



# My Next Door Omega

**Author:** *Ashe Moon*

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

**Description:** Kell Eden and Parker Leipold hate each other's guts.

They're the two best students in their program, but that's where their similarities end. Kell is an omega with a confidence problem, and he just can't understand why Parker always singles out his best work with the harshest critiques. He's always been a jerk from the very first moment they met, and Kell is certain it's because Parker has always lived his life in the lap of luxury.

Parker is an alpha who gives zero f\*cks. He knows he's the best at what he does, and what anyone else thinks about him doesn't matter—except when it comes to his home life. He's kept that a big secret, having been cut off by his parents for supporting his estranged brother and four-year-old nephew, who both live with him in his tiny apartment. With them to look after, Parker couldn't care less about anything else—especially not finding a mate.

When Kell and Parker get assigned as partners for a school project opposites attract, and the two rivals in close proximity find themselves struggling to deal with their unusual and (mostly) unwanted attraction. Especially when they realize they're next door neighbors.

**Total Pages (Source):** 42

# Page 1

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## Chapter One

Kelly "Kell"Eden dropped the last of his moving boxes into the middle of his new studio apartment and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the heel of his palm. With the scattering of disassembled furniture and cardboard shipping boxes filling up the space, there was hardly any room to move around. The place felt like the size of a damn cupboard—and it was still going to cost him a fortune. He'd had a decent sized place in a nice neighborhood, but rising rent costs had forced him to move out. Now he was living in Forest Glenn, a downgrade on all levels. Cheaper rent, but with the added distance and traffic he was now an extra forty-five minute drive away from both the Art and Design Academy and his job at ElectronicsWorld.

He hated that job.He hated the fact that even though most of his classmates were already working at firms or otherwise making an income with their art skills, he was stuck at a shitty retail job. For some dumb reason he just couldn't land a design job or sell his work, despite being an incredible artist. Instead, he was slinging computer supplies. It was discouraging that one of the best painters in the Art and Design Academy's illustration program was one of the few not making money from their work. But as skilled as he was, Kell had always had a problem selling himself. He thrived in a school environment, but when it came to the real world, he'd always struggled with shyness. Even his best friend, Jessie, was great at putting herself out there. Even though she'd always been an airy, head-in-the-clouds type of girl, she was absolutely fearless about getting her work in front of prospective buyers, clients and galleries.

Jessie lay across one of the large sized moving boxes, her chin in her palm. She was drawing in her sketchbook as she watched Kell. She yawned and stretched, cat-like.

She'd come over to help him move, but in the end, she'd only helped him with the big stuff before retreating into her sketchbook. He didn't really mind, though. He was just glad for the company.

"Send Noods," she said, flipping onto her back and holding her sketchbook high into the air.

Kell cut open a box marked "Supplies" and pulled out his roll of gouache brushes, paints, and a portfolio case that contained his latest project, and set them against the wall next to his naked mattress. "Say what?" he said.

"Send Noods," Jessie repeated, closing her sketchbook. She'd done a series of figure sketches of Kell lugging his moving boxes into the room. "That's where we should go for dinner tonight. I looked it up on the internet, it's nearby. Apparently, they've got some of the best ramen in the city. The chef is famous, or something."

"Oh, okay. That sounds pretty good." He found an open space on the carpet and plonked himself down, exhausted. "God, I hate moving."

"You sure you'll have time for dinner?" Jessie asked. "We've got that project due tomorrow. You got it all finished?"

He snorted. "Of course I've got it finished. Anyway, I promised I'd get you dinner for helping me out. Do you want to see what I painted for the project?"

She grinned. "Hell yeah. Let's see, let's see."

He unzipped the portfolio case and pulled out three thin boards with gouache paper mounted onto them and turned them to Jessie. She took them and spread the paintings out on the floor in front of her.

"Love this linework," she said, her eyes widening. "Wow, what a great series. Gorgeous."

He'd spent the past two weeks working on this school project, a series focusing on pregnant omegas. Each painting was of a different man surrounded by different types of plants or flowers, and Kell felt like it was some of his finest work. The lighting and poses were definitely on point, the style managing to be painterly, yet tight at the same time.

"Thanks, Jessie," he said, feeling even better about the work with her endorsement. He held Jessie's opinion in high regard. The two of them had met in freshman year in a lower division art class they both shared and had bonded over a love of Japanese food and similar artistic tastes. They became close very quickly, supporting each other through the stresses of deadlines and projects and creative droughts. Kell hadn't had many friends as close as Jessie before, and he wondered if he weren't an omega, maybe the two of them would've become a couple.

Kell didn't know what it was like to have a boyfriend. It wasn't that he didn't want one or wasn't interested. It was just that no alphas had ever asked him out during high school, and he'd been too shy to make his own moves. Now that he was at ADA, one of the most intensive art schools in California, Kell just sort of resigned to the reality that he probably was going to die single and alone. With all the projects he had to do, not to mention his job, there was hardly any time to even think about dating. Not that that did anything to lessen the aching desire he felt every time he passed a hot-as-fuck alpha. Kell craved one. He was dying to know what it would be like to be with one, and there were more than a couple men in his program that he wasn't ashamed to admit he'd fantasized about.

After returning the moving truck to the rental shop, Kell and Jessie went to grab dinner at Send Noods. The place was a small joint, with counter seating and a few tables. The two of them chose to sit at the counter, mostly because they wanted to

gawk at the hot alpha owner and chef who was cooking up bowls of piping hot noodles right in front of them.

"Two orders of miso ramen," the hottie chef said, placing the steaming bowls down onto the counter. "Enjoy my noodles." He winked and turned back to the stove.

"You know," Jessie said as she separated her disposable chopsticks, "I think I'd be cool with driving all the way over here to visit you. As long as we can eat here everytime."

"Uh-huh," Kell said, as he distractedly did his best to not stare too hard at the ramen chef's firm and shapely behind. He looked over and was surprised to see Jessie had pulled out her sketchbook and was doing a figure drawing of the guy—only he was completely naked and holding a bowl of ramen in his upturned palm. Kell reached over and quickly shut Jessie's sketchbook. "You're going to get us kicked out of another restaurant," he hissed at her.

"Maybe I should ask him to send me some real nudes," she said, and dug her chopsticks into her ramen.

Kell laughed nervously, and she said, "You think I'm joking?" with a sly smile.

"Just eat your damn noodles and stop fantasizing about this noodle," Kell said.

"Don't pretend like you aren't."

Kell slurped down a mouthful of ramen noodles. They were perfect—al dente and obviously handmade, soaked in the umami flavor of the broth. He was no noodle expert, given the only ramen he could typically afford to eat was served out of a Styrofoam cup, but he knew this stuff deserved praise. He felt a tingle of excitement as he wondered what it'd be like to slurp down something else that belonged to that

hot alphachef.

"It's kind of ridiculous,"he said to her. "I've been so horny recently, it's almost out ofcontrol."

"That's no surprise,"she replied. "You're probably in heat. You need to get laid, Kell, or else you're gonna explode. I'm sure we could find you a guy. You're a good-looking dude. Just a little awkward, that's all. But I don't think you'd have any problem getting picked up if you went and sat at an alpha-omegabar."

"I'm not a fan of bars,"he said. "You know that. Orclubs."

"Yeah,but... those are the easiest places to meet alphas. To be honest with you, I don't understand why you haven't already had alphas asking you out. Like,someoneat school has to be intoyou."

"And yet, it's never happened,"he said. "I'm justcursed."

## Page 2

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"You just need to take things into your own hands," she said. "There's a bunch of hot guys in our program, right? Ask one of them out."

Kell's face went hot, and he cleared his throat. "No... I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Most of them have omegas or betas already. And besides, there's no damn time for that. We're all so busy with school. And... I just don't want to ask."

"I think that's probably all it is," Jessie said. "Right?"

"What about you?" he said, taking his chance to dive out of the spotlight. "It's not like you have a boyfriend."

"Yeah," she said, unaffected. She fished out a hard-boiled egg from her soup and ate half of it. "But it's also not like I'm not getting laid. You don't need to be in a relationship to fuck."

Kell didn't really like the idea of casual sex like that. He'd rather stay frustrated than just fuck for the sake of it. He wanted it to be with someone special—or no one at all. He had it all imagined out. Candles. Perfume. A big fluffy bed in a fancy hotel.

The chef leaned over the counter and smiled at the two of them. "How's everything tasting?" he asked.

"Great," Kell stammered, flustered by the chef's handsome smile.

Hereallyhopedthat it wouldn't end up being with no one atall.

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The Artand Design Academy was renowned for producing some of the finest designers and artists in the world. Kell had always known he'd wanted to study illustration there and had worked his ass off to get accepted. Six figure tuition or not, he'dhadto go to ADA. With the strength of his portfolio he was easily accepted and was without a doubt one of the most skilled artists in his program. In his eyes, there was only one other student who produced work at his level. That other student was Parker Leipold, alpha and residentasshole.

Kell didhis best to get along with everyone. He provided help and advice when asked, he was always friendly, he stayed out of drama. There was no reason for anyone to dislike him, and yet Parker Leipold had always remained a jerk from the first day they'd met in freshman year. It was true that Parker was generally cold toeveryone, but for some reason he seemed to be especially standoffish to Kell. It bugged the hell out of him. What had he done to offend theguy?

Parker came from a rich family,but he wasn't one of those kids at ADA who'd simply bought their way into the school. Parker was insanely talented, to the point where it both awed and intimidated most of the other students. His talent only annoyed Kell, because he made it seem so damn effortless. Kell had worked his ass off developing his skills to get to this level, and here was a guy who seemed to naturally be that good at it. His compositions were incredible and complex, his lighting and color techniques perfect, and when he painted people he had a way of giving them the most incredible life and vitality. Watching Parker work was an exercise in frustration for Kell. He hated that he felt that way, but he couldn't helpit.

Today,the class would turn in their projects for critique, and Kell was excited to get some feedback on his work—but more than that, he was looking forward to the



praise. It was his best work, after all. He'd put together a killer series of paintings. He was positive that this time, not even Parker would be able to say anything about it.

Students filled the classroom, working on hanging up their work onto the walls for display. Kell popped in his earbuds to listen to music as he removed his paintings from his portfolio case and started to mount them at his display space. He stayed focused on his area, resisting the urge to look around at everyone else's work. He liked to wait until the critique session to look so that he could give everyone the full and proper attention they deserved.

He placed mounting adhesive onto the back of the second of his paintings and placed it up on the wall and stepped back to examine it. Jessie was next to him, and she also worked quietly with earbuds in. Chris, a beta whose display was next to Jessie's, came up to her and said something, gesturing across the room. Jessie glanced over to where he was pointing, and the two of them walked away together. Kell looked over his shoulder to see where they were going, and to his surprise he saw that the entire class had gathered around one display space, gawking at whatever was there. Curious, he pulled his earbuds from his ears.

"Holy shit," someone muttered. "That's just insane."

"Parker does it again," said someone else.

Kell left this display and went over to the huddle and peered through. Parker seemed to not even notice that the entire class had gathered around his work. He had a pair of over-ear headphones on and was putting up his third painting. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing muscled forearms that were splattered in dried paint, like he hadn't bothered to wash after finishing his work. He stepped away from the triptych of paintings and tilted his head, examining them. Kell hated that bored expression Parker always seemed to wear, like nothing was a challenge for him, and it annoyed the hell out of him that the guy didn't even seem to care that everyone was checking

his paintings out.

"I've got a lot to learn," Chris sighed, walking away.

Kell didn't want to look before the critique, but he couldn't help himself. He shuffled forward to get a view of the work, and his jaw dropped. God damn. What he saw up on the wall were absolute masterpieces. They were figure paintings, but done in a sort of impressionist, abstract style, with an energetic brushwork that got Kell's blood pumping. The way the paint danced across the canvas, creating shapes and structures that seemed to explode off into 3D space... He hated to admit it, but it was incredible. Parker was incredible.

Jessie turned away and walked back to her display, patting Kell on the shoulder as she passed him. "Parker hits another out of the park."

Kell grunted and returned to his paintings. He stared at his trio of pregnant omegas, which now seemed so drab and lifeless in the wake of Parker's work. Dammit. He shouldn't have looked.

"Alright, alright!" The classroom door opened and Professor Young entered. "We've got to get through everyone's work today, so let's get the critiques started right away. I hope everyone's prepared? Good, Good. Quiet down please. Shh shh shh." The murmur of classroom chatter faded as Professor Young pushed a flattened palm down through the air, like a conductor silencing an orchestra.

Professor Young made his way over to the nearest project to him, belonging to a girl named Sammie. The class gathered around the painting, and Professor Young examined the work, first at a distance and then up close, his face just a few inches away from its surface. After a quick moment of contemplation, he gave his thoughts. His critique was basically what Kell would've said—she'd done a good job of capturing movement in the work, but her use of color was uninspired and didn't serve

the overall painting.

"Anyone else have comments?" Professor Young asked.

Parker raised his hand.

"Parker. Go ahead."

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"You did a good job with the capturing the force of the model's pose," he said, his arms crossed solidly over his chest. "I remember you had trouble with that in your last projects."

Sammie nodded enthusiastically with stars in her eyes. She looked enchanted to have received a compliment from Parker Leipold. Kell privately rolled his eyes.

"Thank you, Parker," Professor Young said. "Anyone else? No? Alright. Next is... Parker. Let's see."

The class moved to Parker's triptych. Professor Young chuckled to himself as he examined the work, like he was in disbelief of what he was seeing. He turned to face the class. "Well. Not to say I'm surprised, given the quality of work Mr. Leipold has produced over the quarter. But I must say, I'm impressed. Very impressed. I can feel the energy behind every brush stroke, the vitality. I would say it has an almost Van Gogh quality to it, but that wouldn't give you enough credit for your originality."

"Thank you, Professor," Parker said. He didn't smile, just nodded slightly. It seemed to Kell like Parker had been expecting the praise. Perfect, as usual.

