luke went to bed, and he was always back before Luke got up in the morning. Luke wouldn't have even known about Vlad's nightly absences if he hadn't checked the security logs. It wasn't hard to figure out where Vlad was going every night considering that lately Vlad looked either well fucked and relaxed or incredibly gloomy and tense.

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“You can talk to me, you know,” Luke said one day as they were having a quiet dinner. Vlad seemed distracted and tense, quieter than usual.

Vlad lifted his gaze from his plate, a wrinkle appearing between his brows. “About what?”

Luke eyed him thoughtfully before coming to the conclusion that Vlad wasn’t yet ready for this conversation. Vlad was clearly struggling with coming to terms with his sexuality and didn’t need to learn that Luke knew about his thing with Sebastian. If Vlad wasn’t comfortable with their relationship himself, he was unlikely to be comfortable with other people knowing about it.

“About anything,” Luke said with a shrug. “You seem tense. Tenser than usual.”

Vlad’s piercing, suspicious gaze nearly made him squirm in his seat.

“I’m concerned for Roman,” Vlad said.

Luke glared at his bodyguard. Vlad knew how worried he was for Roman. Using it to divert Luke’s attention was a dirty tactic—dirty but effective. Luke had been trying to keep his mind occupied with anything but Roman; he’d go crazy with worry otherwise.

“Any news?” Luke said stiffly.

Vlad shook his head. “Not after Anna’s call two days ago. They should still be somewhere up in the mountains. Charves is rumored to have a base there.”

“There’s probably no signal where he’s at,” Luke said with more optimism than he felt.

Vlad nodded curtly, his expression grim.

Luke felt a twinge of guilt for his earlier thoughts. Maybe he was wrong and Vlad really was worried for Roman, too.

“You are not used to this, are you?” Luke said. “You probably hate that instead of being out there you’re stuck bodyguarding me from a non-existent threat.” The last time Roman had contacted them he did say Charves was definitely in Peru and was unlikely to be a threat to Luke.

Vlad shrugged. “It does feel strange. Anna is good, though. She’ll watch his back.” Despite his reassuring words, Vlad still seemed tense and distracted.

Luke was certain there was something else bothering Vlad.

But what?

* * *

Sebastian almost drifted off to sleep when he heard the nearly silent sound of footsteps approaching the bed.

“Your locks are pathetic,” the familiar voice said.

“Stop breaking into my flat,” Sebastian mumbled into the pillow, yawning. “I’m sick of getting my locks fixed.”

“Get good ones.” Vlad switched the bedside lamp on.

Sebastian turned onto his back just as Vlad leaned down to kiss him.

When their lips met, Sebastian sighed, feeling himself melt into the kiss as Vlad kissed him unhurriedly but thoroughly. Sebastian's hands found their way onto Vlad's back and pulled Vlad closer, his mouth opening wider to give Vlad's tongue better access. God, he felt the kiss down to his toes, warmth spreading all over his body. This was just what he needed after such a long day.

But his eyelids were growing heavier and Sebastian pushed Vlad away a little, breaking the kiss.

"You should have called," he said with a yawn, closing his eyes. "I'm too sore and tired for sex." It wasn't strictly true, but he was bone tired after the photo shoot and didn't feel like he was in any state for a few rounds of rough, energetic sex he and Vlad usually had. He felt like being pampered and loved up tonight, but obviously that was out of the question with Vlad.

"Sore?" Vlad said in a strange voice. "Why?"

"Because being a model is actually very tiring, you know," Sebastian said. People often thought that being a model was as easy as having to smile for a few minutes. They didn't realize how long it could take to set up the shots, the lights, the camera, how hard it was to assume some poses and do it again and again and again, until the picture was just right. By the end of the photo shoot, his muscles ached, and not in a good way. "We barely had time to eat."

"We?"

"Antonio and I," Sebastian mumbled with another yawn. "Didn't I tell you we were working together for Tristan's fashion line?"

“You did.”

Sebastian frowned, noticing that Vlad sounded tense. He had to bite back the question on the tip of his tongue. He didn't need to know Vlad's intimate thoughts. He was content to keep it that way.

It was bad enough that he was kind of...addicted to Vlad in the worst possible ways. When Vlad kissed him, he felt worshiped. When Vlad touched him, he melted into the touch, wanting more, more, and more, until their bodies were inside each other. When Vlad stared at him, he felt beautiful and interesting. The latter was particularly intoxicating. He loved how badly Vlad wanted him, loved seeing the reluctant attraction and fascination in Vlad's eyes when he looked at him. Sebastian couldn't explain it. He just knew he got a bit giddy and warm on the inside whenever their eyes locked. It was a heady, addictive feeling—and a dangerous one. He and Vlad were casual fuck-buddies, nothing more.

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Though, sometimes it was hard to stay firm in that belief. It was hard to stay aloof when he could see the turmoil of emotions in Vlad's eyes. No matter what he told himself, he couldn't just turn his emotions off. Although Vlad had kept his word and didn't say anything to him, there was a part of Sebastian that wanted to reach out and comfort him when Vlad felt stressed out, to say that it was okay, that being attracted to men wasn't wrong. He didn't, of course. For one thing, he doubted such an attempt would be well received. For another, Sebastian was terrified. Terrified of getting too attached.

"Antonio is fun," Sebastian murmured. He wanted to open his eyes and look at Vlad but didn't want to risk it. He sucked at resisting Vlad when Vlad looked at him. "It's never boring with him."

"I'm sure," Vlad said with such venom that Sebastian snapped his eyes open. He suddenly remembered that Vlad had heard his phone conversation with Antonio a few weeks ago and knew that he and Antonio were fuck-buddies.

Was Vlad jealous?

The thought made a funny feeling appear in the pit of his stomach.

Sebastian eyed Vlad, his stiff posture and stony face.

Was he jealous?

"He wanted to come over," Sebastian said, watching Vlad carefully. "But I was too sore and didn't feel like getting more sore."

Not a single muscle moved on Vlad's face. Sebastian's stomach dropped and he realized he had wanted Vlad to be jealous. It was stupid, but he had wanted it. He had wanted Vlad to explode with rage, grab him and kiss him, and say Sebastian was his and only his—

What in the actual fuck? He'd always despised possessiveness, had always thought he was nobody's possession, and now he wanted Vlad to go all possessive over him?

"I'm sure he can come over another day," Vlad said tonelessly, not even looking at Sebastian. He didn't seem bothered at all. And why would he? Sebastian was just a casual fuck, nothing more. Unlike him, Vlad didn't seem to have a problem remembering it.

"Yeah," Sebastian said, anger tightening his throat muscles. God, he was such an idiot. "Maybe tomorrow. I'll invite him over tomorrow."

Vlad pressed his lips and gave a curt nod. "I won't bother you anymore, then." He turned away swiftly and grabbed his jacket from the chair.

Panic bubbled up inside him. Was he leaving for good? Would he ever be back?

"Wait," Sebastian blurted out, hating himself a little for it. When Vlad turned to him, Sebastian looked at Vlad from under his eyelashes. "You can come, too. Tomorrow."

Vlad went very still. "What?"

Fuck, was he really suggesting a threesome with Antonio? But he had painted himself into a corner. He couldn't back out now.

Sebastian forced out a smile. "If Antonio comes, it doesn't mean you can't, too. The more the merrier, right? It will be fun. Tony lives for casual sex and would be fine

with it.”

Vlad stared at him. Sebastian couldn’t read his face at all.

At last, Vlad nodded tersely and walked out of the room.

Sebastian was left blinking after him, feeling lost. How had they gone from having delicious, toe-curling kisses to agreeing to have a threesome with another man?

And what’s wrong with a threesome?

Sebastian frowned, chewing on his lip. Threesomes could be fun. He had participated in a few of them in the past, but...But.

He didn’t think Vlad was comfortable enough with his sexuality to participate in a threesome with another man. Vlad wouldn’t be comfortable touching another man. Or kissing another man, or paying attention to someone other than him, Sebastian—

Sebastian groaned aloud. Seriously? Jealousy and possessiveness had no place in a casual relationship. This was bad.

So, so bad.

Chapter 22

Antonio Bonaventura was a tall, dark-haired man with olive skin, very white teeth, and a charming smile.

Vlad disliked him immediately.

Antonio smiled at Vlad, giving him an appreciative once-over before shaking his

hand firmly. His thumb caressed Vlad's wrist. "You can call me Tony."

Sebastian cleared his throat, putting a hand on Vlad's bicep. "So, this is Vlad, my..." He trailed off, his brows furrowing. "Friend," he finished eventually.

Antonio chuckled. "A friend like me, right, bello?" He winked at Sebastian, slinging an arm around his shoulders and kissing the corner of Sebastian's mouth.

Vlad forced himself to unclench his fists. He looked away, wondering what he was even doing there. He shouldn't have come. The mere idea of sex with that guy turned his stomach with unease and faint disgust. For all the doubts that filled his mind after sex with Sebastian, touching and kissing Sebastian never made him uneasy.

He wanted to leave.