"Anyone have a critique for Parker?"

"It's so beautiful," Andrew said. Andrew was an omega, and it was obvious to Kell that he had the hots for Parker. How anyone could have the hots for someone so damn nice was beyond him. The guy was physically attractive, he couldn't deny that. But beyond that... He was just a stuck-up jerk. Kell thought so, anyway. "I love what you did with their eyes," Andrew went on. "It feels like you can see their souls. Like

they're alive. I think what you've done is amazing."

Parker nodded in acknowledgement but said nothing. Kell wished he could come up with a critique for Parker's project, but there was nothing he could say. Perfect, as usual.

Professor Young went around the room, continuing the critique session. For each project, Parker had something to say. Nothing too complimentary, but generally positive and constructive. Jessie's project got an all-around good response, and Kell exchanged a grin with her. "Good job," he whispered to her.

"Thanks," she replied. "You're up."

The class gathered around Kell's paintings, murmuring with approval at what they saw. Professor Young did his examination routine, taking it in at a distance and then up close. He nodded to himself and pointed towards the first painting.

"Lovely lighting here, Kelly," he said. "Beautifully rendered. Very naturalistic. Excellent work, as always."

"Thank you, sir," Kell said, pleased.

"Comments on Kelly's work?"

There was a murmur of general agreement that he'd produced some gorgeous work. Jessie complimented his technical prowess in the rendering of the figure's anatomy. Andrew said that he appreciated the subject matter. Then, Parker spoke up.

"It's not your best work," he said, coolly, and Kell felt a knot rise in his throat. "Technically it's sound," Parker went on, "but the composition is uninspired. The way they're just holding their pregnant bellies, looking slightly away from the viewer. It

feels distant. There's no courage. I get the sense you were afraid of something, like you were afraid to dive in all the way and engage themodels."

Professor Young stroked his chin,and looked back at the paintings, like he was verifying something he'd missed. "Response to that, Kelly?" heasked.

Kell crossedhis arms over his chest to hide the fact that he'd balled his hands into tight, white-knuckled fists. He felt his face going hot with embarrassment. He shouldn't have been embarrassed. It was a critique. He could take critiques—hehadto be able to take them, it was the only way to improve. But hearing it coming from Parker's mouth had his heart pumping with irritation. He knew everything that Parker had said was completely accurate. What he'd not so long ago thought was his best now crumbled before him, all the flaws now completelyevident.

He shook his head. "No,"hesaid.

No courage.Afraid.

Dammit,that'd cut deep. It was so accurate. How was it that Parker could see all that so clearly, just from looking at the painting? Because it was completely true, and Kell knewit.

The class turned awayfrom his painting, leaving him stewing in frustrated irritation. Parker walked away, without so much as another word of acknowledgement to Kell. It was like he'd come by just to destroy him. Maybe he shouldn't have been surprised. It wasn't the first time that Parker had done that to him. He always seemed to have a harsh word to say about Kell's work. He always seemed to be looking down on him. And yet, Kell had never said a word about it. He'd only ever just stewed about it, like he wasnow.

No courage.

That'd always been his problem. He wasn't the most assertive person.

"Jeez," Jessie said quietly to Kell. "That was a little rough."

"It was true, though, and I didn't even know it," Kell grumbled. "He totally saw right through me."

"Good work completing your projects," Professor Young said. "That's all the time we have for today. Next class we'll be discussing the marketing design project that we have coming up next. Please leave your work up so that the lower division classes can take a look at them, and I'll see you later."

The class filled with discussion and the sound of backpacks and portfolio cases being zipped up and closed. Some people hung around to check out the artwork, and of course Parker's display had a large crowd around it. People were even taking photos of them. Parker, however, wasn't sticking around. He hugged his portfolio case underneath his arm and slung his backpack over one shoulder and headed out of the room.

"Wanna grab some lunch?" Jessie asked, yawning. "Critiques always make me hungry."

Kell watched Parker disappear out the door, his critique still burning in his mind. He hated that he always had nothing to say to Parker. He hated that he always just took it from him. Why the hell was he the only person in the class that Parker had something really critical to say about?

They left the room. Down at the end of the hallway, he saw Andrew run up to Parker and stop him, no doubt to continue gushing to him about his paintings. Kell stopped. Dammit, he was tired of this shit. He had to speak up this time.

"I'll catch up with you," he told Jessie, and strode down the hallway towards Parker.



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### Chapter Two

"I thought it might be...I mean, I was wondering if maybe you might want to go out with me sometime?" Andrew asked, his voice unsteady.

Kell slowed his approach as he overheard what was being said. So, Andrew wasn't going to gush to Parker about his project, he was asking him out.

"I don't think so," Parker said, flatly.

Andrew looked taken aback. "Or maybe we could just get to know each other first?"

"Sorry. I've told you, you're not my type."

"What is your type?" Andrew asked. "I could become your type..."

"That's not possible," Parker replied, looking completely unsympathetic to Andrew's feelings.

"Why not?"

Parker looked at him, his blue eyes as cold as glaciers. "You've got no talent."

Andrew's mouth opened and closed, like a fish gasping for breath. He looked shattered. "I-I..." He couldn't summon anything else to say, so he turned and quickly walked away, his head down. He rushed by Kell, who was stunned at the brutal rejection. Parker turned to leave.

"Hey," Kell said, walking after him. "Hey!"

Parker stopped. "You're not going to ask me out too, are you?"

"Why did you have to be such a dick?" Kell said, angrily. "That was really unnecessary, what you said to him. Did you have to be so mean?"

"I was being honest," Parker said. "Anyway, this isn't the first time he's tried that. He doesn't know how to take 'no' for an answer."

"Well...still. What's your problem, anyway?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your critique. You gave positive feedback to everyone else in the class, except me. Why was mine the only one you tore apart?"

"I didn't realize you cared so much about my opinion, Kell."

"I don't. You've just always been a bit of... well, a bit of a prick to me, and I want to know why that is."

Parker frowned. "I don't see it that way at all."

Kell was shocked. "You don't think you've been a prick?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You constantly single me out. You always have, ever since the first class we had together. And you've always been short with me whenever I've tried to talk to you."

"Maybe I'm short with everyone," Parker suggested.

Kell stared at him. Parker was tall and trim, with an athletically slender build. He looked like he did gymnastics, or something like that. Kell wouldn't have been surprised if he was a skilled gymnast or martial artist. The guy was probably good at everything he did. And he was always well dressed, with impeccable style. He was practically Mr. Perfect. Mr. Perfectly Infuriating.

"Okay, I'll give you that," Kell said. "But I'm tired of you gouging the hell out of every one of my projects. Why do you do that?"

Parker eyed him, his expression unchanging. "I would've thought it'd be obvious."

Obvious? What the hell was he talking about?

"Um, no?" Kell said.

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Parker gave him a look. "Well, that's too bad, then. I have to get going. I'll see you in classtomorrow."

"Hey, wait—" Kell said, but Parker was already out the door. He stared after him, the door shutting behind him. Kell gritted his teeth. "What the heck?" He'd been left even more annoyed than he had been before. Obvious?! What was so obvious about any of this? "Dammit," he muttered to himself, and turned for the other exit at the opposite end of the hall.

He found Jessie in the campus cafe and plonked himself down in the seat across from her. She looked up from her cell phone as she munched on a burger, and Kell stole a French fry from her tray and stuffed it into his mouth.

"What is up with that guy?" he asked, stealing another fry.

"Who?"

"Parker. I went and talked to him."

"Really?" She looked surprised. "About what?"

"I wanted to know why he's always such an ass about my work. It's always me, specifically. You've noticed that, right?"

"Uh-huh. What'd he say?"

"I thought it would be obvious," Kell said, imitating Parker's voice. "What the heck is

that supposed to mean? And I overheard Andrew asking him out."

Jessie raised an eyebrow. "No way?"

"Yeah, and you know what he said to him? Basically that he only likes talented people. Man, what an ass."

"Poor Andrew," Jessie said. She finished her burger and pulled out her sketch book. She liked to do quick sketches of people sitting around the cafe during her breaks. She pulled out a ballpoint pen and clicked it against her chin. "Maybe it's because Parker thinks you're talented."

"What?"

"Maybe you're the only one he's super critical about because he thinks you're talented? I mean, you are."

Kell felt his heart do a flip, much to his surprise. The idea of Parker noticing his work... of actually acknowledging that he liked it. Kell had never considered that before, because Parker had never once paid him a compliment on it. It'd always just been harsh criticism.

Or, had he...?

This isn't your best work. That was what he'd said, wasn't it? So, Parker thought that there were other projects he'd done better? Was he actually paying attention to them and not just putting them down?

"He's never said a single nice thing to me," Kell said, and stole another fry from Jessie's tray. She slapped his hand.

"Alright, that's enough, fry thief."

He smiled apologetically. "I'm gonna grab some food."

The cafeteria bustled with people, and he wound through people holding trays of food, bottles of soda and cups of coffee to get to the line for burgers. His mind was occupied with what Jessie had just said. Had Parker actually been critiquing him hard because he liked his work? But why the hell didn't he do that to anyone else in the class? There were plenty of other really skilled artists, and yet all of them got fair criticisms from Parker. The guy was never so harsh to everyone else. Kell couldn't wrap his head around it. If he liked people's work, he wouldn't just tear it apart every time, he'd give it fair criticism, and that included compliments.

I'm only attracted to people with talent.

Parker's voice echoed in Kell's mind, and he felt his face grow hot. He shook his head, trying to clear the weird thoughts away. Parker thinking he was attractive? No, that'd be really weird, even though he was pretty cute...

Kell grimaced. Oh, god. How could he even think something like that about Parker 'Jerkface' Leopold? The guy was an ass. A guy like that would probably be a terrible boyfriend. Not that he really had any actual experience knowing what made a boyfriend good or bad, but he could imagine Parker being a nightmare. The guy'd probably criticize his kissing technique. "Too much tongue. You've kissed better, before."

He snorted to himself. And sex? Could he imagine doing it with a guy like that? It'd probably be horribly rough and hard, more like a beating than anything else. Not romantic at all. Shit, he imagined Parker would probably be into hardcore BDSM, or something, with a heavy serving of S.

All sortsof graphic images popped into Kell's mind at that moment, and he felt his face grow hot and his cocktwitch.

Wait,wait, wait, he thought.No, that's not supposed to happen.Why am I getting turned on bythis?

"Are you ready or not?"

Kell snappedout of his thoughts. The girl manning the cash register stared at him, smacking away at a piece of gum. "What's your order?" she said,annoyed.

"Oh,sorry. I'll have a cheeseburger and fries,please."

He paidfor his meal and stepped aside to wait for it to be ready, his thoughts returning to Parker. The guy was an ass, end of story. Had it been middle or high school, Parker would've probably been the guy who'd 'accidentally' spilled paint all over his work. Or stole his clothes from the locker during PE. Or any of the bullshit Kell'd had to deal with back then. He could just tell—he was one of those rich kids who'd always had an easy time in life, and probably would have an easy life until he died. Parker was probably working already, too. He'd overheard him talking about some design job for a family friend's company. Ofcourse.

Nah,there was no way Parker thought anything good about him. And there was no way that Kell would ever likehim.

### Chapter Three

Parker sat in front of his pen tablet computer in a row of ten other artists all doing the same. He stared blankly at the revision e-mail that'd just come in for the illustration he was currently working. "We'd like it to be happier, brighter," it said. "Focus more on the soda can. The product needs to sing. Family value. Bigemotion!"

"What the fuck does that even mean?" he muttered to himself. The way the higher-ups spoke about design revisions was always like a completely foreign language. Bigemotion?

He opened up the illustration file and picked up his stylus. Time to redo this whole thing, then. He was more exhausted than usual, not just from splitting time between this project and the last school project, which had been more intensive than most, but because he'd been fretting all day about the dinner he was going to have with Mom and Dad that night. They'd all but cut contact since he'd taken in his brother William and his son six months ago.

His parents had disowned William when he'd gotten pregnant four years ago with Nate. William was seventeen, and he'd gone to live with his alpha boyfriend, who'd promised he would take care of them. That situation had gone downhill almost immediately. Surprise, the man was a piece of shit, and William had held on living with him for four years before calling up Parker for help. Parker had gone to his rescue, extracting him and Nate and bringing them to his luxury condo. Of course, because Mom and Dad owned the condo, they weren't too happy to find that out. He'd had to vacate, and the three of them moved into a cramped one-bedroom apartment together.



Parker'd senthis parents e-mails, written letters, made calls, and left messages pleading their case and asking for them for assistance. The responses had always been sparse. It wasn't until the night before that they'd contacted him, asking him to meet them fordinner.

He brougthis stylus to the screen and started to make adjustments to the illustration. The office was mostly silent, with soft clicking of keys as everyone around him worked on their projects. He hated this job. Not because of the ridiculous revision demands; those were expected with pretty much any client. He just hated what he was creating. Advertisements for junk food. He was capable of way more with his abilities, he knew that for certain. He wanted to be creating work that reallymovedpeople. Challenging, beautiful work. That was what he expected out of his artwork—and everyone else's, too, especially those who had real skill. And there were very few who he thought had realskill.

Lots of peoplecould imitate styles, could paint by the numbers, could replicate light and render in a pleasing way on a canvas or piece of paper or computer screen. But very few could inject life and meaning and real passion into the work. Very few could make things that could touch people. And that was what Parker strived for. That's what he wanted to be doing with his life. Anything less was just... infuriating. It seriously pissed him off to think aboutit.

He finishedup with his revisions to the project and dropped it into the network folder for review. He'd upped the saturation and changed the position of the soda cup in the composition to make it even more dominant. He had no clue if he'd achieved "big emotion." Chances were the people giving the okay on the work probably had no idea what they meant by it,either.

He opened up his e-mail.The inbox was stacked with revision requests for dozens of other projects he was working on. He sighed and clicked on the next one.Just fucking end me,now.

After work, Parker got stuck in traffic driving to the opposite end of the city to meet his parents at an Italian restaurant they'd chosen for dinner. Of course, they'd refused to meet closer to his apartment. "Oh, but Beverly Hills is so much nicer," Mom had said. "And we know the restaurants there." He knew she really meant—his new neighborhood was too poor. Too frightening for her to deal with. Ridiculous.

He pulled into the parking lot and a valet attendant opened his door for him. He sighed, wishing he didn't have to pay for something so excessive, but at least it was on his parents' dime. He forked over some cash and jogged up the steps to the restaurant. The host led him inside to where his parents were seated. Mom was staring into a glass of wine and Dad was looking off somewhere, probably dealing with an awkward silence. Parker couldn't remember the last time he saw them have a normal, friendly conversation. They only talked at each other, barking out opinions about this person or that thing, or about chores that needed to get done around the house.

When he approached the table, his parents glanced up at him. He paused for a moment, waiting to see if they'd rise to greet him, but Mom only smiled thinly at him. Dad nodded and uttered a gruff, "Parker."

"Hi, Mom, hi, Dad," he said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. His heart throbbed loudly in his chest. He was nervous, more than he'd expected. It wasn't the reunion he'd been hoping for, and he sensed bad news coming.

"Traffic coming here?" Dad asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Sorry I'm late."

"I tried to convince your mother to change the reservation to Zangaro's. It would've been a little closer, at least."

Huh. A concession. Maybe that was a good sign?

"Zangaro's has horrid service," Mom said. "And the last time we went, the valet scratched the car. Don't tell me you've forgotten?"

"No, of course I remember," Dad said, irritated.

Parker glanced through the menu, not feeling very hungry. He just wanted to get to the point. What had they called him here for? The waiter came and the three of them made their orders, and after he'd gone, a silence descended on the table, like everyone was trying to figure out what to say.

"How's work?" Mom asked. "I hope you're doing your best. You know your father had to call in a favor with Mr. Lansing to get you that job."

"Work's fine, Mom," Parker said. "It's busy. Lots to do."

She and Dad exchanged a glance. "Good. So, you have a secure position there?"

"It seems that way," he said. It was just like them to ask about work and not about his art. It'd been that way for nearly his entire life. In fact, if his conviction to become an artist had been any weaker, his parents would've probably convinced him to give it up when he was just a kid. They'd tried multiple times to get him to do something more 'practical', but he'd always known he wanted to do art. "They've got my team working on a big marketing campaign for Bingo Soda. Looks like there's going to be more projects with them."

"Fabulous," she said.

A moment of silence, again. Weren't they going to ask about William? Or about their grandson? Didn't they care to know how they were doing? He waited until it became

too irritating to bear.

"William and Nate are doing well," he said. "We're talking about using some of my funds to put Nate in preschool. He's a great kid. You'd love him."

His parents exchanged another glance. "No, Parker, we can't allow that," Dad said.

"What?"

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"We haven't forgiven William for what he did," said Mom. "Having a child with an alpha who's not his mate. It's a disgrace to the family, you know that."

Parker felt a flush of anger and fought to quell it. "He's your son. He made some poor decisions, but he's grown a lot. And he's raising Nate—your grandson—the best he can. He's not a disgrace, Mom. Not any more than I am."

"No, you're not," Dad said. "But we just cannot approve of you sacrificing your time and your resources for your brother. More importantly, nor can we approve of you using the family resources for that purpose. We've cut your brother off for a reason, Parker. You can't just support him using your family funds."

"And what? Just leave him and my nephew to fend for themselves? You've already reduced my funds as it is."

"That's what we wanted to speak to you about, Parker," said Dad. "We can't approve of you using our money any further. If you're going to continue assisting William, we will have to cut off the remainder of your funds."

He blinked in disbelief. "The three of us are living in a one-bedroom apartment," he said. "I've already reduced the expenses as much as possible to avoid dipping into the trust. You aren't seriously saying you're going to cut me off. I'm helping my brother."

"That's exactly what we're saying," said Dad. "Anyway, you have a good job. You can support yourself, and we'll still be taking care of the tuition. And once your brother goes off on his own, you can have access to the family money again."

"And you can start thinking about finding yourself a mate," Mom started.

"Fuck that!" Parker said, unable to keep his voice from raising. There was a murmur as eyes turned towards their table. His parents looked horrified.

"Parker!"

"Settle down," Dad said. "The food is here."

The waiter maneuvered over to their table, and the three of them sat in silence as he placed the plates of pasta in front of them. Parker was seething. He felt ill. He hadn't had time to eat a bite since breakfast, but his anger wiped away the hunger. It wasn't about the money. He knew Mom and Dad had always been practically insane, but just couldn't believe that they were this uncaring. Were their principles worth that much to them that they'd be willing to cut off both of their sons?

"Anyway," Mom said, speaking in fast, hushed tones, trying to maneuver the conversation to a lighter ground. "It's about time you found yourself someone. You'll be graduating soon, and you'll want to start a family of your own."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing," Parker said. "This is insanity. You both are crazy, you know that?"

They stared at him like he was speaking a foreign language. Mom gingerly placed her napkin into her lap and pierced one of the stuffed ravioli with her fork, taking a dainty bite from it.

"Mm," she said. "Delicious. I'm glad we came here and not Zangaro's. Their ravioli is horrid."

Parker pushed away from the table, his chair groaning loudly across the floor. "You

can forget about me," he said. "If this is how we treat our family, I don't want any part of it anymore."

"Parker," Dad said, sternly, like he was talking to a child. "Sit down. Eat your food."

"Go to hell," Parker growled. He turned heel and marched out of the restaurant, leaving his parents sitting stunned. He didn't bother to look back at them. They might've been calling to him to come back, Mom might've been shouting, he didn't know. He wasn't listening. He couldn't hear anything over the angry pounding of his heart and the rush of blood in his ears. The valet arrived with his car, and Parker got inside, slamming the door. He pulled out of the parking lot, onto the street and then onto the highway, putting enough miles in between him and his parents so that he could finally breathe again.

Screw them.

He was going to be there for his brother and his nephew. He wasn't going to let them treat them this way. The money didn't matter. He could care less about his inheritance. He could support them on his own—and he would.

Parker pulled into the parking lot of his apartment complex and spent a few minutes in the car, breathing slowly, trying to cool down. He'd always had a bit of a hot temper and had been working on getting it under control. It was difficult for him to keep whatever was on his mind to himself. If he was pissed, he had no qualms about telling it like it was. He'd made his fair share of enemies that way, but he really didn't give a damn. He had William and Nate, and he had his art. He didn't need anyone or anything else.

He'd never been in a proper relationship, either. Not once. It wasn't like he didn't find omegas and betas attractive, he definitely did, it was just that his personality had always prevented him from getting close to anyone. Sure, he'd hooked up with a few

people before, but real relationships were out of the question. People were intimidated by him, and he wasn't concerned enough about it to try and make people feel comfortable. So he'd just gotten used to being single, and as the years went by he realized that his standards were just getting higher and higher anyway. Just being good looking wasn't enough. He couldn't find himself attracted to someone who wasn't motivated, skilled and talented. Parker knew he was being unreasonable, but he didn't really care. He had limited time in this world, and he wasn't going to waste it on just anyone. He saw no problem with that.

There were few people he could think of that he even found attractive. There was really only one, but that guy seemed to dislike him, anyway. And also, he was way too insecure. Parker didn't like that. In fact, the more he thought about that guy, the more he realized how annoying he was.

He could hear William scolding him. "You're never gonna get laid if you have these ridiculous standards."

Parker took a deep breath. He felt calmer now. He'd have to give William the news. Without access to the family fund, money was about to become really tight. He'd do what he could to send Nate to preschool. He had to.

He got out of the car and headed through the complex. As he passed by the rows of front doors he caught vignettes of other lives: of televisions blaring in living rooms, of a couple having a shouting match, of babies crying and the smell of dinners on the stove. A cacophony of life that he was still getting used to. The family condo had been up in the Hollywood Hills, private and secluded from the lives of neighbors.

He turned a corner into the hallway leading to his apartment and collided shoulders with a man hurrying by. The guy was lugging several bags with him, and they dropped onto the floor as he stumbled backwards from the impact.



"Sorry," Parker said, stooping over to collect the fallen bags. He realized they weren't just normal bags—they were portfolio cases, much like the ones he used to transport his own artwork.

"Sorry," the guy mumbled. Parker turned to give the cases to him and froze when he saw who it was.

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Kell Eden stared back at him, equally stunned. The cases slipped from Kell's hand and dropped back onto the ground.

"What are you doing here?" both of them said in unison. Kell stared at him for a moment before quickly averting his gaze. Parker frowned. He didn't let it show, but he was flustered. Why was Kell Eden at his apartment? The one guy in school with real talent. The only guy he was interested in. It was like he'd summoned him here.

Christ, why the hell was Kell so shy? The guy was looking around like he was expecting a camera crew to pop out and tell him he was being pranked. It was frustrating, but at the same time, Parker found it strangely... cute? He was really attractive, with soft hazel eyes and a bright, curious face. But it was Kell's art that really attracted Parker. Despite his mild-mannered exterior, Parker could see the passion burning inside him through his artwork. Kell's work spoke more about his personality, his emotions, his soul than any words could. Except for his latest project. That one really was garbage, compared to his other work.

"I live here," Kell muttered.

Parker blinked. "I've never seen you around here before."

"I just moved in yesterday," replied Kell, still looking like he was expecting to be told he was being pranked. "Why are you here, anyway?"

"I live here, too," Parker replied flatly. Kell stared at him, looking horrified. "I guess we're neighbors," Parker said.

Kell quickly scooped up the portfolio cases from the ground. "Yeah, I guess so," he said. He didn't look well. "Uh, I should get going. Bye." He hurried past Parker and disappeared around the corner. Parker stood there, absorbing what'd just happened. What was his problem?

Neighbors.

Weird.

He opened the door to the apartment and was greeted by Nate, who came sprinting at him holding a toy spaceship. "Uncle Parker!" he squealed. "Vrroooooom. Pshaowpshaow!"

"Whoa," Parker said, allowing a smile to cross his lips. "Hey, kid. What're you playing?"

"This is another planet," Nate explained. "I'm finding aliens. Swishhhhh!" He arced the ship through the air and ran through the living room, hopping up onto the couch.

William peeked his head out from the kitchen. "Hey, Parker." His brother eyed him, looking to his expression for good or bad news. Then he smiled, sadly. He could see it in Parker's face. "It didn't go well."

Parker shook his head and sat down at the table. "No."

"I just made some food. Want some? Something tells me you didn't stick around to eat with Mom and Dad."

He chuckled. "Nope. I got the hell out of there as soon as they started talking their nonsense. I'm starving."

"Nate! Dinner."

The three of them sat around the table, quietly eating the roasted chicken breast and broccoli that William had made. Nate's spaceship sat next to his plate, and every so often he picked it up and flew it around.

"So, what happened?" William asked.

Parker sighed. He'd been going over in his mind how to break the news to William and had not been able to think of any easy way to say it. "Mom and Dad are cutting me off, too."

"Oh my god. Seriously?"

"Yep. They don't like that I'm helping you. They said, as soon as I stop I can have access to the trust again. So I told them to get f-u-c-k-e-d."

"Jesus, Parker. You shouldn't have done that... You've already done enough for us. Way more than I could ever expect. That's... that's your inheritance."

"That's our inheritance, and it means nothing if we can't share it. Anyway, if Mom and Dad are going to use family money to try and wedge us apart, then I want no part in it. I've got no need for it. My future hasn't changed."

William shook his head in disbelief. "I never thought they'd go this far just to punish me."

"You don't deserve this, William," Parker said. "Neither does Nate. We're family. I'm going to stick by you, no matter what happens. Okay?"

William smiled sadly. "Thanks, Parker."

"We'll get Nate into preschool."

"You've had enough responsibility,"said William. "I'll start looking for work, rightaway."

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"But Nate?"

"I'll find him a daycare. I'll cover that. I can't expect you to continue to pay for everything, now that's coming from your own pocket." He straightened. "We can stand on our own."

He nodded at William. "Okay. But if it gets to be too much..."

"No, Parker. I've gotta take care of this, now. I've gone for too long relying on your help. On others' help. It's time I took full responsibility."

William had already dealt with so much, far more than he should have, and had already shown plenty of responsibility. But Parker knew better than to argue with his brother.

"Something weird happened earlier," Parker said.

"What?"

"Do you remember the guy I told you about? From my class?"

"The one you like?"

Against all effort, Parker felt his face flush hot. "I don't like him," he growled. "I just think he's a good artist."

"Okay," William said, smirking.

"I'm serious," Parker said.

William put his hands up in surrender. "Alright, alright. You don't like him. Even though that one time you said that he was hot."

"I was drunk. That doesn't count."

"Parker, you're never gonna get laid if you can't just admit that you're attracted to someone."

He laughed. "Who said I cared about that? You're more concerned about me getting laid than I am."

His brother shrugged. "Hey, man. I just worry about you sometimes, that's all. It's not good to be so isolated."

"I'm not. I've got you two." He smiled a lopsided grin at Nate. "Right, kid?"

Nate was playing with his spaceship and wasn't paying attention to what was being said, but he nodded anyway. "Daddy, can I be excused?"

"Go wash up," William said to him, and the little boy slipped off his chair and toddled off to the bedroom that he shared with his father, making spaceship noises as he went.

"Anyway," said Parker. "That guy. I ran into him out in the hall. He lives here."

"No shit?"

"Yeah. Weird, huh?"

William cheered at him. "Hey, man. It's the perfect opportunity."

Parker scowled at him. "Itoldyou. I don't likehim."