Except he didn't want to leave Sebastian alone with that slimy Italian. He hated the way the Italian looked at Sebastian, undressing him with his eyes.

Soon he will be literally undressing him.

Vlad ground his teeth and told himself he didn't care. No strings attached: that was what they had agreed on. They didn't owe each other anything. Sebastian could touch anyone he wanted. Any other man—or woman—could touch Sebastian. Vlad didn't have the prerogative.

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Antonio's hand moved down Sebastian's back.

Vlad took a step toward them and then forced himself to stop. Sebastian didn't belong to him. He had no claim. He didn't want any claim.

Still chatting with Antonio, Sebastian shot him a look Vlad couldn't quite read.

Antonio's hand moved lower. The Italian leaned into Sebastian, smiling. His lips touched Sebastian's. He was kissing Sebastian, kissing Sebastian's sweet, perfect mouth, groping him, pulling him close—

Vlad's control snapped.

He hauled the fucker off Sebastian and tossed him away. Antonio collided with a chair and fell on the floor, cursing in Italian and glowering at Vlad. "What the fuck?" he growled, getting to his feet with a grunt. "What's wrong with your pet Russian, Sebastian?"

"Get out," Vlad told the Italian.

Antonio scoffed and took a step toward him. "You think you can just—"

"I think you'd better go, Tony," Sebastian said, looking at Vlad oddly.

"Are you serious?" Antonio snapped.

"Yes," Sebastian said. "I'm sorry, I'll explain later."

“You’d better!” Antonio huffed, grabbed his coat, and stormed out.

“Well, what was that?” Sebastian said after the door slammed shut.

His lips were red and shiny from Antonio’s mouth.

Vlad yanked him close and smashed their lips together in a bruising kiss. Every cell in his body seemed to be straining to get closer to Sebastian, press against him, sink inside him, melt and fuse together until Sebastian was branded with Vlad’s name from the inside.

When he finally let Sebastian breathe, Sebastian stared at him dazedly, two red spots on his pale cheeks.

“You will tell the Italian he can’t touch you anymore,” Vlad said.

Sebastian’s eyes cleared a little. “I will? And why would I do that?”

Vlad opened his mouth and closed it. He said gruffly, “Because he tastes disgusting and your mouth stinks of him.”

Sebastian smiled. “So, theoretically, if I find someone who doesn’t taste disgusting, you’ll be fine with it?”

Vlad glowered. “You’re such a little shit,” he said and gave Sebastian another bruising kiss.

Sebastian was grinning. “I’m six feet tall. Hardly little.”

“You’re still a little shit,” Vlad said and kissed him again, softer this time. God, he couldn’t get enough.

When they broke the kiss, Sebastian looked at him seriously. “We are not exclusive, Vlad. Casual fuck-buddies, remember?”

Vlad’s fingers dug into Sebastian’s sides. “Sure.”

“Then what was that?” Sebastian said. Despite his words, he didn’t look angry. His expression was soft, his lips folded into a pout.

Vlad wanted to kiss him.

“I’m an uneducated possessive caveman, remember?” he said, forcing lightness into his voice. “That’s why we met, after all.”

Sebastian worried his lip, a mix of conflicting emotions appearing on his face. “That’s different. Nina was your girlfriend of two years. I’m not. I’m just a guy you’ve been fucking for a month.”

Vlad didn’t know what to say to that. Sebastian was right. He had no right to feel like Sebastian’s skin and mouth were only his to kiss. They weren’t, and he’d better remember that. He was the one who had told Sebastian this was just a casual arrangement.

“Look,” Sebastian said. “I know I shouldn’t have pushed you into this threesome thing. I knew you were nowhere ready. But you can’t do this, either—can’t act like a jealous boyfriend. It really fucks with my head. Don’t do that, okay? Don’t complicate it.”

Vlad nodded stiffly.

“Good. Now let’s go to bed,” Sebastian said with a soft smile, grabbing Vlad’s hand and pulling him toward the bedroom. Vlad let him, noting that despite his

admonishing words, the little shit looked very pleased by Vlad's jealous outburst.

Instead of making him feel better about the whole thing, it made Vlad feel like the scum of the earth. He was fucking it up for both of them. Casual fuck-buddies didn't feel possessiveness. Casual fuck-buddies didn't attack another man for touching their fuck-buddy. Sebastian should have kicked him out immediately instead of being secretly pleased, or Vlad should have put an end to this himself. Sebastian deserved better. Vlad liked him. He genuinely liked him as a person. He didn't want to hurt him, didn't want to be another Mike Fletcher.

But you are, a voice taunted in the back of his mind. You're exactly like him. You still can't admit you're a faggot, still think you're better than that.

Sebastian pushed him on the bed and straddled Vlad's thighs. "What do you want tonight?" he said, slipping his hands under Vlad's t-shirt with an impish smile.

He was beautiful. A man shouldn't be so damn beautiful.

"You," Vlad said hoarsely, pulling him down to his mouth.

The voice in his head grew weaker as he kissed Sebastian, losing himself in his addictive taste and scent, trying and failing to get enough.

But Vlad knew the voice would return.

It always did.

Chapter 23

Vlad returned to Luke's flat at the wee hours of the morning.

He tensed upon realizing the security system was turned off—turned off by someone who wasn't him.

Vlad pulled his gun out of his holster, trying to see the details in the dark living room. The penthouse was quiet. Hopefully Luke was sound asleep in his bedroom, which could be opened only from the inside if someone unauthorized managed to turn the security system off, which seemed to be the case. Inwardly, he berated himself for leaving Luke alone. Strictly speaking, he wasn't required to bodyguard Luke 24/7—he had four hours off every day, and Luke did have security stationed by his private lift, but there were still ways to get inside the flat if one was dedicated enough. Although Roman had told him a few days ago that Charves was unlikely to target Luke at this point, Roman had many enemies. One of them might have found out about Roman's boy.

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He shouldn't have left, or at least he shouldn't have spent over an hour kissing Sebastian after sex, reluctant to leave while Sebastian looked so soft, flushed, and fucked out. Pathetic. His own actions made him cringe lately.

Not enough to stop, his inner voice said snidely.

Shaking it off, Vlad focused on his surroundings, moving silently and holding his breath.

The flat was absolutely silent, which meant the intruder had heard him and was either hiding or moving silently toward him. The pitch-black darkness made it impossible to tell which, but Vlad was calm, his mind clearing of everything irrelevant and focusing entirely on the danger.

There. A barely audible breath from the left. Vlad was moving before he even fully registered it. He collided with the intruder, sending them both crashing to the floor. The other man was tall and big, about Vlad's size, and they wrestled in silence, trying to get the upper hand. They were pretty evenly matched, Vlad noted with surprise as he struggled to pin the man under him and incapacitate him. There was something very familiar about the way the intruder fought.

"Vlad, get off me," the man said.

Swearing, Vlad let go of the man and rolled to his feet. Finding the switch, he turned on the lights.

The very unamused face of his boss greeted him. Roman stood up, as well. "Where

the hell have you been and why are you returning at three in the morning?" he said coldly. The unsaid "instead of protecting Luke" hung in the air.

Vlad gritted his teeth. He was sick of Roman's passive-aggressive attitude toward him. Yes, he had—sort of—betrayed Roman's trust once, but he'd saved his hide dozens of times. "I have four free hours every day. It's in my contract. I don't have to be at your boy's beck and call 24/7. He's asleep. What am I supposed to protect him from? Nightmares? You told me the Charves threat was minimal."

Roman's expression turned sharp and assessing as his gaze swept over Vlad.

Vlad told himself there was no way Roman could tell what he'd been doing in the last couple of hours.

"Everything fine?" Vlad said, trying to divert Roman's attention. "Charves?"

"He won't be a problem anymore," Roman said, his eyes gleaming with cold satisfaction.

Vlad almost felt sorry for Charves. But then again, the guy had been one sick psycho.

"Roma?"

Vlad turned his head.

Luke was blinking sleepily before a brilliant smile lit up his face. "You're home!" He all but ran toward Roman and flung himself at him. Roman hugged him tightly, burying his face in Luke's curls.

Vlad watched in mild disbelief as Roman nuzzled Luke's hair, taking shallow, greedy breaths. "Hey, kotyonok," he murmured, kissing Luke's ear.

“I missed you,” Luke said into Roman’s neck. “Missed you so much.”

“Yeah,” Roman said hoarsely before hiking Luke’s legs up around his waist and carrying him out of the living room.

Vlad stared after them before going to the bar and grabbing a mini-bottle of vodka. With Roman back, his job as Luke’s bodyguard was effectively over. He could get wasted if he wanted.

Opening the bottle, Vlad went out on the balcony. It was a cold, windy night, but he didn’t mind. He was used to much cold weather.

Leaning against the railings and looking at the lights of London spread out beneath him, he took a sip from the bottle, enjoying the burn and trying not to think of anything. It didn’t work all that well.

After what he had just witnessed, it was undeniable that Luke wasn’t just a passing fancy for Roman. It was obvious Roman had actual feelings for the boy. And yet, Vlad still couldn’t think of Roman as a faggot.