### Chapter Four

Kell sat huddled up in the corner of his studio apartment, surrounded by moving boxes and lit by a single floor lamp. His heart pounded and his mind raced as he tried to make sense of what had just happened. He was neighbors with that guy? It had to be a joke, right? He'd just imagined it?

But no. What had happened back in the hallway was reality. Parker Leipold was here, and he really had slammed into him. They really were neighbors.

Out of all the apartment complexes in the county of Los Angeles, he had to pick the same one that fucking Parker Leipold lived at? What the hell? Did that mean he was going to see him like that, every day? Jesus, would he run into him while doing laundry? Kell cringed as he imagined the scenario—carrying his basket to the laundry room and spotting Parker inside, folding his underwear at the machines. What would he do? Probably spin 180 degrees and run away to hide in his room until he was gone. How embarrassing.

"Ahh!" he groaned, rolling onto the carpet. "Why him? Why him?"

He grabbed his cell phone and dialed Jessie, and then unloaded the story onto her in a long ramble. Jessie, who was working on a painting, listened patiently. When he finished, Kell could hear her clinking her brush against the glass jar of turpentine.

"You know," she said after a moment of silent contemplation, "he is pretty cute. Maybe this is a sign?"

"I just found out I'm neighbors with the one guy in class that hates my guts, and you're saying he's cute?"

"I think you might be overstating his hatred for you," Jessie said. "If anything, I think he likes you."

"You're crazy."

"I mean, he said he liked talented people, right? Maybe that was his way of sending you a hint?"

"That's just weird."

"But you do think he's hot, right? Like, objectively speaking. Any personality stuff aside."

Kell stammered. "Uhh... I mean... he's not bad."

She sighed. "Anyway, I don't think he hates you. I think he's just weird and has a weird way of dealing with people. Kinda like you."

Thanks, Jessie, he thought.

It didn't matter if Parker was attractive or not. That did nothing to change the fact that Parker had always been a jerk to him. People didn't treat those that they liked that way.

Did they?

Kell worked on unpacking his moving boxes, starting with his other art supplies. He had a lot of supplies. In fact, most of his belongings were art supplies. Paints,

brushes, volumes and volumes of sketchbooks... He reassembled the Ikea shelf he had and filed everything away as he mulled over his new situation. It was weird to think that Parker was here, somewhere in this building, doing something. What would he be doing, anyway? Painting, maybe.

He sighed as he thought of Parker's work. That was one thing he could not deny—his art was incredible, inspiring and moving. Maybe there was more to him lying below the surface? If he could make art like that... Maybe he was hiding another part of himself.

He tried to imagine a sensitive side of Parker, and for some dumb reason could only picture him lying naked on a bed of flowers, gazing up at him with his icy blue eyes. "I'm sensitive, too, Kell... I don't mean to be an asshole to you..."

"Ugh. Weird," he muttered. "Get out of my head."

He went and took a cold shower to try and wash the image of Parker from his thoughts, but the guy persisted, refusing to leave. That night, he dreamed he went to the laundry room and found Parker there, loading his clothes into one of the machines. Hesitantly, he placed his hamper down onto the machine next to Parker's and began to toss his clothes inside. His heart was pounding as he wondered if Parker would acknowledge him. Then Parker tugged off his shirt and tossed it into the machine. Kell couldn't help but sneak a look to see what his shirtless form was like. His heart hammered even harder, and his cock swelled up firm. Parker turned to him and smiled.

"You're amazing, you know that, Kell?" he said, and reached out to take Kell's hand.

"Wha? I'm not... Really..."

Parker pulled him in close. He felt the warmth of Parker's skin through his shirt, and

he found himself running his fingers up Parker's muscles. He couldn't help but indulge his curiosity.

"Oh, yeah," Parker murmured in an uncharacteristically exuberant tone. "That feels so good."

Parker slid his hand around the back of Kell's neck and drew him up towards him. Their lips met. Kell's cock throbbed, stiff as a rock. It ached for him, and then suddenly he felt Parker's hand tightening around his girth. Suddenly he was completely naked and they were no longer in the laundry room, but inside their classroom, and everyone was there like shadows, watching them. Kell didn't care. He barely even noticed. He was riding with the motions of Parker's hand, feeling his lips on his neck. Oh god, it felt so good. It felt so good, he was going to...

He was going to...

"Ahh!"

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His eyes sprung open, his heart racing in his chest. Cool morning light filtered in through his blinds, dancing across his mattress, which was still on the bare floor with the unassembled frame lying next to it. His cock pulsed hot stickiness, and he pushed his hand down into his pajamas to confirm what had just happened.

"Shit..."

When was the last time he'd had a wet dream? Had he ever had a wet dream before? He really couldn't remember. But it probably shouldn't be a surprise—he'd never had a chance to release any build up. Of course he'd be horny. Of course he'd dream about sex. But why Parker? There were guys in his class he would have had no problem having a sex dream about, and Parker was not among them.

The guy'd been on his mind, like it or not. That was probably all there was to it. But if that was the case... why did Parker seem unusually attractive to him now? Was it just because of what Jessie had said?

He groaned and got out of bed, slipping off his pajama bottoms and carrying them to the bathroom to wash in the sink. His dick ached, as if it really had been squeezed in the tight grasp of Parker's warm fist. And just as the thought ran through his head, he felt a prickle of excitement run down between his legs.

He bit his lip and did his best to push it out of his mind as he hurried to get ready for work. It was going to be another long day. Four hours of soul-sucking retail before heading right into class. He sometimes wondered why he even bothered renting an apartment. With the intensity of all the projects he had to do, it might make more sense just to sleep under a table in the art studio at school. He'd probably get more

work done that way,too.

Despite his efforts,pesky thoughts of Parker followed him all the way to work. He couldn't help but replay that dream over and over again in hismind.

He wasn't into him.That's what he told himself. But he couldn't stop thinking abouthim.

So what ifParker did think highly of him? It wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't change his feelings towards him, not atall.

Would it?

"Kell. Kell!"

"Hm?"

Kell snappedout of his thoughts as his floor manager, Montrell, waddled up to him with an annoyed expression on his face. Kell'd been staring blankly at the rack of anti-virus software, his mind off in inappropriateplaces.

"Wake up,man. We've got a line of people who need to be helped. You know how understaffed we are, I need you to be on your A-game. C'mon,c'mon."

"Right,"Kell said as he went off to enter the fray. "Sorry."

"And remember,"Montrell hissed at him. "Upsell!Warranties."

They were severely understaffed,which meant that Kell had to take on several jobs outside his position to make up for it. He was zipping around the entire store, running himself exhausted. He helped a couple find a laptop before going over to the home

theater department and selling a TV, and then back into the warehouse to find it and lug the box out to their car by himself. During every moment of it all, he was wondering what the hell he was doing there. He was an artist. A damn good one. Why wasn't he working for an art firm? Or better yet, why wasn't he running one? Why didn't he have hundreds of clients paying for his artwork?

Oh, right. Because he still was terrified of selling himself.

"I took a look at your reports," Montrell said to him near the end of his shift. "Look, Kell, we really need you to be selling warranties on those computers and TVs."

"I attached some accessories," Kell offered. "Even sold some people on some of those fancy cables."

"We need you to sell warranties, buddy," Montrell said. "So, you gonna try a little harder next time?"

No, he thought. If he had a hard time selling his own work, stuff that he cared passionately about, how the hell was he going to manage selling people on things he didn't give two shits about?

"I'll do what I can," he said.

Montrell smiled and punched his shoulder. "Great. That's what I like hearing."

When Kell got to class, he found himself sneaking glances towards where Parker usually sat. He hadn't come in yet. Jessie plonked down into her seat next to him and pulled out her earbuds.

"Hey, guy," she said, grinning at him.

"What're you so happy about?"heasked.

"Guess who sold a piece today?This girl! This month's living expense? Covered. Bam. And the buyer might even commission me for somethingelse."

"Oh,"he said, unenthused. Normally he would've been happy for her, but he felt like absolute junktoday.

"Oh,"she said. "You're in a badmood."



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"Sorry," he said. "Work fuckingsucks."

"Hmm," she replied. He knew Jessie had received his complaints about work more times than she probably cared to hear, and she'd always been blunt with her responses.

"You could sell your work, if you tried harder," she'd said. "You give up too easily on that."

The door opened, and Professor Young entered and walked to the front of the classroom. Kell peeked over again and saw that Parker's seat was still empty. Had that guy ever been late to class? He'd always seemed like such a perfect student. Never tardy, never absent, usually early. Militantly responsible.

Professor Young announced their next assignment would be a group effort in which they'd be creating illustration work along special marketing guidelines and on a tight deadline. Marketing and creating work specifically to business specifications was something that Kell didn't have much experience with. He was used to following guidelines for school projects but designing work for commercial purpose was a little different. He was used to having a lot of freedom, so this would be a good experience.

"Hey," he whispered to Jessie. "Be in my group? I suck at doing marketing stuff."

"For sure. But you think I'm any better?" she said.

"Better than me. At least you have experience working with clients."

She shrugged. "I guess."

Everyone was chattering,grouping up, when Professor Young spoke up. "Wait, wait, let's not get too ahead of ourselves. When working for firms we don't often get to choose the people we work alongside with. So, for this project, I'm assigning you randomly into groups ofthree."

Everyone groaned.

"So much for that,"saidJessie.

Professor Young started groupingpeople off from his roster, ticking names away. Everyone who Kell would've wanted to work with was already being assigned off to groups. Jessie's name was called next, and she moved off to sit with the new group. Soon, it seemed like everyone had been assigned off except for him, and he figured that would just mean he'd be slotted in to one of the existing groups, making it a group of four. The classroom door opened again, but this time Kell wasn't really paying attention. Professor Young touched his glasses and squinted at theroster.

"Well,it appears I'd made a miscalculation, so it looks like our last group is going to be a pair. But considering who the remaining folks are, I don't think that'll be a problem." He looked up at Kell and smiled. The rest of the class chuckled. Faces turned to look athim.

"Kelly and Parker,you two are in the lastgroup."

Kell felthis heart do a triple flip in his chest, and his natural response to glance over at Parker's empty seat. Only, it wasn't empty. Parker was there, and he looked over at him with an expression of what Kell read as something between annoyance and cold indifference. Kell's heart did another flip, and his mind suddenly flashed back to the dream he'd had. He quickly lookedaway.

"Oh, dammit,"he muttered tohimself.

Parker grabbed his bag and made his way over to him, and in Kell's mind it felt like Parker was advancing towards him like a wolf coming after his prey. Kell was nervous, way more nervous than he had any right to be. But it wasn't because he was frightened of Parker. He was nervous for a completely different reason, now. Some weird switch seemed to have been flipped in his mind since the day before.

Parker pulled up a chair next to Kell and sat down, and a brief waft of his scent drifted over to him as he did. Kell swallowed, wondering if he'd always smelled that good.

Dammit, he thought. Enough of that.

"I know I can count on you not to screw this up for us, right?" Parker said. "I have high expectations."

"Don't worry about me," Kell said, tensely. "Mine are just as high as yours."

"I don't doubt that."

Kell looked at him, unsure if he'd just received some kind of weird Parker compliment.

"Wonderful," Professor Young said. "Project details are online. We won't be using all of our studio time to work on this project, so make sure to get your group members' contact information so that you can meet outside of class. The deadline is in two days, people. Okay, let's move right in to our lecture on color theory...."

At the end of class, Parker leaned over and said, "Meet me in the art studio." Before Kell could respond, he was already out of his seat and walking for the door.

"What is up with him," he said to himself.

"Well, this should be fun," Jessie said, coming up and nudging him in his side. "You

and Parker working together. Think you can deal with him?"

"Fun's not the word I'd use to describe this situation," Kell said. "More like...nightmare."

"Oh, come on. Learn to deal with him, Kell. You're going to have to deal with plenty of dark-hearted fuckers in this career, anyway. Worse than him."

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"I know that," Kell said. "It's just... I don't know why he gets to me so much."

She pouted her lips. "Hmmm. Mystery."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's okay to admit you find him attractive," she said, smiling. "Just admit it. It'll make your life easier."

Kell felt his face go hot. "I mean... He's..." He sighed. He could fight against it as much as he wanted, but it was true. Parker was still a gigantic douche, that hadn't changed, but... "Yeah," he said. "I guess I can admit he's good looking." Dangerously sexy, how about?

Jessie giggled and laughed and patted Kell's shoulder. "There ya go. That wasn't so hard. It's not like you're gonna fall in love with him if you think he's hot. Just loosen up, okay?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Let me know how it goes," she said, dragging it out in a sing-song way.

He grabbed his bag and left the classroom for the art studio. He stopped outside the door, and found himself pacing back and forth, unable to go inside.

"What the heck is wrong with me?" he said to himself. Yeah, he found Parker attractive. Hot. Sexy. Whatever. That was clear. But why the hell did he feel so

damnnervousabout meeting with him? His stomach was filled with butterflies. "Come on, Kell," he said, and opened the door.

The studio was a large, brightly lit classroom, with easels and art horses in place of desks. There was a raised platform in the middle of the room where models stood for figure drawing sections. The smell of oil paint and turpentine lingered in the air, and the floor was spattered and streaked with fallen paint and charcoal. Drawings and paintings done by students lined the walls. In a corner was a stack of wood for stretching canvas. Rolls of blue jumbo paper towels were scattered across the countertops next to paint-marked sinks that once were spotless stainless steel. Kell gently closed the door behind him. The room was empty except for Parker, who straddled one of the art horses, his back facing him. He was drawing in his sketchbook, and the room was so quiet that Kell could hear the scratches of his pencil against the paper.

Parker closed his sketchbook and turned around on the art horse as Kell walked over to him. Kell could practically hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears. Come on, Kell. Get it together.

"Hey," Parker said.

Kell thrust his hands into his pockets, stopping a couple feet away. Parker didn't stand to meet him.

"Look," Kell said. "If we're going to get through this I need to know what your deal is."

"You're still going on about that? Let it go."

"I just want to know why you're always so harsh to me. Did I do something to offend you?"

"No."

"Then why?"

Parker sighed, and then stood up. Parker was about a head taller than he was, and he craned his neck slightly to look into his eyes.

"You shouldn't care so much about what people think about you," Parker said. "It doesn't do anything to serve you or your work." He took a step forward, and Kell stepped back. "Artists need to be bulletproof if they're going to survive out there in the real world." Parker took another step forward, and Kell retreated further back. His heart raced even harder. What the hell was Parker doing?

"I know how you are," Parker went on, still advancing. "You're afraid. Afraid of what people say. Of what they think."

"W-what..." Kell stammered, as he kept retreating from Parker's advances.

"And that's what's keeping you from getting to the next level," Parker said, his voice like a low growl. "That's what's keeping you from being better than me."

Kell backed into one of the art horses and tripped over it. He shouted, grabbing frantically at the air as he fell backwards. Suddenly, he felt Parker's hand snag his wrist, and he was yanked forward onto his feet. He stumbled with the momentum of the pull and slammed cheek-first into Parker's chest, his left arm held up awkwardly in the air in Parker's fist. He took in a breath of Parker's scent, the smell of his shirt and the warm aroma that lay beneath the fabric. He tugged his wrist free and pushed away.

"Watch out," Parker said.

Kell's face was hot. He hated how easily he blushed. "You're fucking full of yourself," he said.

"I'm just being real. You know I'm telling the truth. But if you really can't see that, then I guess I was wrong about you, and you aren't as good as I thought."

He looked away. "Screw you. Just because you're right doesn't mean you're also not a douche."

Parker shrugged. "I admit it. I am. That's just how I am. But you and I working together, I think we have a shot at creating something really great. I'm excited to see what we can make together. But you need to be less afraid."



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Kell's heart was still pounding, but somehow, having been confronted about it like that had actually wiped some of the nerves away. To his surprise, he felt braver. Now the only butterflies in his stomach were because of that brief moment of contact they'd had.

"Only if you promise to be less of an ass," Kell said. "But maybe I can't expect that of you."

Now I know he doesn't hate my guts, at least, Kell thought. That was something. Actually, he felt the opposite. Jessie had been right—the guy was a jerk because he admired Kell's work. He was trying to push him to get better by being harsh on him. On the one hand, it irritated him that a guy the same age was treating him like he was his little disciple, or something. But on the other hand... it was Parker. Parker Leipold was interested in him, and the thought gave him a little thrill.

"I can't promise anything," Parker said, "But I'll try." For the first time, a slight smile formed on his lips. Kell's heart did a little flip when he saw it.

Damn, he thought. He's actually really hot when he smiles.

And then, as quick as it'd come, it was gone.

"Well, I'm glad we got all that cleared up," Kell said. "I could've sworn you didn't like me, or something."

"I never said that I do," Parker said.

"What happened to trying to not be an ass?"

Parker snorted. "Anyway. We should exchange phone numbers."

"Yeah, okay." They pulled out their phones and swapped info. It felt a little weird—Parker was the absolute last person he would've believed he'd exchange numbers with.

"And as for address... I guess we don't really need to exchange that information."

"No, I guess not." Kell said. "Anyway, we can take care of the project here at school. It's not like I have much room at my apartment." And he felt weird about the idea of Parker coming over to his place.

"Yeah," Parker said. "Me neither. It's best we just meet here to do the work. Most of the final work will be done digitally, anyway. We can work in the library."

It was a surprise that Parker was living in a crappy apartment in Forest Glenn, because he knew that Parker came from wealth. He'd heard it mentioned before that Parker was living in a swanky hillside loft, but apparently that wasn't true, at least anymore. Kell wondered if something had happened, or if maybe he wasn't as spoiled as he thought. The guy did still drive a Bentley, though.

Parker opened his sketchbook and turned it to Kell. "I did a few quick thumbnail mockups. Take a look."

Kell took the sketchbook from him, surprised. He'd done these in the fifteen minutes since class had ended? They were rough, no doubt, but clear on the concept as an advertisement for the mock company they were supposed to be designing for.

"These are really good," Kell said. "I had no idea you were so good at

commercialstuff."

"It helpsthat I already do this kind of thing for work," Parkerreplied.

Kell felt a pang of self-consciousness.Right. So, he wasn't just living off mommy and daddy's money. Parker was already working professionally. Of course he would be. With work likehis...

"But,"Parker said, "I have no doubt that you could easily learn this. Absolutely no reason why you shouldn't be able to, with yourskills."

Kell looked at him,surprised. "Did you just give me a compliment? An actual nicecompliment?"

Parker smirked."Did that make you feelbetter?"

Kell rolledhis eyes and pushed the sketchbook into Parker's chest. "So, should we sit down somewhere and do some moremockups?"

"Unfortunately,I can't today. I have work afterclass."

"Crap.I've got work beforeclass."

"Where do you work?"Parkerasked.

Kell shifted uncomfortably.Again, that damn easy blush response. "Oh, just a... This one, um...it's a bigcompany."

"A design firm?"

"Not exactly... I work retail."

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“Are you serious? You work retail?”

“I’d rather not talk about work,” Kell said, feeling slightly humiliated.

Parker shrugged. “Fair enough. I understand.”

“So, how are we going to do this? With our schedules...”

“I suppose we’ll need to meet at night,” Parker said. “Or on the weekends. Any time we have to meet.”

Considering they did live in the same apartment complex, meeting at one or the other’s apartment would’ve been a clear and easy solution, but Kell definitely did not want to have him over. It would just be weird, and besides, his place was Spartan bare and looked like it was being occupied by a serial killer. He reminded himself he needed to get that bed assembled.

“Alright. Well, I’ll put together some mockups and send them over to you tonight,” said Kell.

“Okay,” Parker said.

There was a weird moment of silence that passed between them as Parker looked like he had something more he wanted to say. Kell waited for a moment, and then averted his gaze. He couldn’t hold Parker’s stare for too long—his icy blue eyes were still slightly intimidating, and now they were making his stomach do little flips...

"Well, I'll see you later," Kell said. Parker nodded, and the two of them left the art studio. Kell split off from him, walking quickly down the hallway. His mind replayed the embarrassing moment he'd fallen into Parker's chest. He closed his eyes and found himself trying to remember Parker's smell.

God, he thought. What's wrong with me? I must be going crazy.

### Chapter Five

Parker had spent that morning helping William look for an affordable daycare for Nate, and the two of them had gone around to check out a few places. Turned out, it was difficult to find daycares within their price range that also met their high expectations. They both realized that in their current financial state, they had a lot of readjusting to do. On the way back, Parker had gotten stuck in traffic and was late to class, a first for him. He promised himself it would never happen again.

That night when he got back from work, he walked through the apartment complex expecting to run into Kell again. Or had he been hoping to run into him?

No. Why would he want to run into him? He didn't want to see him any more than he had to. The hours they'd have to spend together working on this project was enough time to be spent around him. Parker just didn't like getting close to people if he didn't have to. It was just... too much energy. Energy that he could be spending on other things, like his work.

Still, Kell wasn't like everyone else. He'd stood out to Parker from the first time they'd had a class together when they were both freshmen. His work was amazing; that was what'd initially drawn his attention. But the more Parker had observed Kell, the more he noticed other things about him. At first, he found his face to be irritatingly naive looking, and it seemed to always hold an expression of either daft wonder or nervous uncertainty. But after a while, he began to find it oddly charming. Irritatingly charming. Parker noticed that when Kell painted, he would wear this look of intense focus, his eyes becoming penetratingly serious, and that had charmed him too.

Kell was interesting. It was more than he could say about anyone else in the program. And it wasn't that there weren't many other skilled and hardworking artists in the class, Kell just had something different than all the others.

He didn't expect anything to come from this sudden partnership with Kell. It would be a good opportunity to see what the guy was really made of, to see if he could actually exceed his own limits. But aside from that, and potentially producing an amazing piece of work to turn in, Parker wasn't expecting anything to happen between them, certainly not friendship. It didn't matter that Kell was the only omega he'd ever met who'd actually made him... feel something.

Nate was on the floor of the living room, which also doubled as Parker's bedroom, doodling in a coloring book. William sat on the couch, which also doubled as Parker's bed, frowning at his laptop. They both looked up when Parker came inside, and Nate bounced up and ran over to him to greet him as he always did.

"Hi, Uncle Parker. Look, I'm doing drawings."

He took the coloring book from Nate and looked at it. "Very nice job," he said, and passed the book back to him. "Keep it up, kid." Nate hopped back to the floor and continued to doodle.

Parker set his bag down in the corner and dropped onto the couch next to his brother. "Any luck with the job hunt?"

"Sent out applications to a few places," he said, shaking his head. "I'm now realizing how unhireable I am. I don't really have any skills."

"Just keep applying," Parker said. "You can develop skills on the job."

William sighed and rubbed his temples.

Parker's phone buzzed in his pocket. To his surprise, his heart actually skipped a beat when he saw that it was a text message from Kell. Attached were several images of mockup sketches for their project.

KELL: Hey. Came up with these, what do you think?

Parker scrolled through them. He snorted.

PARKER: This is what you did in five hours?

KELL: Yup.

PARKER: These suck.

KELL: ... Wow.

PARKER: Sorry. They could use some work.

KELL: What's wrong with them???

PARKER: Too much to say over text.

He glanced at the time—it was only seven.

PARKER: Why don't we meet? I'll drive. I know a good place.

Kell's response was delayed.

KELL: K.

PARKER: Meet me in the parking lot in ten minutes.



He slippedhis phone back in his pocket. William was eyeinghim.

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"Anything interesting?" he asked.

"Not really," Parker said.

"I don't believe you. You laughed at something."

"It's nothing. That guy, Kell. He and I got grouped together for a class project. I'm going to meet with him to talk about it. You should see the samples he just sent me. Makes me question his abilities."

"Oooooooh," William cooed.

Nate looked up from his drawing and giggled. "Ooooooh," he echoed.

"You're going to meet him, huh? Group project? It's a sign. Are you going over to his place?" William grinned at him.

"Hell no," Parker said, scowling.

"But he lives here. Why not?"

"I don't want to make this any more personal than it has to be."

His brother gave him a look. "You're funny, Parker."

Parker ignored him. "I'll be back in a couple hours. Bye, kid." He ruffled Nate's hair, grabbed his backpack from the corner and headed out the door.

Kell was standing in the parking lot, looking slightly annoyed. "So," he said. "Tell me why my work sucks."

Parker sighed. "I said, I'm sorry."

"Apology not accepted, jerk," Kell said, a playful defiance in his tone. "So, where are we going?"

It was strange--hearing that provocative sort of response from Kell was oddly exciting. He'd always seemed so passive in class, so to see this other side of him... He liked it.

"Send Noods," Parker said, and Kell looked at him quizzically. "It's a ramen restaurant," he added, quickly.

"I know," Kell said. "I've been there before."

"Oh. Well, good. I haven't eaten anything all day and I'm starving."

They walked through the parking lot towards his Bentley, which stood out like a sore thumb amongst all the other cars surrounding it.

"Fancy," Kell said, and Parker, for what might've been the first time ever, felt a slight burn of self-consciousness.

He unlocked the car and they got inside. Kell sank into the leather seat and looked around the car with wide eyes.

"I'm thinking about getting rid of it," Parker said. "Getting something a bit more practical."

I'm just saying that because I'm embarrassed, he thought.

"I could straight up live in this car," Kell said as Parker started up the engine and pulled out of the parking lot. "I always thought that you lived in some giant mansion somewhere. Your parents are rich, right?"

What kind of question was that? "Yeah, something like that," Parker grunted.

"Sorry," Kell said. "I didn't mean to be rude."

"Why are you always so damn jittery?" Parker asked. "Just relax."

"Sorry," Kell said quietly. He breathed out a sigh and looked out the window. "I get worked up easily."

"Obviously," Parker said.

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"You especially," he said. "I get nervous around you."

"Well, don't."

"You can't just say 'well, don't,'" Kell said. "I can't help it. I'm not used to your attitude. And... and, yeah."

"And, yeah?"

"Nothing. That's it."

He eyed Kell. He was still looking out the window, kneading his hands in his lap. Parker reached over and grabbed Kell's wrist. Kell looked over, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Uh..."

"Cut that out," Parker said, letting go of his wrist. "It's irritating." It was strange to admit it, but he felt a slight thrill touching him like that. He'd felt it earlier in the day, when he'd pushed Kell back and grabbed him when he was about to fall. It wasn't a feeling he would've ever thought he'd associate with Kell, but there it was. He liked touching him. He liked feeling Kell in his hands.

"Sorry," Kell mumbled.

As much as Kell's submissive personality annoyed Parker, he was beginning to find that it equally turned him on.

He pulled into the parking lot of Send Noods, and the two of them went inside and got a table in the corner. It was a weekday night, and the restaurant was fairly empty. They ordered their food, and Kell pulled out his sketchbook.

"So, this is what I was thinking," he said, opening his sketchbook. "The assignment says it's for a demographic of betas aged twenty-five to--"

Parker stood up. "I can't see a damn thing." He went over to Kell's side of the table and sat down next to him, leaning over to look at the sketches in the book. His shoulder touched Kell's. "Alright. Continue."

"Uh, okay. Well... It's, um. It's for a demographic of betas aged twenty-five to forty-five. So I was thinking..."

Was Kell blushing? His face had definitely taken on a slight shade of pink. Come to think of it, he'd gone red after that moment in the studio, too. Did touching him get him embarrassed?

Parker sat quietly, listening to Kell's reasons for the decisions he'd made for the mockup sketches, their shoulders still touching. When Kell finished, he took the sketchbook from his hands and pulled out a pencil.

"Do you mind?" Parker asked.

"Go for it."