Faggots are pathetic weaklings, not real men.

His uncle’s words seemed ridiculous now. Roman Demidov was the opposite of a weakling. He was one of the most ruthless, strongest men Vlad had ever known. Vlad couldn’t think of him as weak and pathetic, as less of a man, only because Roman happened to have sex with a man.

His uncle had definitely been wrong, at least in that regard.

But Stepan might have been right about one thing: attraction to another man—at least to one man in particular—felt unnatural. Unnaturally strong.

It had been over a month since they'd had sex for the first time. He had hoped to fuck it out of his system by now, but fucking hell, it didn't seem to be helping. The mere memory of the hours he'd spent enjoying Sebastian's body, kissing his mouth afterward, unable to get enough, made him burn. He'd barely torn himself away from Sebastian, had barely forced himself to leave. He would say he felt like he was a teenager again, except he'd never been this drunk on a person when he'd been a teenager—or an adult, for that matter. Vlad couldn't help thinking that he must be sick, because he'd never felt this way: like a hormonal mess with a one-track mind. Sebastian's smile shouldn't have left him feeling breathless and winded with desire to touch, desire to kiss, as if someone had socked him in the stomach and spelled blue balls on him.

Maybe it was just a midlife crisis.

Maybe his uncle had been right and this was a disease.

Or maybe he had always been a faggot and had just repressed the hell out of it. Maybe it wasn't Sebastian. Maybe he would behave so ridiculously with any attractive man, although his lack of attraction to Antonio seemed to point to the contrary.

Maybe it wasn't Sebastian who was the exception but Antonio.

To test that theory, Vlad closed his eyes and tried to imagine fucking Luke. The kid was as pretty as it could get and Vlad definitely didn't feel revulsion at the idea, but the faint interest had nothing on the insatiable want he felt with Sebastian. Besides, Roman might actually kill him if he laid a finger on his boy.

Roman.

Vlad imagined fucking Roman and snorted. Even if the idea wasn't vaguely gross—Roman had always been a bit of a brother figure to him—he knew they would be disastrous in bed. It wasn't exactly a secret to him that Roman was a kinky, domineering asshole. Vlad had no submissive inclinations. He could rarely keep his opinions to himself if he disagreed with Roman's orders—that was the reason they had clashed so often over the years. They would be terrible in bed.

So it was safe to say he didn't want Luke or Roman the way he wanted Sebastian.

Vlad wasn't sure whether he should be happy about it or not. On one hand, it was good to know he hadn't suddenly become a cock slut. On the other hand, it was hugely worrying that he was so transfixed on Sebastian, sick with desire to kiss him, to touch him, to fuck him—to see him. Even now his gaze kept drifting to the right, toward the district where Sebastian's flat was located. He couldn't see the building from here, but it didn't stop him from looking, like some obsessed, lovesick creep.

Sighing, Vlad took another sip from his bottle, staring moodily into the dark sky and letting his thoughts drift.

He didn't know for how long he stood there, perhaps an hour, perhaps more, when the balcony door opened behind him.

Roman stepped out, lighting a cigarette. He had his coat thrown over his shoulders, his bare chest on display. He reeked of sex.

“Can't sleep?” Roman said, taking a deep drag.

Vlad shrugged.

“Luke says you've been an exemplary bodyguard.”

Vlad just snorted, a little surprised. While he and Luke had worked out their differences, they weren't exactly friends. He had expected the kid to still hold a grudge against him.

“I'm glad you and Luke have worked out your issues.”

Vlad said nothing, waiting. Roman wasn't one for idle talk; he was going somewhere with this.

“I expect you to return to your old job,” Roman said.

Vlad laughed. Of course Roman wasn't asking him if he wanted to return to his old job. He was informing Vlad of his stance, fully expecting the positive answer. Arrogant asshole.

“Who says I want to go back?” Vlad said. “I took this job as a favor to you, because I owed you one. Maybe I'm not interested in staying around. This city is fucking depressing.”

“Really,” Roman said evenly, taking another long drag. “I've been told something different. Luke says you've been fucking his model friend.”

Vlad stiffened. It was an effort to keep his face blank. How did Luke know? A lucky guess? Or had Sebastian told him?

Unease settled low in his gut. He wasn't comfortable with so many people knowing about...him.

“If Luke spent the past hour talking about me, you were doing something wrong,” Vlad said gruffly.

Roman chuckled, not taking the bait. “So it's true. Have to say I'm surprised.”

“Why?” Vlad bit off. “You used to fuck a different woman every night, but now you're fucking Whitford's boy.”

“I'm not ‘fucking’ Luke,” Roman said, ice creeping into his voice. “Don't speak of him in that way. Understood?”

Vlad looked at him. Roman didn't seem amused in the least, his posture tense, anger

rolling off him in waves.

Eyeing his normally cool-headed boss, Vlad realized Roman didn't just have fond feelings for the boy. He loved him, as in was in it for the long haul.

The realization made him feel...strange. He didn't feel disgusted, and that was the strange part.

"Okay," Vlad said, turning away. After a moment, he added stiffly, "If I knew how important he was to you, I wouldn't have helped Anastasia. I thought he was a bad influence." The road to hell was paved with good intentions.

"I know," Roman said. "That's the only reason I decided to forgive you. And if I can let your betrayal go, you can swallow your damn pride. You will take the job, Vlad. Anya is sick of doing your job on top of hers." He paused. "And I got used to the way you handled things, even though Anya never questions my orders, which is a refreshing change from you."

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Vlad's lips twitched. Coming from Roman, that was the equivalent of him admitting that he missed him.

"Fine," he said. "But I want a raise."

"A raise?" Roman said with a chuckle. "I pay you a fortune, you greedy asshole."

"This city is fucking expensive and my tastes aren't cheap."

"And to think you used to be a country bumpkin who owned two shirts," Roman murmured, lighting another cigarette.

Vlad's smile faded. That country bumpkin would have been disgusted and horrified if he could see him now—it he knew Vlad was so crazy about another man.

"That was a long time ago," he said. "I'm a different man now."

Was he?

Chapter 24

Sebastian let himself into his flat, locked the door, and took off his Chelsea boots with a relieved sigh. He adored them, but they were still new and weren't ideal for wearing all day long. Moving his toes to get rid of the stiffness in them, Sebastian padded out toward his bedroom.

He yelped when he saw a figure sitting on his bed in the dark.

“It’s me,” Vlad said.

Sebastian breathed out, pressing his hand to his rapidly beating heart. “Jesus, you scared me! Warn the guy that you’re waiting for him in his dark bedroom. Creep. Normal people wait outside when there’s no one at home.”

“You left the balcony door open.”

Sebastian turned the lights on. “I live on the second floor.”

Vlad shrugged and gave him a look, as if saying, “So?”

Sebastian’s amused smile froze. What was wrong with him? Vlad’s criminal habits weren’t adorable. They weren’t. They were terrible. Vlad was a terrible, terrible person.

“Right.” He peered at Vlad curiously, pulling his coat off and dropping it on the chair. “Why are you here so early? Shouldn’t you be bodyguarding Luke?”

“Roman’s back. My contract is over.”

Sebastian’s stomach clenched.

After a moment, he said in a carefully casual tone, “Does that mean you’re leaving England?”

Vlad’s blue eyes were studying him intently.

Putting on his best neutral expression, Sebastian started unbuttoning his shirt.

“No,” Vlad said at last. “Roman rehired me as his head of security.”

Sebastian let out the breath he'd been holding. Fear knotted his insides when he realized he felt relieved. He had no business to feel relieved.

"That's...good," he said, slipping out of his shirt. He felt a little off, unsure. He didn't know where they stood after the other night's weirdness—after Vlad had gone all caveman on him. He had liked it. He had liked it too much, against his better judgment. "I mean, that's good for you, right?"

Vlad shrugged, his eyes still on Sebastian's face despite Sebastian's semi-undressed state.

"Have you told Luke about this?" Vlad said. "Have you told anyone else?"

Sebastian frowned. "About what?"

"About—you and me," Vlad said in a clipped voice.

"Of course not," Sebastian said, his frown deepening. "Luke knows only what he saw with his own eyes." He pursed his lips. "I haven't told anyone—well, there's Antonio, but you did agree to have a threesome with him, so it was kind of unavoidable. But I would never out anyone without their explicit permission. That's not cool."

Vlad kept staring at him with that weirdly intense look.

"What?" Sebastian said.

The muscles in Vlad's cheek pulsed. "It makes me uncomfortable—that people know. First that Italian, now Luke and Roman."

Sebastian's hands paused in the middle of tugging his jeans down his thighs. He wet

his lips with his tongue, nausea rolling in his stomach.

So this was it.

“If it makes you uncomfortable, let’s end it. It’s no big deal.” He managed to chuckle lightly. “This was supposed to be sex for fun, no strings attached. If it’s not fun anymore, it defeats the purpose, right?”

Maybe it was for the best. This no longer felt like a no-strings-attached thing. It felt anything but.

“Yes,” Vlad agreed, his gaze still on Sebastian’s face.