He drew next to Kell's sketches, taking the elements he thought worked and adding his own. He worked quickly, loosely, the pencil flying across the paper. In five minutes, he had a new mockup done at the same level of rendering detail as Kell's. "What you did works on a general level. But once you look at the type of designs and ads that betas in that demographic actually respond to, you'll learn that this type of

composition isn't very attractive. Simpler is better." He turned the sketchbook back to Kell. "Something like this."

"That's amazing," Kell said. "You did that so fucking fast. It took me an hour just to come up with one of these..."

"I told you, it's experience. I grind through hundreds of these types of drawings every day for work."

"Sounds brutal."

"I guess you have to take what you can get as an artist, sometimes. Anyway, what you did was good for our class. Professor Young would've given it an A, and it would've been better than everyone else's work. But..."

"We don't want to do something that's just good for class," Kell said.

"Right."

The waiter came over with their bowls of noodles, and Parker stood up and went back around to the other side of the table. He felt a strange feeling the moment their shoulders separated. He could feel the lingering warmth of that tiny point of contact where they'd been touching, and he actually longed for more. He was startled by the feeling but didn't let it show through. Kell quickly packed away his sketchbook, looking flustered.

They both ate in silence, and Parker found himself taking occasional glances at Kell as he sucked down the noodles. Weird thoughts were going through his head.

I don't like him like that, he thought. Or maybe I don't want to like him like that. But it's fucking weird. I've never felt this way before.

But in the end, it didn't really matter. Nothing was going to happen between them. He sure as hell wasn't going to do anything, and he knew for certain that Kell wouldn't either, even if he did feel anything for him. Kell was too timid for that. And besides, Parker knew that Kell thought he was a dick. He knew he didn't really like him very much.

That was fine. All that mattered was getting this project over with and making something they could both be proud of.



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The two of them walked through the apartment complex, and Kell stopped in front of a door. "This is my apartment," he said.

"Oh, alright. I'll see you later, then."

"Yeah."

Kell's pulled his keys from his pocket and dropped them on the floor. "Oops," he said, scooping them up. Parker smiled to himself before turning to leave. The guy was cute.

"Uh, hey," Kell called to him.

"Hm?"

"Maybe, next time... We could just meet over here? I mean, it doesn't really make sense to keep driving. I'm alright with it, if you are."

"That's fine," Parker said. "Goodnight."

He walked away, playing it cool, but his heart had started pounding fast. He told himself to calm down, he didn't know why he was getting excited... But there was something exciting about Kell inviting him over.

Maybe Kell's dislike for him wasn't as great as he'd thought.

### Chapter Six

After he'd gone inside, Kell stood by the closed front door and listened to the sound of his pounding heart. Had he really just told Parker that they should meet here? What the hell happened to not wanting to have him over?

Inexplicably, in the matter of just a couple hours, things had changed. Having spent that tiny bit of one-on-one time with the alpha, he was beginning to learn how Parker operated. He was learning that it wasn't exactly that he meant to be so harsh, he just didn't have much tact in the way he dealt with people. Saying something like "this sucks" meant more like "I know you can do better." It still stung, but now he was definitely sure of one thing—Parker did actually think highly of him.

And that'd given him another startling realization about himself—he'd been craving Parker's approval this whole time. That was why he'd always taken his criticisms so hard.

But what he really hadn't expected was the growing attraction he felt for Parker. Over the brief time they'd spent together, it felt like he was constantly receiving electric jolts of excitement to his system. Every bit of physical contact with Parker had been oddly amazing. It'd made him want more, and he had the strangest feeling that Parker was indulging him.

He dropped his bag and stumbled over to his mattress. He had to get this under control. What he was feeling was ridiculous. Of course Parker's admiration would feel good—he was such an amazing artist. But to suddenly be into him? The things Parker did that Kell had once found irritating and repelling now seemed to captivate

him. The snips of anger, the domineering attitude, his unwavering confidence... Kell suddenly was finding it all to be incredibly hot. When Parker had grabbed him in the studio, there'd been a startling reaction down in his pants. It'd happened again in the car, and in the restaurant. Every bit of physical contact that day had elicited a rise to attention down below. He hadn't been able to do anything to stop the embarrassment from coloring his cheeks, and he prayed that Parker hadn't noticed the stiffened bulge between his thighs.

Kell's face went hot just thinking about it. Sitting there next to him in the restaurant, crossing his legs tightly together as Parker sat next to him and drew in his sketchbook, trying his hardest to extinguish his erection. Was he in heat? Was that all it was? Or was there something more? If Parker were to burst into the door and satisfy his itch, would there still be attraction there the next day?

Kell had no idea. He'd never felt like this for anyone before, and as his mind continuously recalled each moment he felt his cock twitch with want. He popped open the button of his jeans, unzipped himself, and pushed his hand down into his underwear to meet his waiting hardness.

He closed his eyes as he tightened his fist around himself. What would it feel like to have Parker do this to him? It was so weird to be fantasizing about him, but the thought was turning him on so damn much. He pushed his underwear down to his thighs, just enough to free himself. His cock stood tall and ready, and he began to stroke himself, imagining that it was Parker who was doing the work. He imagined Parker's warm scent, drawing in intoxicating breath after intoxicating breath of it, the feeling of his fist around his wrists, holding him pinned down while he stroked his dick. He recalled the imagery of his dream, the feeling of being taken by him. It didn't matter how he did it, how rough he was, he just wanted Parker's body on his. He wanted to feel him inside of him, filling his ass and his mouth. He wanted to know what he looked like naked, and what his hardness tasted like.

Kell moaned as he stroked himself, squirming on his mattress as he imagined pleasing Parker, taking his cock into his mouth and sucking it down deep. He knew he would be terrible for him. He knew he was still a jerk, and he didn't like jerks, but it didn't matter. The desire that was raging through him overpowered everything else. Any common sense that he'd once had, all thoughts of reservation for the type of alpha he thought he'd be attracted to, all gone. He flipped onto his knees, his cheek pressed into the sheets as he continued to stroke himself, pushing his ass up to an invisible Parker.

"Fuck me," he murmured. And he imagined getting filled up, getting his virginity taken and the ache eased with the alpha's cock. And then when he imagined what it might feel like to have Parker come inside of him, to leave his hot semen inside, to impregnate him... That was when the unstoppable force of his orgasm burst over him. He came hard, the waves beating over him again and again, and when it was finished he slowly relaxed onto his side as he tried to slow his breaths.

"Damn," he muttered. He reached over to the box of tissues sitting on the ground by the mattress and cleaned the mess off his sheets. He had a problem, and it started with a capital P.

Just get through this assignment, he thought. After that I won't have to spend time with him anymore.

But somehow, it didn't feel like it would be that easy. Somehow, it felt like this desire for Parker was here to stay.

He wondered what Parker was doing at that moment. Was he also lying alone in his apartment, thinking about him? Maybe he also was touching himself?

Kell groaned and got up to go to the bathroom. Don't be ridiculous. There's no way he thinks of me that way.

\* \* \*

"Warranties," Montrell said, tapping the brochure hanging on the shelf next to the laptop computer displays. "Warranties, warranties, warranties. I don't think I need to remind you all again."

Kell was only half listening to his manager's daily pep talk. He stood in the back of the group of his co-workers, a glazed look on his face. He was thinking about the project design. He and Parker would be working on finalizing it that evening so that they could move on to the actual production rendering.

"Kell!" Montrell said, snapping his fingers and pointing at him. "Did you get what I said?"

He blinked. "Uh, upselling. We need to sell more warranties."

"That's right. Corporate is on our ass about this stuff, guys. Our store is not performing up to snuff, and the DM is on my ass about it. So let's get focused on selling more of these services."

"When are we going to get some new help hired?" a coworker asked. "It's hard to focus on our departments when we're being forced to run around all over the place to fill in the gaps."

"Don't worry about that. We've got some people coming in for interviews soon, we'll have help on the floor before you know it. Alright? Alright, let's get to work! Warranties!"

The group dispersed, each one of them looking miserable. Kell meandered around his department, adjusting things on the shelves in an attempt to look like he was doing something. He wished he could be at the studio at school working on the project with

Parker. This was just a big waste of precious time, and every moment spent here drained his creative energy like leeches drained blood.

His thoughts went from working on the project with Parker, to just of Parker. As he walked through the store, it felt like every computer monitor and TV screen was playing those few, extremely vivid moments he'd had with him. They were taking over his mind, and they'd been such tiny, nothing moments, too. Why did he have to feel like this about Parker? Why couldn't it have been someone less difficult? Someone he actually got along with? Someone who was nice to him, who was actually into him?

But then...perhaps he wouldn't have felt this strongly if it were someone easy. Maybe the reason why he was feeling this way about Parker was because he was such a dick. Somehow, it made those moments when he was not so dickish feel that much more amazing. Parker hated everyone, so if he could get along with him... then he had to be special.

Parker was early for class that day, already seated in his corner of the room when Kell walked in. He considered for a moment going over to sit near him, but in the end decided against it. He went to his usual spot next to Jessie and found himself wondering if Parker might come over to speak with him or show some kind of evidence that he felt any kind of new affection for him—but he didn't even glance over at Kell once, not one hint of acknowledgement.

Professor Young was giving a presentation on color, and he turned the lights in the room down so that he could show a series of slides on the projector. In the darkness of the classroom, Kell stole glances at Parker from the corner of his eye. The light of the projector screen rimmed Parker's face in soft colors and shadows, like a vision from a dream. Somehow, he'd managed to get even hotter overnight.

When class ended, Kell was surprised to see Parker disappearing out the door. He was sure he'd at least come over to talk to him after class, if anything just to discuss the

project. Jessie started to talk to him about something, and he stopped her. "Hold on a second," he said, and he jogged out of the classroom. Parker was at the end of the hallway, about to leave the building.

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"Hey!" Kell shouted. He was startled at the loudness of his own voice. "Hey," he said again, softer. Parker stopped and looked over his shoulder at him, the usual uninterested expression on his face.

"What do you want?"

You, idiot, was the first thing that flashed through his mind. Oh god, he thought immediately afterward. What's wrong with me? But it was true. Despite better judgement and better taste, a desire for Parker had blossomed from nowhere and was now taking hold of him.

"I thought we were going to talk after class," Kell said, walking up to him.

"Why would we do that?"

"For our project," Kell said.

"Do we have anything to talk about right now? We're going to meet tonight, aren't we?"

"Well, I just thought..."

Kell's heart started to pound, like someone was turning the volume up on a stereo. Thought what? That they were friends, now? That they'd just meet casually to say hello and chat?

"We never agreed on a time to meet," he finished.



"I've got your number," Parker said. "I'll message you. I've gotta get to work." He turned and left, the door swinging shut behind him. Kell stared at it, feeling like a fool. He didn't know what he'd expected. After all, nothing had really happened between them the night before. Kell had felt like Parker had opened himself up, just a little. He felt like he understood him a bit better, like he could see past the cold exterior—but no, in reality nothing really had happened. They weren't actually closer, were they? That was just in his mind.

Stupid. This was the perfect reality check. Parker was still an asshole. Always would be. The realization should've been enough to reverse whatever feelings he'd developed for him, but for some ridiculous reason he only wanted him more. Parker's denial had fanned the flames.

He felt an ache tighten around his heart. Damn. He really liked him.

"Hey," Jessie said, coming out of the classroom holding Kell's backpack. "What was that?"

"What?" He took the bag from her and avoided looking her in the eye.

"Ah, ah! You can't hide from me," she said, and hopped in front of him. She peered up into his face, grinning. "I saw what happened. There was some teennnsiiooon." She drew the word out obnoxiously. "All that electricity in the air! What is going on?"

"Shush," Kell said as they walked out of the building.

"Don't tell me you've got a thing for him," Jessie said. "Oh, man. I knew it! I knew it, I knew it. You've always had this weird complex about Parker and I could never figure it out. It was so obvious!"

"Stop psychoanalyzing me," he said.

"It makes sense for you to be into him. You don't need to be embarrassed about it. And besides, you guys would be cute together."

"Really?" he said, trying his hardest not to sound too perked up.

"You'd be an art power couple. I mean, I couldn't imagine dealing with an attitude like his, but maybe he's actually a tender lover."

Kell snorted. "He's a dick. I'm pretty sure he doesn't give two shits about me, other than thinking I'm a good artist. I doubt he gets along with anyone. He's just an asshole all the time."

"Aw, look at you. You've got a crush. How did this happen?"

"I have no idea, Jessie. But he's going to be coming over tonight to work on the project."

"Whoa. Whoa-hoh. To your apartment?"

"Uh-huh."

"Are you going to do anything?"

He frowned. "We're going to work on the project."

"Maybe you could do something sexy. Something to show him you're interested in him."

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"Oh god, Jessie. No, that's a terrible idea. This is a school project, not a date."

"Yeah, but how else will he know you're into him?"

"I don't know. I wasn't planning on telling him. I was kinda hoping if I waited long enough, it'd just go away on its own."

Jessie groaned. "Wait until it goes away on its own. That's so like you." She threw her arm around his shoulder. "If you want something, you gotta grab it by the balls." She squeezed her hand into a tight fist.

He winced as he imagined grabbing Parker's balls like that. "I don't know. I don't think so. I think I'll just see how things go."

She shrugged. "Okay. You wanna go get burgers?"

The rest of the day, Kell couldn't stop thinking about what Jessie had said. That's so like you. It was, and he knew it. But what the hell was he going to do? Fill the room with mood lighting and flowers? He had no idea how to suggest to Parker that he was into him, and he felt awkward about bringing anything up while working on the project. It would just make it uncomfortable, and it just wasn't appropriate. He didn't want to make anyone uncomfortable. Especially himself.

So what if his fears had prevented him from being in a relationship his whole life? He was used to it. If nothing happened with Parker, which nothing would, then that would be fine. Life would go on.

Right?

He's an asshole, anyway, he thought. Who would want to be with someone like that? He wouldn't be a good mate. He doesn't care about anyone but himself.