“Okay, then,” Sebastian said, forcing out a small smile and trying to ignore the hollow feeling in his stomach. He wasn’t disappointed or hurt. He wasn’t. He was totally cool. He’d always known Vlad would eventually freak out and go back to being “straight” and “normal.” Vlad was just like Mike. Sebastian had been prepared for it. It had been the whole point of having no-strings-attached sex. Vlad had warned him this would happen. He had no reason to feel angry or upset.

“You know the way out,” he said.

When Vlad didn’t move from the bed, he felt a little silly.

“Bye,” Sebastian said pointedly, starting to get pissed off. Why couldn’t Vlad just go? He looked around the room. “I need to feed the cat.”

Where was Hermione when he needed her?

At last, Vlad stood up and moved toward the door, his footsteps slow and heavy.

Suddenly, Vlad stopped, his shoulders and back radiating tension. He swore through his teeth and strode toward Sebastian, grabbed his face and kissed him, his tongue pushing into Sebastian's mouth, demanding and rough. There was something needy and urgent about that kiss, something painfully angry and desperate. It broke Sebastian's heart, just a little. This was it. This was it.

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Vlad sucked on his bottom lip, his hands holding Sebastian's hips in a bruising grip. "Throw me out," he croaked, kissing the corner of Sebastian's mouth. "Please, throw me out." He kissed the other corner before pushing his tongue back inside, his hands slipping under Sebastian's boxers to pull their bodies flush together.

"Stop," Sebastian said weakly.

Vlad kissed him deeper, his arms tightening around him.

"Stop," he managed firmer, pushing at Vlad's chest.

Vlad went rigid, his body fraught with tension.

At last, he stepped away, looking at Sebastian like a thirsty man at a well, his hands balled tightly into fists.

Sebastian closed his eyes, breathed in, breathed out, and opened them.

"You can't do this," he said, pulling his jeans up and avoiding Vlad's eyes. "I can't do this, not again. I know you must be confused, but it's not fair to me, Vlad. You can't keep fucking me around. I can't—I won't let you. If this makes you uncomfortable, if you're freaking out, that's it, we're done."

Vlad locked his jaw and nodded, clasping his hands behind his back. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's just—" He shook his head. "Never mind. It's my problem, not yours."

Sebastian nodded uncertainly, hugging himself. "I don't dislike you," he said. His

throat felt raw. “Not anymore. I’m glad we could talk it out and act like responsible adults. I guess...I guess we can be friends if you’re staying in London?”

Vlad stared at him oddly. “Sure,” he said after a moment. “Why not.”

Licking his lips, Sebastian looked around the room, searching for something to say.

“So are you moving out of Luke’s place?” he said.

“Yes,” Vlad replied. “I need to find a place, actually.”

“The flat next door is empty,” Sebastian said without thinking and promptly wanted to kick himself.

“Thanks. I’ll look into it,” Vlad said, putting his jacket on.

Sebastian knew he wouldn’t. They would never be neighbors or friends. They never could be.

This was really it.

“Yeah,” Sebastian said, nodding unnecessarily and swallowing around the sudden lump in his throat. “See you around.”

Their gazes met and held for a moment that felt like eternity.

I could have loved you.

In another life, they could have been something together. Something good and strong and bright. Something that didn’t hurt. Maybe in another life, Vlad wouldn’t have been raised to hate what he was. Maybe in that life Sebastian wouldn’t be afraid of

love and would allow himself to trust and love again.

In another life.

But not this one.

Vlad turned away and left.

As he heard the door close after Vlad, Sebastian sat heavily on the bed and stared into nothing, his throat thick and achy.

Chapter 25

One month later

The door to the security center opened and closed.

“The new intern is crying,” Anna said.

Vlad made a noncommittal noise, without opening his eyes.

“Why is he crying?” Anna said. “Vladislav!”

Vlad opened his eyes and shrugged, knowing it would drive her crazy. Anna was a stickler for rules, the type to do everything by the book and never question Roman’s orders. Needless to say, they had never really gotten along.

“He has no spine,” he said at last, glancing at the security feed showing the kid crying outside the room. “I’m not in the mood to babysit stupid kids today.”

Anna crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re never in the mood since you returned

to work. You would think getting a second chance would put you in a nice mood instead of turning you into a tyrant. It's the fourth employee you've made cry this week alone. Someone's going to complain. We aren't in Russia anymore, Vlad."

He gave her a flat look. "If you have issues with my behavior, you can bring it up to Roman."

Anna sighed. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you're back—I was sick of doing your job on top of mine—but you need to deal with whatever has you snapping at everyone. Whatever is wrong with you, fix it."

"Nothing is wrong with me."

She smiled. "You're an asshole, but you're not that much of an asshole. Fix it, Vlad."

She left and Vlad sagged back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Fix it?

He wished he knew how.

It had been over a month. His bad mood got worse by the day, and he constantly felt like punching someone. There hadn't been an opportunity to punch someone, but he had been snapping at his subordinates and reducing them to tears. To put it plainly, he felt like shit and was taking it out on everyone around him. With Christmas approaching, pretty much everyone was in festive spirits, and it only highlighted what a miserable bastard he had been. If Sebastian saw him now, he would call him a bully and would be absolutely right.

Vlad heaved a sigh, beyond annoyed with himself. He had managed not to think of Sebastian for a whole two hours. That must be a new record. If his thing for Sebastian

had been a disease, the lack of exposure to the cause definitely wasn't helping.

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To make things worse, it felt like Sebastian was suddenly everywhere: Vlad kept seeing billboard ads with Sebastian all the goddamn time. He hated them, hated looking at them, hated the sultry looks Sebastian gave to the camera—to other people. Acid jealousy burned his insides when he wondered if Sebastian was with someone else at the moment, if he was smiling at them, if he was letting other people touch him, kiss him, look at him sleep—

Vlad sprang to his feet and started pacing the room.

Whatever is wrong with you, fix it.

The funny thing was, he hadn't actually intended to end things with Sebastian. He had simply wanted to talk to him—Sebastian was the only person he felt remotely comfortable with to discuss his sexuality—but Sebastian had taken it the wrong way, interpreting Vlad's discomfort as the desire to end things. After Sebastian suggested ending their arrangement, looking so fucking unbothered, Vlad could hardly say that he didn't want to end it.

Maybe he should have.

And then what? Sebastian clearly didn't want anything permanent with him. Hell, if he were in Sebastian's shoes, he wouldn't want anything permanent with him, either.

Vlad came to an abrupt halt.

Did he want something permanent with Sebastian?

His heart started beating faster. He thought of being able to call Sebastian his, of being able to spend as much time with Sebastian as he wanted, of being the only man to touch him, to kiss him, to fuck him. He liked the idea. He liked it very much.

But while his heart and his body were fully on board, he was a little queasy at the idea of a relationship with a man and doubted he would be any good for Sebastian.

Vlad sighed. Well, listening to his brain only had turned him into one miserable fuck.

Maybe it was time to be irrational and go for what he wanted.

The question was whether he could convince Sebastian that they would work together when he couldn't entirely convince even himself.

Sebastian had said they could be friends.

At the time he had discarded the idea as ridiculous. For the first time, Vlad gave it some real thought. If they were friends, he wouldn't be able to touch, but he would be able to see Sebastian, to look at him as much as he wanted. This way he wouldn't hurt Sebastian by fucking him around.

Maybe they really were better off as friends.

Now if only he could figure out how to keep his greedy hands to himself.

Chapter 26

The house was lit up by Christmas lights.

Vlad stared at it for a good five minutes before slowly walking toward the front door.

He could see silhouettes of people in the windows and tried to imagine Christmas celebrations. He'd never celebrated Christmas in his life. He didn't have a family to celebrate it with. Not to mention that in Russia Christmas was celebrated in January and it was mainly a religious event, the importance of the holiday nowhere as big.

He'd never felt more like an outsider than he had lately, as everyone around him seemed to be immersed in Christmas festivities. Even Roman was humoring Luke and celebrating Christmas with him.

Vlad stopped in front of the door and hesitated. Maybe he should go and return some other day. As he understood it, Christmas was a family holiday. He was unlikely to be welcome.

But he had been putting off this visit for too long. He had toyed with the idea of calling Sebastian, but he had no idea what to say. He needed to see him. He couldn't wait any longer or his Christmas present for Sebastian would be useless—if Sebastian even accepted it.

Vlad took a deep breath and knocked.

A few minutes passed before the door finally opened. It was Sebastian's sister.

Julia's smile faded when she saw him. "You!"

Vlad raised his brows. "Me?"

"What do you want?" Julia said. Her eyes were just like her brother's—dark and big—but Vlad had never seen such a cold expression in Sebastian's. If Vlad hadn't been on the receiving end of Roman's ice-cold glares for half of his life, he might have been intimidated by hers.

“Is Sebastian here?” Vlad said.

“What’s it to you?” Julia said, stepping out and closing the door behind her. She crossed her arms over her chest.

Vlad felt like an asshole wearing a winter jacket while she was in a thin cardigan. It wasn’t particularly cold, but it was snowing.