But no matter how much he talked himself down, no matter how many things his mind came up with to try and convince him that Parker didn't care about him anyway, that there was no reason for him to continue liking him... the feeling did not go away. Just like back at school, it grew stronger. The aching desire that had taken hold of his heart tightened even further, and Kell found his thoughts entirely occupied by the icy alpha.

Was he really just going to ignore this feeling? He already had so many regrets. He'd made so many decisions—or avoided making so many decisions—because of the fear. Could he live with avoiding another? How much longer could he do this before losing his way completely?

By the time Parker's text message came through several hours later, he'd made up his mind.

PARKER: Need to take care of some things after work. Will be over a little later.

KELL: Ok.

And so he spent the rest of the time getting the place ready.

### Chapter Seven

He'd purposely had a little contact with Kell as he could.

The thing she was starting to feel for Kell, he wanted to nip them in the bud. He had to avoid him in class, even if he'd wanted to be closer to him and to sit near him again and to talk with him. If he had gone over to him, then he'd just be dropping further down a rabbit hole he was scrambling to get out of. Meeting him for the project was enough. He would keep it all official. That way he could keep his feelings in check. He could keep whatever this damn feeling was in check.

After work he rushed to meet with William to check on a promising daycare center for Nate. It was highly rated, in a good neighborhood, and surprisingly affordable. After a tour of the place, the two of them agreed that it would be a great place for Nate—and not a moment too soon, because William had started to get responses back to the dozens of job applications he'd sent out.

"You going to meet that dude again, tonight?" William asked when they got back home.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll probably be back pretty late."

"Going to that noodle place again?"

"No. I'll just be around the corner. Going to his place."

William's eyes widened. "Oh, really?" He imitated Parker's baritone voice. "I don't

want to make this more personal than it has to be.' What happened to that?"

Parker sighed. "Why do I tell you anything? We've got a project to complete. We'd save a lot of time cutting out the driving. Especially because we need to do renderings, and we can't exactly do that without a drawing tablet. It'd take forever to drive all the way to school."

"Okay, okay," William laughed. "Thank you for the detailed explanation."

Parker scowled at him. "I'm outta here."

"Have fun," William said, winking.

He grunted and shut the door behind him, stepping out into the warm night air. Damn William, it wasn't like that. It was never going to be like that. He wasn't going to give in to anything unnecessary. Absolutely not.

Kell's apartment was just a few turns down the hallway, and when he reached the front door he took a moment to brush some debris off the front of his shirt before ringing the doorbell. The door opened and there was Kell—only it wasn't the same Kell he'd seen at school that afternoon. Instead of his usual paint-stained jeans and old t-shirt, he wore a crisp button-down and pressed slacks, his hair shining and done up with wax. Despite the smart outfit, he still wore that same awkward smile.

"Come in," he said.

The inside smelled like it'd been sprayed down with cologne, or something. It was pretty sparsely decorated, with the bed just a bare mattress sitting on the floor next to a disassembled bed frame. In the corner by the kitchen area was a fold-out table and two plastic folding chairs, and in the other corner was an easel and several stacks of paint-stained storage bins and stretched canvas. For some reason, Kell had the place

lit by a bunch of tea candles and one desk lamp.

"What's with the mood lighting?" Parker asked, nodding towards the candles.

"Oh, uh... I just like having it a little dimmer to help me, um, unwind. At the end of the day. You know?" he said.

"We're not going to be able to do any work with this light," Parker said. "It's too damn dark in here. What'd you do, drop a bottle of cologne on the floor? How can you breathe in here?" He went to the window and opened it.

"No..." Kell said. "Sorry. I didn't think it was that strong."

Parker sighed. The guy was hopeless. "Do you have any more lights? How did you do any work in here?"

"I only just moved in a couple days ago," he said. "I've got some work lights in those boxes. If it's not up to your standards, we could go to your place..."

"No," Parker said. "C'mon. I'll help you set up the lights."

Kell opened up one of the supply bins and pulled a collapsible light stand and a large lamp, and the two of them set it up near the folding table.

"Did you just come from work?" he asked Kell.

"No. Why?"

"You changed your clothes," he replied. "You look all dressed up, like for a presentation or something." He plugged the lamp in and then turned it on. Kell's cheeks were pink. What the hell? Was he blushing?

"I'm just a retail drone," Kell said. "I wear a uniform at work."

"You never dress like that at school," Parker said.



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Kell shrugged, looking away. "Maybe this is how I normally dress."

"You should dress like that more often," Parker said.

Kell looked at him, surprised. "Thanks."

"People might take you more seriously if you did," he added, and Kell's expression went dark.

"God, you're such an ass."

Parker couldn't help but laugh. He was way too easy to wind up. "I'm kidding," he said. "You do look good."

"Wow," Kell said. "I'm shocked that you have a sense of humor." He looked slightly flustered and hurried off to grab his sketchbook. "Anyway, we should get started. It's getting late, already."

"Yeah," Parker said. "I don't want to have to stay any longer than I have to. I might suffocate."

Kell rolled his eyes, and the two of them sat down at the table. "I made some alterations to your design. Take a look." He slid the sketchbook over.

Parker was impressed. "Very nice," he said, honestly. He'd swapped around certain elements to the illustration and added in some little graphical flourishes to accentuate the key parts, and he'd also done several little color thumbnail samples with gouache

paint, each one vibrant and sumptuous. "Now this is what I'm talking about. This is fantastic."

Kell leaned over to point at the page, and when he did, his thigh rubbed up against the side of Parker's leg. Parker felt a tingle of excitement run through him. And despite what he'd told himself earlier, he didn't pull away.

"These two are my favorites," Kell said. "I think this arrangement of color works best. What do you think?"

"Couldn't have done it better myself," said Parker. Kell's thigh against his was beginning to feel like being touched by a live wire. How could just that simple contact make his heart beat so fast? He couldn't take it anymore. He had to pull away. He shifted his leg and severed the connection as he pointed to one of the images. "I think we should go with this one."

Kell took the sketchbook back, his cheeks turning pink again. Parker swallowed and licked his lips. How the hell was Kell this damn adorable? How did he have this much power over him?

"How should we do the final rendering?" Kell asked. "You probably don't trust me to do it."

Normally, Parker would've agreed to that. For a project as important as this one, he would've preferred to do the heavy lifting on his own, that way he'd be certain it'd be done right. But he did trust Kell, and he wanted to see what he would produce, what he was fully capable of.

"I think we should split it," he suggested. "You can do the line work. I'll take it into the computer and do the digital portion. I've got a lot of experience with doing digital painting, so I can do it quickly."

"Okay," Kell said. He looked surprised and pleased that Parker trusted him. "I'll get to work on that now."

Parker got out his laptop and tablet and set them up on the folding table while Kell got out a large sheet of paper and clipped it to a wooden board, which he leaned against the wall. He got out his pencils and a drafting ruler and plopped himself on the floor in front of it, and the two of them set to work.

"I don't get it," Parker said. "You must've had plenty of opportunities to get hired at a firm. Or even doing commissions. We had that portfolio review fair last quarter. I know several less-skilled people in our class who got hired through that event. Didn't you go to that?"

"No," Kell said, sounding embarrassed.

"Are you serious?" Parker asked, surprised. "Why not?"

"I just... My portfolio, it could use a bit of adjusting. I know there's a lot of pieces in it that aren't very strong, so they wouldn't have liked it anyway."

Parker picked up a pencil from the desk and flicked it at Kell, and it bounced off the side of his head. "Ah! Hey!"

"Let go of your fear, Kell," he said. "Or eventually, your talent won't be enough to sustain you. Everyone else will pass you, and I'll have left you far behind in the dust. It's limiting you in every way, you've gotta see that."

"I'm fine," Kell mumbled, turning back to his work. "I've got it. I've got to go at my pace."

"No, if you go at whatever your pace is right now, it's never going to happen."

"Why are you so concerned about it, anyway? Don't worry about it."

Parker picked up a kneaded eraser from the desk and tossed it at Kell's head.

"Dammit, stop that!" Kell said.

"It pisses me off that you're wasting your potential right now," Parker said. "Someone as talented as you shouldn't be doing anything other than art. It's a damn crime to be wasting your time with anything else. Let me see your portfolio."

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"What? Parker, it's fucking late already, shouldn't we be finishing—"

"Portfolio. Now."

Kell put his hands up. "Okay, jeez." He went to his closet and pulled out a portfolio case and brought it to the table. "Here."

Parker unzipped it and removed the several large pieces that were inside, spreading them out on the table. He shook his head. He only needed that brief glance to see that Kell's fears were entirely unfounded. The work was, as always, some of the best he'd ever seen. The fact that Kell's confidence in it was so low was mind-boggling to him. This was work that should've inspired supreme confidence. He flipped through each one, taking a longer moment to examine them individually, and then slipped them back in his case.

"You know what?"

"I know, I know. I should've used red tones in the last one, it would've matched so much better with everything else. And the digital one, I'm still learning how to paint in Photoshop, so I don't really have great command over the brushes, and—"

He stood up and placed his hand over Kell's mouth. "Shut up. No. All of this is brilliant. You are brilliant, and the fact that you're sitting here making excuses is killing me. Do you have this as a digital portfolio?" He took his hand away.

"Yeah..." Kell said.

"I'll do the first part of the project. You send your portfolio. Through my job I know of a handful of design and advertising firms who are currently looking for artists. It's not the most ideal work, but it's a start."

"I don't know..."

"God dammit, Kell." He grabbed him by his shoulders and looked him in the eyes. "Are you going to take charge of your shit, or not?"

Kell stared back at him, and for what seemed like the first time, didn't immediately look away. His eyes were clear and bright, like liquid topaz. His lips quivered, and when Parker looked at them he found himself licking his own.

"Okay," Kell breathed. "You're right. I've been putting it off for way too long."

Kell got on the computer and Parker loaded up the websites for the firms he knew were hiring, and Kell sat and typed up a resume to go along with his portfolio. Parker took over the project, bringing it entirely onto the computer where he knew he could finish it up quickly. After an hour, Parker went over to check on him.

"Is this good?" he asked, scrolling through the resume. "I don't know if this is formatted right."

Parker glanced over it, and then hit the send button.

"Hey!" Kell gasped. "Oh, no!"

"Stop fighting it," Parker said. "You're just dawdling. It's fine, I told you. Everything looks great."

Kell slumped into his chair. "Yeah." He went through the rest of the applications and

submitted those, too. "Alright. They're gone. They're in."

Parker crouched down next to him so that they were at equal height. "Good job. And you'd better believe I'm going to follow up with you about this to make sure you go in for those interviews."

Kell blushed, and with his gaze averted, put his hand on top of Parker's. Parker jerked in surprise. Somehow, he hadn't realized that he'd been touching Kell's leg. When he'd crouched next to him, he'd placed his palm on Kell's thigh without even thinking about it. Parker's heart hammered, but he didn't pull his hand away. He felt the warmth of Kell's palm on the back of his hand, the tingle of their skin touching.

Were they... What was happening?

"Thanks," Kell said.

It was Parker's turn to feel shy. "Yeah," he mumbled.

Kell swallowed nervously, and then turned to look at him. "Fuck it," he said, and then he leaned in.

Parker froze in shock as Kell's lips met his, and he stumbled backwards onto his ass in surprise. Kell looked at him with a look of half concern and half horror on his face, like he couldn't believe what he'd just done. As the kiss still burned on Parker's lips, he felt all restraint, all care and all hesitance he'd had crumble away to pure want. He came forward and slipped his hand around the back of Kell's neck, pulling him into him and into another kiss. It was explosive and unrestrained. Parker fell back again, this time bringing Kell with him. He fell on him, kissing him back with wanton fervor. Kell's kisses were unpracticed and virgin, but Parker didn't care. The feeling of his lips was like a taste of water in a parched desert. How could it feel so good to kiss someone? He'd never felt this way before in his life.

Their tongues met and played, and Parker felt his cock swell with vigor, pressing tightly against the front of his pants. He told himself not to go any further, to fight against the intensely powerful desire that was welling up inside of him. He was an alpha, and he wanted what only an omega—what only Kell—could give him. And he might have actually succeeded in containing his want and ended it with just that incredible kiss, if it hadn't been for Kell's curious hand, which slid between Parker's legs, gliding along his thigh. He sucked in a breath as Kell's fingers reached him, a slight and hesitant touch that was dampened only by the thin layers of fabric. And yet even with that barrier there, it felt like a shock of pleasure to his cock and he actually found a moan leave his lips.

"Is this okay?" Kell whispered, as his fingers went for the button of Parker's pants, quickly working to open it.

Parker responded with another kiss, and he slowly reached up to touch Kell's chest. He felt oddly reserved about touching him. He wasn't used to getting close to anyone. His fingers finally met him, and he felt the ripples of muscle beneath Kell's shirt. The more he felt, the more he wanted to feel, and soon his hands moved hungrily all across Kell's body. He grabbed him by the waist and in one quick motion, flipped him so that Kell was on the bottom and he was on top. Kell stared up at him, his gaze occasionally flitting away in shy, nervous glances.

"God," Parker growled. "I don't get it. Sometimes you piss me off so much. But I can't get you out of my fucking head. You've been driving me crazy for the entire time I've known you. I fucking hate it." He kissed him again, this time pushing his face into Kell's neck. He licked him and raked his teeth across his skin as he breathed in Kell's scent. Kell gasped and dug his fingers into Parker's back. Parker loved feeling and hearing his reaction to his touch, and he nipped his neck again.



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"Ah..." Kell moaned. "I've never liked you. You've always been such an asshole. This shouldn't feel so damn good."

Parker felt Kell drawing down his fly, leaving his pants open and his bulging underwear exposed. Then he felt Kell's fingers pushing down beneath the waistband of his underwear until finally they made contact with him. A rush of energy crackled through Parker from the touch, as Kell squeezed his fist around his length.

"I've never done this to anyone before," Kell admitted, almost to himself.