“Here, take my jacket,” he said, unzipping it, but her cutting words stopped him.

“I don’t want anything from you,” Julia said. “Leave. You have some nerve to show up here.”

“I’m not going anywhere without seeing Sebastian,” he said, a little confused by her hostility. Even if Sebastian had told his sister what had transpired between them, he must have told her that their relationship had been casual.

Julia pursed her lips. “What do you need him for? Need someone to suck your prick?”

Vlad stared at her. “I’m here as a friend,” he said at last.

She laughed. “Right.”

“He did say we could be friends,” Vlad said, reining in his temper. It wouldn’t do to be rude to Sebastian’s sister. “I want to be his friend.” Want was probably too strong a word, but he wasn’t lying.

Julia scoffed. “Please. You can’t be friends with Sebastian.”

Vlad gritted his teeth. “And why the hell not?”

“Because Sebastian’s friend wouldn’t look at him like he’s starved and Sebastian is a three-course meal.”

“I didn’t look at him that way,” Vlad said stiffly.

Julia gave him an unimpressed look. “I was actually in the room with you two. You looked at him like you wanted to push him on the table and fuck him right there.” She made a face. “Gross.”

Vlad shoved his hands into his pockets, fighting back a blush. “That was before.”

Liar.

Julia stared at him. “Why are you here?”

“I told you—I want to be his friend.”

“Why are you here?” she said again, as if he hadn’t said anything.

Vlad pressed his lips together. “I don’t get why you’re interrogating me like I’m his bad ex or something. Sebastian and I had a casual thing.”

“Right,” she said, her expression hardening. “Have a good day. You will not be seeing my brother.” She turned away and put a hand on the door handle.

“Julia,” Vlad croaked. “I need to see him.”

She turned back slowly and studied him for a long moment.

“Please,” he said. “I miss him.”

Her face softened. “If you hurt him—”

“I won’t,” Vlad said. “I’m telling the truth: I’m here as a friend.”

She sighed, muttered something under her breath, and disappeared into the house, leaving him staring at the door.

He waited.

The wait seemed endless.

When he started thinking Sebastian wouldn’t be coming out, the door finally opened again. Vlad felt his mouth go dry.

Sebastian’s dark eyes stared at Vlad with an unreadable expression. Sebastian was

wearing a thick, oversized green pullover and old, threadbare jeans. His hair wasn't styled. It had gotten longer, falling to his shoulders in soft waves. Vlad wanted to bury his fingers in those raven strands, pull him close, and kiss him until he could satisfy the bottomless hunger in the pit of his stomach.

"Hey," Sebastian said, breaking the silence. There was something wary and uncertain about the way he looked at Vlad.

"Hi," Vlad said hoarsely. Friends. He was here as a friend. He'd better remember that.

They stared at each other.

"How have you been?" Vlad said.

"Good, thanks," Sebastian said, running a hand through his hair. "Hermione had two boy kittens."

It took Vlad a moment to remember what Sebastian was talking about. Right. Sebastian's cat.

He chuckled. "Don't tell me you really called them Rose and Hugo."

"I called them Gryff and Slyth," Sebastian said, smiling and looking very proud of himself. He was ridiculous.

Vlad wanted to kiss him. He hoped he didn't look as fond as he felt.

They stared at each other some more, neither speaking.

Vlad said, "You haven't even texted me."

Sebastian's smile disappeared. "You haven't texted me, either."

"If we are to be friends, we should do better," Vlad said.

Sebastian dropped his gaze. "We should."

Squashing down his disappointment, Vlad retrieved an envelope from his pocket. "This is for you. Merry Christmas."

Sebastian's eyes lit up with curiosity and pleasure. "What is it?"

"Two tickets for Chelsea-Manchester City game tomorrow," Vlad said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I thought we could go together. Hang out. If you want."

Sebastian beamed at him. "Wow, really? Of course I do! Thank you!" He leaned in and pecked Vlad's cheek.

They both kind of froze.

"Right," Sebastian said, stepping away and clasping his hands behind his back.

It took Vlad a moment to regain his control over his brain. "I'll pick you up tomorrow, then."

"Great," Sebastian said, grabbing the door handle behind him. "Thanks, see you tomorrow." He all but fled back into the house.

Vlad touched his cheek before letting his hand fall and balling it into a fist.

Friends. Just friends.

Right.

Chapter 27

It wasn't a date. It wasn't a date. It wasn't a date.

Maybe if Sebastian repeated that often enough, the butterflies in his stomach would finally go away.

It wasn't a date. They were hanging out as friends. He and Vlad were friends. That was the only thing they could be. He shouldn't—mustn't—make it weird.

The last month had been weird enough as it was. He had been plagued with what ifs, feeling off balance and frustrated with himself. Even spending Christmas with his family hadn't fixed him. Thankfully, his parents seemed oblivious.

But Julia hadn't been as easily fooled. She had noticed his mood immediately upon his arrival, cornered him in his room and forced him to spill.

He had told her everything.

After Sebastian finished speaking, his sister didn't roll her eyes or say, "I told you so." Instead, she looked at him a little sadly and said,

"Do you remember that Christmas we spent at Aunt Virginia's?"

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Sebastian frowned. “Vaguely? I was eleven or twelve, I think.”

Julia nodded. “Aunt Virginia made all of the kids make a Christmas wish and write it down on a piece of paper. Aunt Stella was supposed to be your Secret Santa but ended up asking you to make another wish. Do you remember what your original wish was?”

Sebastian searched his memory but it was blank. “Nope.”

His sister smiled, a little amused and a lot sad. “You wanted epic love.” She chuckled. “I remember making fun of you for being such a girl.” She looked at him in the eye. “I wish you’d never met Mike.”

Sebastian swallowed and looked down at his hands. “I don’t know how it’s relevant.” He changed the subject and Julia let him, but before she left his room, she hugged him tightly, the way they hadn’t hugged in years, and said quietly, “Don’t let a past mistake or the fear of a future one ruin your life. Don’t let him win.” And then she was gone, leaving Sebastian with more questions and doubts.

Things had been weird even at work. He had taken to hiding whenever he crossed paths with Antonio. The Italian didn’t seem to understand why they couldn’t hook up again, and Sebastian didn’t know how to explain what he didn’t understand himself. He was a young, single man who loved sex. There was no reason for him not to have sex with Antonio—or with anyone else. So why the hell couldn’t he say yes to Antonio?

Because he felt taken.

It was ridiculous, it was messed up, it was only in his head, but he felt taken. If he closed his eyes, he could almost feel Vlad's hands on his hips, Vlad's mouth on his inner thighs, sucking love bites into his skin, marking him up, his touch intimate and proprietary. He wanted to be Vlad's—he, who had always rolled his eyes at possessive behavior and macho bullshit.

It was ridiculous. He wasn't Vlad's, and Vlad wasn't his. The only thing they could have was friendship.

Sebastian repeated it to himself like a mantra as Vlad drove them to Stamford Bridge. He and Vlad in an enclosed space turned out to be a bad, bad idea. Sebastian found himself blabbering like a nervous teenager, trying not to stare at Vlad too much. If someone asked him what they were talking about, he would have no clue.

Christ, how was he supposed to be friends with this man? He couldn't stop staring at Vlad's strong, large hands on the steering wheel, and missing them, missing their touch. His lips tingled, missing Vlad's lips. His body missed Vlad's. Just thinking about kissing Vlad had Sebastian digging his fingers into his thigh to stop himself from reaching out and clinging to Vlad like a monkey in heat.

When they finally arrived, Sebastian couldn't leave the car fast enough. They were let in through the staff entrance instead of waiting in the long queue to get into the stadium.

"I know the owner of Chelsea," Vlad said with a shrug when Sebastian had asked.

Right. The owner of the club was Russian.

"Let's go find out seats," Vlad said, guiding him with a hand on Sebastian's lower back.

It made Sebastian feel funny. He told himself not to be silly. Friends did that. It was no biggie, or at least it wasn't supposed to be. Sebastian probably wasn't supposed to feel the touch so acutely through his coat.

He was both relieved and disappointed when they reached their seats in the Matthew Harding Stand and Vlad dropped his hand.

"VIP tickets were sold out," Vlad said.

"I'm glad they were," Sebastian said, taking his seat and looking around excitedly. "Those VIP seats aren't really my thing. I love the atmosphere here. I love sitting with hardcore fans who actually know and sing the songs, you know?"

"Are you a hardcore fan, then?" Vlad said, looking at him curiously.

Sebastian squirmed a little in his seat, trying to ignore the pleased little hum in his chest. It probably wasn't healthy how much he liked having Vlad's attention focused on him and only him.

"Since early childhood, but I don't go to games as much as I used to," he replied, watching the few empty seats around them fill quickly. The atmosphere was already amazing, the fans singing the teams' songs as the players did pre-match warm-ups.

"Why not?" Vlad said.

Catching his lip between his teeth, Sebastian looked at him. "My face was pretty recognizable around here after I participated in a BBC documentary about homophobia in football. Obviously I'm not a football player, but I have friends in the closet who are. I spoke for them because they can't speak for themselves." He smiled wryly. "Most football fans probably didn't appreciate it that I called them close-minded homophobic jerks. I got a huge backlash on Twitter for daring to say what

everyone thought. It actually might be the reason the cult targeted me.” Sebastian glanced around, catching a few hostile glares, and fidgeted. “You probably don’t want to be seen with me here.”

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Vlad was frowning, his expression grim as he looked around. “You should have told me about it before we came.”

“Sorry,” Sebastian said, haltingly, averting his gaze. “You can go if you want. I know you don’t want people to think you’re gay.”

“Hey,” Vlad said, putting his large hand on his shoulder. “Look at me.”

When Sebastian did, Vlad gave him a hard look. “Don’t be silly. I’m not going anywhere. You should have told me because I would have gotten us more secure seats; that’s all.” He grimaced. “I know I was an ass to you, but did you really think I was going to get up and leave you alone?”

Sebastian stared at him and realized the answer was no. He hadn’t actually expected Vlad to throw him to the wolves. He’d stopped coming to football matches for a reason: while other fans never physically attacked him, their animosity and verbal abuse usually ruined all the fun. He had felt too unsafe to attend games on his own, and he wouldn’t have come if he really thought Vlad would leave him alone.

“No,” Sebastian said softly, smiling a little, and dragged his eyes away from Vlad before he could say something stupid like I feel safe with you here. He looked at the pitch and said with forced enthusiasm, “The match is about to start!”

His forced enthusiasm became genuine as the referee blew the whistle, signaling the start of the match. Sebastian focused his attention on the game and soon lost himself in the excitement of it. He hadn’t lied to Vlad: he didn’t attend football matches anymore and being at one was a rare treat for him. Unlike the last time he’d been at a

Chelsea match, he felt relaxed and safe with Vlad by his side.

As the first half neared its end, Vlad touched his hand. “Your hands are blue. Are you cold?”

Only then did Sebastian realize his teeth were chattering. He had been so engrossed in the match he hadn’t even noticed he was freezing.

“Yeah, freezing,” Sebastian murmured, frowning down at the Saint Laurent coat he had painstakingly chosen this morning after an hour of trying on all his coats and jackets—something Vlad didn’t need to know about. While the coat looked good on him, it did little to protect him from the freezing wind.

“Aren’t you cold?” Sebastian said miserably. Vlad had only a thin jacket on but looked unbothered by the weather.

Vlad shook his head with a little smirk. “This is like a lovely spring day in Siberia.”

Rolling his eyes, Sebastian swatted him on the arm. “Drop the smug look, will you? Yeah, you’re a tough Russian and I’m a delicate English flower, yadda yadda.”

Vlad was outright grinning now. “Don’t you have gloves, English flower?” he said, taking Sebastian’s freezing hand between his palms and eyeing the knuckles.

“No,” Sebastian said, watching Vlad’s thick fingers stroke and knead his slimmer ones. A squirmy, fluttering feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. He looked up at Vlad’s face. “Do you?”

A corner of Vlad’s lips twitched. “If I did, would you ask me to give them to you?”

“You should just give them to me so I wouldn’t have to ask,” Sebastian said with a

little smile, and fuck, were they flirting? Abort, abort. They could not be flirting.

Snorting, Vlad let go of Sebastian's hand and pulled a pair of leather gloves out of his pocket.

"Why do you have gloves if you aren't cold?" Sebastian said.

"You never know when you need to break into someone's place and not get caught," Vlad said, offering the gloves to Sebastian.

That would be a joke coming from ninety-nine percent of people, but Sebastian had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't a joke at all.

"You aren't serious, are you?" Sebastian said and only received a shrug in response, which could mean any number of things.

Sighing exasperatedly—and hopefully not too fondly—Sebastian took the gloves and put them on. They were a little too big but fit okay.

"Thanks," he murmured.

Vlad stared at Sebastian's hands for a moment before nodding and looking away.

Sebastian turned back to the pitch, feeling a little unsettled. He wasn't sure how to behave around a Vlad who cared about whether he was cold or not. He almost wished Vlad had kept acting like an asshole toward him. Almost.

Doing his best to push the man beside him out of his mind, Sebastian focused on the match. He tensed when City's striker dribbled past Chelsea's defenders. Fuck, he'd better not—

He cheered loudly with the other fans when the striker missed.

The pace of the game picked up after that, both teams trading nail-biting moments. Sebastian became so engrossed in the match that it took him a while to notice that he was clutching Vlad's arm with both hands in excitement and leaning all the way into Vlad.

He snatched his hands away.

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“Exciting game,” he said awkwardly without looking at Vlad. Fuck. What was it about Vlad that turned him into the painfully awkward loser he used to be as a teenager?

“Uh huh,” Vlad said, his eyes on his phone. “Do you think DuVal will score? They are giving good odds.”

“Are you betting?” Sebastian said, leaning into Vlad to look at his phone.

Vlad hummed in affirmative. “Just put five thousand pounds on Gabriel DuVal.”

Sebastian whistled. “Gabe had better deliver.”

Vlad turned his head. “You know him?”

Sebastian swallowed at the sudden proximity of their faces. “Yeah—I mean, we aren’t friends or anything, but yeah. He’s Tristan DuVal’s adoptive brother.”

Vlad’s eyes lit up with curiosity. “Are the rumors true?”

“What rumors?” Sebastian said, wincing inwardly. He knew Vlad was unlikely to out Gabe, but it still didn’t sit well with him to share secrets that weren’t his.

“That he has a thing with the team physician,” Vlad said, his gaze moving to the technical area where Sebastian could see Dr. Sheldon, an insanely attractive man who was openly gay.

“No idea,” he said, rubbing at his nose.

Vlad looked at him for a moment. “Do you know you often rub your nose when you’re lying?”

Sebastian dropped his hand and laughed. “Stop being such a creep.”

Vlad gave him an affronted glare. “What’s creepy about noticing things? Paying attention might save your life one day.”

Sebastian pressed his lips together to keep himself from laughing. “I’m sure you have a very rational reason for being a creep,” he said teasingly, looking Vlad in the eye.

Vlad stared at him with a pinched expression, as if he’d swallowed something sour. “You’re flirting,” he said. “Stop flirting, damn you, if you expect us to be friends.”

Sebastian licked his lips. “I’m not flirting. I’m just being friendly.”

“You’re not ‘being friendly’ very well,” Vlad said. The intensity of his gaze made Sebastian hot all over, his cock going half-hard so fast it was dizzying.

“I...” Sebastian trailed off, unsure what to say, because he really had been flirting. It was like he couldn’t control his mouth or the way he looked at Vlad.

“You said we shouldn’t and I agreed with you,” Vlad said, looking almost pained. “And I was trying to be a decent person for a change—I’m trying. But you’re being all—” Vlad glowered at him. “Being all pretty and flirty and making me stupid—”

“I’m not doing it on purpose,” Sebastian said guiltily and bit his bottom lip, lowering his lashes.

Vlad cursed in a Russian before suddenly grabbing a fistful of Sebastian's hair and kissing his mouth, hard and greedy. He pulled back even faster, swearing under his breath and shoving his trembling hands into his pockets.

Sebastian stared at him, wide-eyed, his lips tingling, his heart racing, and his body quivering with want.

"Sorry," Vlad said tightly, looking at the pitch like it was the most interesting thing in the world.

Sebastian stared longingly at the mouthwatering line of Vlad's jaw and dug his nails into his thighs again to let the pain distract him.

Fuck, they were terrible at being friends.

Flustered and frustrated, Sebastian looked around and froze, catching the sneering, disgusted looks from the men around them.

"Let's leave," he said.

Vlad's brows furrowed, his eyes still on the pitch. "There's still half of the game to go."

"People are looking, Vlad," Sebastian said, his chest filled with anxiety. The tensions ran high during such an important match and most fans had likely had a few pints prior to the start of the match; sometimes violence could be triggered by the smallest things.

Vlad followed his gaze toward the gawking men. His face hardened, something ugly and dangerous appearing in his eyes.

“Calm down,” Sebastian said nervously, putting a hand on Vlad’s shoulder. Vlad had a temper on him; he was very unlikely to ignore it if someone called him a faggot.

“I’m perfectly calm,” Vlad said evenly.

“Let’s go, then,” Sebastian said, getting up.

Vlad grabbed his wrist and pulled him down. “We aren’t going anywhere,” he said, his eyes on the men around them. “I see no reason for us to. We came to see the match and we will watch the match till the end.”

“Vlad,” Sebastian started, looking around anxiously. He could feel the hostility and disgust emanating from pretty much everyone in their vicinity with the exception of the woman in the row below, who just looked curious.

“I never let a bunch of assholes bully me into leaving and I’m not about to start,” Vlad said.

Sebastian gave a wry smile. “You’re the one usually doing the bullying, huh?”

Vlad didn’t return his smile. In fact, he looked deeply unamused as he watched their surroundings like a hawk, looking each man in the eye, as if daring to say something.

Fuck, this wasn’t going to end well.

“Come on,” Sebastian tried again, squeezing Vlad’s biceps. “Let’s just leave.”

“No,” Vlad said. “We have every right to be here.” Before Sebastian could say anything, Vlad put an arm around him and pulled Sebastian close so their sides and thighs pressed together.

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His eyes widening, Sebastian hissed, “What the hell are you doing? Are you crazy?”

“If anyone has a problem, they should be the ones leaving,” Vlad said.

“What happened to ‘I’m not a faggot’?” Sebastian said, confused as hell. He had thought Vlad would try putting as much distance between them as possible at the mere suspicion that they were together. “Why aren’t you freaking out that people think you’re gay?”

Vlad frowned. Perhaps he was surprised, too.

“I don’t know them and I don’t give a damn what they think about me,” he said. “But I don’t fucking like how they’re looking at us. If that’s how you felt when I shamed you for your sexuality, you should have punched me every time I opened my mouth.”

Sebastian felt his jaw drop. Of all the outcomes of Vlad being subjected to homophobia, this outcome was the one he certainly hadn’t expected.

“I did try punching you,” Sebastian said with a smile. “Not my fault you’re built like a tank.”

“No, it’s not your fault,” Vlad said in a strange tone, returning to scanning their surroundings warily, his gaze sharp and hard.

Sebastian let himself relax and lean against Vlad. It felt insanely good to have Vlad’s arm around him, to feel Vlad’s warm breath against his ear, to feel Vlad’s strength with his own body. Sebastian wasn’t a small man, but, tucked in against Vlad, he felt

small, vulnerable, and protected in the best possible way. Despite the hostile looks, he no longer felt nervous, somehow sure that no one would do anything. It was so stupid. Moreover, it was dangerous.

But his stupid heart and his stupid body didn't listen, reveling in the feeling of being warm, of being held and protected.

Of being cared for.

Christ, he was so, so screwed.

Halftime passed in a blur, with Vlad talking quietly into his ear about the substitutes both team managers should make. Sebastian found himself nodding dazedly and contributing very little, his mind occupied with squashing down the small spark of hope that had raised its ugly head. He couldn't read too much into Vlad's behavior. If Vlad was behaving like a boyfriend, it didn't mean he wanted them to be boyfriends. It didn't.

When halftime ended and the match finally resumed, Sebastian was relieved to have something else to focus on.

Chelsea started the second half better and soon Sebastian was on the edge of his seat, murmuring "come on" as the team launched attack after attack.

When Gabe DuVal finally scored in the fifty-sixth minute, he jumped to his feet, cheering loudly. "Fuck yeah! Get in!"

Vlad hugged him from behind, grinning, and pecked his cheek.

Warmth spread through Sebastian's body, his heart fluttering like a trapped bird. He leaned back into Vlad's chest, wishing there weren't so many layers between them.

Other fans paid them no attention now, too busy hugging and celebrating the goal.

All too soon, the referee blew the whistle, signaling the players to resume the match.

His heart still beating fast, Sebastian plopped down on his seat and, after a moment of hesitation, huddled into Vlad for warmth.

“So how much did you win?” he said, smiling at Vlad and feeling ridiculously giddy.

Vlad stared at him. “More than I thought,” he said, wrapping an arm around him again.

Beaming, Sebastian settled against him, feeling much too warm and content to care about the glares of the homophobic jerks around them.

As the match neared the end, Vlad pressed his nose into Sebastian’s cheek.

Sebastian’s breath caught in his throat. He didn’t dare move.

Nuzzling into his cheek, Vlad dragged his mouth along Sebastian’s jaw and sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said hoarsely. “I can’t be your friend. I don’t want to be your friend. I want more.”

Sebastian closed his eyes, fear, hope and violent delight surging through his body.

If he allowed this to happen, he might get his heart broken again and this time he might not recover. The emotions he felt for Vlad were far stronger and deeper than the teenage infatuation he used to feel for Mike; the fall would be much harder.

There were so many reasons why they wouldn’t work. Vlad had too much baggage. Vlad might decide he wasn’t gay after all and leave him after a few months. Vlad

might resent him for “making him gay,” poisoning their relationship with his resentment.

Vlad might never love him.

But he also might.

Sebastian opened his eyes, his throat painfully tight with fear. The fear of making the wrong choice.

He suddenly remembered his sister’s words.

Don’t let a past mistake or the fear of a future one ruin your life. Don’t let him win.

Sebastian turned around to look at Vlad.

Vlad met his gaze, his expression unguarded and open. Sebastian realized he wasn’t the only one who felt unsure and vulnerable.

He put a hand on Vlad’s scruffy cheek and felt the tightness in his throat ease when Vlad leaned into the touch.

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Licking his lips, Sebastian took a leap of faith.

“Then be more,” he whispered with a smile.

Vlad’s blue eyes smiled.

Epilogue

Eight months later

The wedding day of Tristan DuVal and Zach Hardaway dawned bright and beautiful, the sunlight filtering through half-closed curtains and waking Sebastian.

Yawning, Sebastian turned to his other side and felt his breath catch.

The early morning sun had set Vlad’s blond hair ablaze in golden light. His lax mouth was parted as he breathed evenly, his wide chest rising and falling rhythmically. Altogether, he looked warm, solid, a picture of virility and masculinity.

Sebastian rested his head gently against his own pillow and simply watched him. He wanted to snuggle up against Vlad’s warm body, to inhale the scent of his sun-kissed skin. But for now, he merely watched, feeling like he’d never tire of it.

I love you.

The thought didn’t make him panic. The thought felt right and comfortable. After months together, he was used to these random waves of love that stole his breath

away.

Being in love felt surprisingly wonderful. Sometimes it was still scary, but Sebastian found himself smiling more often, feeling more positive and happy in general and when Vlad was around in particular.

It wasn't always sunshine and roses, though.

Sometimes there were bad days, when Vlad became closed off and tense. On days like that, he tended to avoid Sebastian, but he usually ended up at Sebastian's place anyway.

"Sorry," Vlad would say gruffly, nuzzling Sebastian's cheek, his neck, breathing in deeply, as if trying to take him under his skin.

At first Sebastian had thought he was apologizing for his shitty mood, but before long, he realized Vlad was apologizing for needing him anyway when he was in such a mood, which was...it kind of melted Sebastian's heart.

"It's okay, you know," Sebastian had said one such evening months ago. He was snuggled up to Vlad, Vlad's arms wound tight around him. Although Vlad was the one holding him, neither of them was delusional about who needed it more at the moment.

He looked at Vlad. "I know I said I didn't want to deal with gay freak-outs, but that was before." Before I let you in. Before you became mine. "You can talk to me. I want you to. Only if you want to, of course."

Vlad just looked at him for a while.

"I..." Vlad grimaced, closing his eyes for a moment. "It's like there's this annoying

snide voice in my head that keeps telling me how wrong and sick being with a man is. It's quiet most of the time now, but sometimes it fucks with my head, you know?"

Sebastian nodded, chewing on his lip thoughtfully as he traced lines on Vlad's arm with his finger. "What can I do to help?"

"You're already helping," Vlad said. "It goes very quiet when I look at you."

Sebastian cleared his suddenly tight throat and smiled. "And why is that?" he said teasingly. Yup, he was fishing for compliments; sue him.

"Smugness isn't attractive, you know," Vlad said. But the fascinated, intense expression on his face said otherwise. "You know why, you smug little shit."

Sebastian grinned, feeling warm, pleased, and so gone, God.

"You love it," he said, smirking. "You secretly love everything about me, despite all your grumpy bitchiness."

"I'm not grumpy," Vlad said grumpily.

Sebastian lifted a hand and patted him on the cheek. "It's okay. You can be grumpy. I can smile for both of us."

Vlad kissed him.

By the time Vlad pulled back, Sebastian was a little breathless, his mind blissfully empty as he murmured, "I love you, you know."

It had been the first time he told the words to Vlad.

They both kind of froze, staring at each other. But if Sebastian was a little surprised by his own declaration, Vlad looked absolutely floored, as if someone had pulled the ground from under him.

“You can’t love me,” he said at last, his Adam’s apple moving.

Sebastian smacked Vlad on the head. “What is that supposed to mean? I can love whoever I want, even a grumpy bear like you. You can’t tell me whether I love you or not.”

Vlad blinked rapidly and turned his face away, presenting Sebastian with his profile. It was a lovely profile, with a jaw to die for, but Sebastian wasn’t exactly content looking at it after declaring his feelings—something he hadn’t done since Mike.

The longer the silence lasted, the more self-conscious he felt. He tried to free himself from Vlad’s arms, but Vlad didn’t let go.

Finally, Vlad looked at him. “You can do so much better than me,” he said, his voice like gravel. “You can find someone nice. Someone who has himself figured out. Someone who’ll never hurt you.”

Sebastian bit his lip. “It’s okay if you can’t say the words now. I don’t want you to say what you don’t mean. But I need to know if you have, like, feelings for me. That I’m not just a pretty thing you like to fuck. That would be enough for now.” He breathed out. There. He’d said that. He hoped Vlad understood and appreciated how hard it was for him to make the first step, to put himself into such a vulnerable position.

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Vlad looked at him like he was crazy. “Trust me, I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have feelings I couldn’t ignore.” Vlad smiled without much mirth. “I feel like—like it’s impossible to have enough of you,” he said, running his hands over Sebastian’s neck before cradling his face gently. “I can never get enough.” He brushed their lips together. “Always need more of you.”

Sebastian let out the breath he’d been holding and smiled at Vlad. Maybe it wasn’t the love declaration he wanted, but it was close enough. It was enough for the time being.

Now, five months after that conversation, it was still enough.

Sebastian couldn’t really complain. He was truly happy, so happy he sometimes had to pinch himself. For all his grumpiness and bitchiness, Vlad was a wonderful boyfriend.

When Sebastian had allowed himself to imagine what kind of relationship he and Vlad would have he had always thought it would be mostly sexual.

Surprisingly, it wasn’t the case.

It wasn’t that they didn’t have a lot of sex; they did. Sometimes Sebastian even wondered if it was healthy to want someone so much. His skin tingled whenever Vlad looked at him a little too long, and he wanted Vlad to touch him all the time. It would have been pathetic if Vlad didn’t look at him with the same hunger as the one that ate Sebastian from the inside out whenever they weren’t touching.

The sex was fantastic and immensely gratifying, but what made it earth-shattering was the way their bodies slotted into each other, like two pieces of a puzzle, like a perfect fit. And that perfect chemistry spilled over into just about every other aspect of their relationship. Vlad would pull him into his side whenever possible, drape his arm around Sebastian's shoulders and hold him close when they watched movies together. Sebastian had never been much for cuddling before, but he was starting to understand the appeal. He loved pressing his face against Vlad's chest and listening to the steady thudding of Vlad's heart under his ear as rain drummed outside the window. He loved watching Vlad watch him, feeling that intense, enamored gaze whenever they were in the same room.

Yes, by now he knew Vlad had feelings for him, knew Vlad adored him to bits. He didn't need to hear Vlad say the words to know that; he wasn't that insecure.

And yet...it would have been nice to hear the words, to know for certain.

Suppressing a sigh, Sebastian slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Vlad. They didn't have to be at the wedding venue until ten o'clock. Vlad could use some extra shuteye after staying up half of the night because of some security problems at work. In the meantime, Sebastian could make breakfast for them.

Breakfast was ready by the time Vlad padded to the kitchen, yawning every few seconds, a disgruntled look on his face.

He really was such a grumpy bear. His grumpy bear.

"Just in time for breakfast, sleepyhead," Sebastian said, watching him with a fond smile. Vlad was decidedly not a morning person.

Vlad's eyes were still half-closed as he made grabby hands for Sebastian. "You weren't in bed," he grumbled, wrapping his arms around Sebastian and dropping his

face into the crook of Sebastian's neck. He inhaled deeply. "You should have stayed in bed."

"If I did, we would have skipped breakfast and then we both would be grumpy at the wedding," Sebastian said, pushing Vlad into the chair and placing a plate with breakfast in front of him. "Eat."

He took the seat opposite Vlad and attacked his own plate. He was starving. Although Vlad had slipped into bed in the middle of the night, they still had a round of sex. He was always hungry after sex.

"Do we have to go to DuVal's wedding?" Vlad said suddenly.

Sebastian lifted his gaze from his plate. He studied Vlad's face, trying to determine if Vlad was just being his grumpy self or if Vlad truly wasn't comfortable attending such a public event with him.

The latter possibility made Sebastian's stomach churn. He knew Vlad still wasn't comfortable with people knowing about their relationship. While they weren't exactly hiding their relationship, Vlad was a little stiff with him in public, displaying only a fraction of the affection he showered him with when they were alone. The affection Vlad had displayed during their first date at the football match had turned out to be an exception rather than the rule. Sebastian tried not to take it personally, knowing that Vlad's hang-ups had nothing to do with him. But it still hurt, just a little.

Sebastian cleared his throat and looked down at the mug in his hand. "I kind of have to go, but you don't have to if you don't want to go with me," he said as nonchalantly as he could.

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“Hey,” Vlad said, knocking their knees together under the table.

Sebastian looked up.

Vlad was gazing at him seriously. “I want to.”

Feeling warmth in his chest, his stomach, everywhere, Sebastian hooked their ankles. “Yeah?”

Vlad nodded. “Wouldn’t want Antonio to think you’re available.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes with a long-suffering sigh, but he was grinning as he got to his feet. “Finish up, we need to pick an outfit for you! And we need to feed the cats before leaving.” He frowned, looking around. “Actually, we need to find them first. I haven’t seen Slyth all morning. He must have slithered out.” He chuckled at his pun, pleased with himself.

Vlad just groaned.

* * *

The wedding was huge, with lots of celebrities and press in attendance. Vlad, who had felt overdressed in his Armani tux at home, now understood why Sebastian insisted that they dress to the nines: they fit right in.

As guests who weren’t very close to the marrying couple, he and Sebastian weren’t seated at the front. Vlad was more than fine with that, because he never liked turning

his back to so many people, but Sebastian kept craning his neck to try to get a better look. Luke waved at them from the front row where he was sitting with Roman. Vlad nodded back. He found the kid far more tolerable as of late. To his slight surprise, Luke and Roman were still going strong, together already for a year.

“Don’t tell Roman, but Luke’s hoping Roman will propose soon, too,” Sebastian murmured into his ear.

If Vlad had been drinking, he would have choked. “He’d better do it himself,” he said with a chuckle. “I can’t really see Roman proposing.” But then again, if a year ago someone had told him Roman would be in a long-term, serious relationship with Whitford’s brat, he would have thought that person was crazy. Maybe he didn’t know shit.

Sebastian shook his head, and Vlad got a whiff of his scent: cologne, aftershave, and something unique to Sebastian. He had to suppress the urge to put his nose against Sebastian’s skin and breathe him in. They were in public.

“No, Luke wants to be proposed to,” Sebastian said with an amused but fond smile. He and Luke had grown a lot closer, too. “You know he’s a hopeless romantic. Roman had better propose with some grand romantic gesture. Good thing he’s filthy rich and can afford grand romantic gestures.”

Vlad snorted. “If he can’t think of something original, he could always buy Luke a tropical island,” he said dryly, and Sebastian laughed.

Someone hushed them, and they turned their attention back to the wedding.

As the grooms said their vows, Vlad glanced at Sebastian again.

Sebastian’s eyes were suspiciously shiny.

“Shut up,” he said, flushing when he noticed Vlad’s stare. “It’s kind of beautiful, isn’t it? Very romantic.”

Vlad thought back to Tristan DuVal’s wedding vow that involved such words “I hated you at first sight, I still hate you for making me so soppy, and I promise to hate you till death do us part.” It didn’t sound very beautiful or romantic to him.

Vlad looked back at the grooms as they exchanged rings, their eyes only on each other.

He stared.

Unnatural, disgusting freaks, all of them. They should be hunted down and killed like rabid dogs.

The memory of his uncle’s words seemed grotesque and ridiculous as Vlad watched the happy couple share a kiss. There was nothing unnatural or disgusting about it. They were happy, they were in love, they were standing in front of their friends and loved ones, committing to a lifetime together.

His uncle had been wrong. Rationally, Vlad had known that for a long time now, but it was the first time he knew it, felt it with every fiber of his being. Love was love. There was absolutely nothing wrong with loving someone of his own sex.

“Hey,” Sebastian said, touching him on the arm discreetly. “All right? You look odd.”

Vlad shifted his gaze from the happy couple to the man who all these months had put up with his shit without complaints, ever so understanding.

Sebastian’s dark eyes were fixed on him questioningly, his red lips pursed. In his

black tux, he looked particularly stunning that day.

His throat suddenly tight with emotion, Vlad wondered what he had done to deserve this man.

“I love you,” he said haltingly. Those three little words had been on the tip of his tongue so many times lately, but Vlad’s hang-ups had always prevented him from saying them. “I love you,” he said firmer when Sebastian’s eyes widened. “I’m in love with you.”

Sebastian blinked a few times, his mouth opening and closing. “Are you sure?”

The hopefulness, the vulnerability in his voice nearly broke Vlad’s heart. He’d had no idea how much Sebastian had needed him to say the words.

Instead of responding, Vlad leaned in and kissed Sebastian right there, in front of three hundred people and countless cameras. Camera flashes went off like crazy, but he found that he didn’t give a damn as long as Sebastian was grinning happily against his mouth.

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“I love you,” Vlad said again, because he could, because he fucking loved this person, adored everything about him.

“I love you, too,” Sebastian said thickly, looking at him with eyes that were a little moist.

He was beautiful. And he was his.

Vlad chuckled.

“What?” Sebastian said, taking his hand and threading their fingers together.

People were staring. Vlad didn’t give a fuck.

“In hindsight, I’m glad you slept with my girlfriend,” Vlad said, squeezing his fingers. “We should send Nina a thank you card.”

Sebastian grinned, looking at their entwined fingers, his eyes bright and happy. “Yeah,” he said softly. “Maybe we should.”

The End