Parker reached down and pushed everything off, and his cock popped free. Kell's gaze dropped. His eyes briefly widened as he took him in, in the way that a person's eyes did when they saw something delicious. Parker tugged Kell's shirt off and tossed it aside. He pulled him in and pressed his face into Kell's chest, kissing and sucking the swells of his muscles as Kell stroked his cock.

Then Parker stood up. His cock bounced at face height in front of Kell, waiting for him. Kell wrapped his fingers around the base and then opened his mouth to take it inside. Parker moaned as he felt Kell's tongue glide along the length of his shaft. Holy shit. It felt amazing. Kell gobbled him down, going at it with an uncharacteristic lack of hesitation.

Parker pushed his fingers through Kell's hair and grabbed a fist of it, riding the pleasure that pulsed through him. He'd had his dick sucked before, but it'd never felt anything like this. This was more than just the physical pleasure. This was something real that he'd never had before. This was a connection.

He was going to come. He uttered it through clenched teeth, and Kell continued to suck on him until the climax surged through his body and pulsed through his cock. Kell still didn't stop. He swallowed everything that Parker had to give to him and licked him clean, like he'd been craving it his entire life.

Parker collapsed into the folding chair, and he pulled Kell to him and kissed him. Their chests heaved with excited breaths. Parker didn't want to stop, but Kell moved away and pulled his shirt back on. He smiled shyly at Parker, like he couldn't believe what he just did. "Maybe we should finish the work. We've got a lot to do."

Parker wanted to get a taste of Kell. He wanted to make him moan with pleasure, to see him lose his mind as he sucked his cock. But he wasn't going to force him to do anything.

"Right," he said, going around to collect his pants and underwear from the floor. He re-dressed and then sat back down at the computer. Kell came and sat next to him. The frantic electricity that had filled the air just moments ago was fading down to a gentle buzz. It felt almost like nothing had happened between them—almost. But the connection was there now, real and established. Parker cleared his throat and picked up his stylus to get back to work. He felt Kell's hand slowly make its way onto his thigh, where it rested as he worked. Parker smiled. The least expected thing had happened, and he felt damn good about it.

### Chapter Eight

They finished the majority of the project that night, and Parker said he would complete the rest the next morning before class. It was late when Parker left to go back to his place, and Kell considered asking if he just wanted to stay the night. He decided against it. He didn't want to get too ahead of himself, and he didn't think Parker would've agreed, anyway.

On his way out the door, Parker stopped, turned, and hesitantly left a kiss on Kell's lips. It was obvious that Parker didn't have much more experience in the realm of romance than he did. He seemed to be just as uncertain about what to do. When Parker was gone, Kell did a running jump onto the mattress and bounced around on it, excitedly. It was almost unreal what had just happened between them. Just a few days ago he would've laughed at the idea that anything like this could happen between him and anyone, let alone Parker Leipold.

But what would happen now? What were they, exactly? Sure, he'd sucked his dick... But that didn't mean they were together.

But the kisses? Maybe the kisses meant something?

He practically swooned thinking about them. The way Parker had pounced on him after he'd gone in for the first kiss...

Kell's balls ached, and his cock throbbed for attention. His erection had lasted practically the entire night. Kell had stopped Parker from doing anything because he was afraid to let things get too far, too quickly. If he and Parker had taken it all the

way thatnight...

He was still a virgin. As much ingrained fear as he'd gotten over in those few short hours, he was still afraid of fully opening himself. And as much as he didn't want to admit it, he was still slightly intimidated by Parker. But he was glad that he hadn't pressured him to keep going.

What was going to happen with them, now?

He slipped his hand down into his underwear and took a hold of himself, closing his eyes as he masturbated to the memory of Parker's cock, its taste still lingering on his lips.

Afterwards, Kell texted Jessie. He knew that she'd sense something was up immediately, so he figured he might as well save himself the trouble and fill her in before he saw her in class the next day.

KELL: Guess what?

JESSIE: Parker said he's into you?

KELL: Uh, something like that. wtf, how did you know?

JESSIE: Oh shit! Whaaaaaat.

KELL: How did you know?

JESSIE: I mean, I always had my suspicions. You two argue like a couple of kids with crushes. What happened??

KELL: I decided not to be so afraid and just kissed him. And then I might've given

him a blow job...

JESSIE: No fucking way. That's amazing... And a little hot.

KELL: Anyway... Thanks for encouraging me to go for it. It helped.

JESSIE: Excited for you. Hope you two manage not to kill each other too soon.

He laughed and settled back into the pillows. Parker was still a jerk, but it didn't bother him like it used to. He thought he could deal with Parker easier now, knowing how he actually felt about him. He sighed, basking in the glow of it all. God, he actually missed him. He missed Parker Leipold. How freaking bizarre was that? He couldn't wait to see him the next day.

He wished he knew which apartment Parker lived in. Part of him wanted to call him up and ask if he could come over right now and get reacquainted with him in his bed. He felt his face go hot, and his cock throbbed in response.

The two of them, together...

Could he imagine himself mated to Parker? Or how about with kids? What kind of kids would they have? They'd probably have an artsy family. Their house would be full of artwork they'd made. Their paintings on the walls, everything beautifully designed. They'd both be working great jobs. Hell, maybe they'd even have their own design firm. They could do it. The two of them would be unstoppable. Their son or daughter would be creative too, of course, and they'd always be immaculately dressed, with perfect style.

He sighed, losing himself in his designer fantasy. Shit. So much for not getting ahead of himself.

"Maybe I should get this bed set up, finally," he said to himself, and rolled off the mattress. His barren apartment was anything but a designer fantasy. It was a little embarrassing to have shown it in this state to Parker. And the damn mood lighting. He didn't know what he'd been expecting by setting that up, but maybe it'd actually helped? He snorted a laugh and moved the pieces of the bed frame into place.

\* \* \*

Work the next day was as much a horror as any other day, but he at least had some pleasant memories as a distraction. Montrell pestered him about his poor sales performance, threatening a cut in hours. For the first time, Kell didn't feel anxious at all. His portfolio was finally out in the world. He had Parker's confidence, and now he felt more confident. Good things were going to happen, he was sure of it.

After some mental debate, he decided to send Parker a text message.

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KELL:Heythere.

PARKER:Yeah?

He frowned.Of course, he shouldn't have gotten his hopes up for anything warm fromhim.

KELL:What a response, jerk. How's itgoing?

PARKER:Getting there. Nearlydone.

There was a delay,and then another message camethrough.

PARKER:How's yourday?

Kell smiledas a pleasant warmth tingled up through hisbody.

KELL:Work sucks. But I'm getting throughit.

PARKER:You'll be out of theresoon.

KELL:I hope so. Ok, gotta go. It's gettingbusy.

PARKER:See yousoon.

Kell slippedthe phone into his pocket, smiling to himself. He could tell Parker was trying to show affection in his own, non-affectionate way.I'll take it, hethought.

He met Jessie outside campus, and she greeted him with an elbow to the side.

"Eh? Eh? Eh? Well? What's happened?"

"Nothing since yesterday," he said. "We texted a bit, but that's all."

"What a turn of events," Jessie said. "You and Parker. Power couple, I'm telling you. So, how did it happen? How'd he end up making his move? How'd you end up giving him a..." She imitated sucking a cock.

"Oh my god," he groaned. "Stop embarrassing me. And I told you, I was the one who kissed him. He never made a move. I had candles and stuff. The cologne might've been a bit much, though."

"Candles?" She laughed. "That's fucking adorable. He must've been surprised."

"It was crazy," Kell said. "The way it all happened so quickly. One moment he's sitting next to me, the next I'm touching his hand. Then we're on the floor and I'm grabbing his dick. And now I can't get him out my head. It's like every thought's been consumed with him, and all I want to do is see him again. Has that ever happened to you?"

"Not often," she admitted. "It sounds like you're really into him."

"I don't know where it all came from," he said. "Just thinking about him used to annoy me. I couldn't stand his attitude. He's so damn arrogant. But now I actually find it... God, I actually find it hot."

Jessie shrugged. "Maybe you always had a thing for him, you just didn't want to admit it to yourself. I mean, you've always talked about him more than anyone else in the class. You were always talking about how much of a dick he is. Either that or how



amazing his work is."

She was right—Parker had always preoccupied a large amount of his attention. He'd never really thought about it before, but that was pretty odd.

"I always did think you guys would make a cute couple," she said. "Never thought it'd actually happen, though. I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever get with someone at all!"

"Thanks for the faith," he said.

As they neared the classroom, Kell's heart started to pick up with anticipation for seeing him. He opened the door and couldn't restrain a grin. Parker was there early again, and this time he was next to where Kell usually sat. Jessie gave him a little nudge and they went over and sat down. Parker turned, and a slight smile pulled across his lips. Kell felt his heart spin.

"Hi," he said.

Seeing him triggered a flood of memory from the night before. Suddenly he was on his knees again, sucking him down, looking up at Parker's ecstasy-gripped expression. He felt his cock pulse with life and squeezed his legs together to try and suppress it. They'd really done that together. It hadn't been a dream. Another flash, and he imagined Parker's lips on his, his tongue dancing against his. He felt those strong hands exploring his body, touching him everywhere... Kell pushed his hands into his lap, like he was trying to shove the jack back into the box.

Parker, if he was affected by Kell's presence, didn't reveal it. He looked just as unaffected as always. Kell wanted to touch him, to take his hand or kiss him or do something to reconfirm that what they'd done the night before hadn't just been a one-time thing, but he resisted. He'd had a feeling Parker would be like this, anyway.

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"Take a look," Parker said, pulling out his laptop and putting it in front of Kell. On the screen was their final project rendering, and it looked incredible. The color was beautiful and the design striking; the perfect realization of their idea.

"Wow," Kell said. "This is... Just, wow." It was amazing to see his line work combined with Parker's masterful color work, and it could easily pass as the best professional work found in a magazine or up on a high-profile billboard.

"I think we did a pretty damn good job," Parker said.

Jessie leaned over and peeked at their work. "Yikes," she said quietly. "My group was a nightmare. I'm almost embarrassed to turn in what we made." She whispered into Kell's ear. "Power couple."

Professor Young went to the front of the class and said, "Okay, everyone. Critique day. I'll give everyone a bit of time to confer with their groups to get organized and their files set up. Looking forward to seeing what you came up with."

The class immediately erupted into a moving of chairs and chattering as everyone hurried to get into their groups. It was obvious that not everyone was happy with what they'd done. Kell and Parker exchanged a look and a brief smile as they sat quietly amongst the chaos. By all rights, they should've had the most trouble of all the groups. Kell had completely expected to fight with Parker over every little decision, but it'd actually been incredibly smooth. Parker might've been a dick, but he also was professional and had an impeccable eye. He was definitely not afraid to speak out against something he felt was bad, but he also recognized when things were good.

Kell realized that it'd been no different with all of the project critiques. He realized that because of his sensitivity, he'd taken only Parker's harsh criticisms to heart. He hadn't read between the lines and seen the deep compliments he'd been giving him this entire time.

"After class," Parker said in a low voice, leaning over to Kell. "Meet me in art studio B."

"O-okay," Kell said, a little surprised. He wasn't sure why he'd want to meet there of all places—art studio B was the dingy backup studio and wasn't really used much except as a room to store all the extra easels and other equipment.

The groups went up one by one presented their projects to the class for critique until finally, it was their turn to show their work. Being no secret that the two of them were the best in the class, everyone was anticipating seeing what they'd come up with. Parker plugged in his laptop and brought up the image. There were groans, whistles, and murmurs of awe and approval.

"I quit," someone joked.

Kell felt proud. Not that he didn't feel proud showing all his other work, but there was something special about having done this with Parker. It made him happy knowing that they'd done it together, and that they were compatible in their skills. Maybe it meant they would be compatible elsewhere, too. He wanted this thing with Parker to keep going. It may have just been physical now, but he could actually see himself in a relationship with him. It'd be a challenging relationship, no doubt, but as he was beginning to discover, Parker's challenging personality was actually drawing him in, not repelling him as he'd once thought. As much as it heated and irritated him, it also attracted him.

He snuck a glance over at Parker, who was addressing critiques and questions about

design choices, and felt his heart flutter a bit. Parker looked so damn hot when he was talking about art.

He looked hot all the damn time.

"Excellent work, Kell and Parker. Thank you," Professor Young said, and they returned to their seats. Kell wondered if Parker might offer some sign of affection for the job well done, but he continued to keep his hands to himself. Kell was dying to touch him, and when they sat down he was tempted to reach over under the table and give him a little squeeze. His palms started sweating and his heart pounded as he debated whether he should just go for it. It was possible someone would see him do it, and that only made him more excited, but he wasn't sure how Parker would feel about that. He didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable, and yet the desire to touch him was so damn strong.

Kell opened his hand and slowly, hesitantly started to move it across his right thigh towards Parker's left leg. He swallowed nervously, anticipating Parker's reaction. Would he be pissed?

Then, suddenly to his shock, Parker reached over and took his hand in a brief action that lasted only a few seconds. He squeezed Kell's hand and then let go, as if he was saying that he was thinking the same thing but wanted him to restrain himself. Kell pulled his hand back into his lap as his face burned red. His cock had stiffened up immediately and strained sorely against his jeans. His heart pounded hard, and he snuck a look at Parker's face. Again, unaffected. Except... He could see color beginning to flush just ever so slightly on his cheeks. Parker looked away.

After class got finished, Parker left in a hurry without saying a word. Jessie watched, eyebrow raised, and turned to Kell. "Uh, is everything okay?"

He nodded. "He asked me to meet him, so I think so." Suddenly, all sorts of thoughts

started to run through his mind. Maybe Parker grabbing his hand had actually been a rejection? He could've sworn he'd given him an affectionate squeeze, though. Had that just been his imagination?

Kell felt a cold chill go through his body.

Maybe he was going to tell him that it'd all been a mistake?

"I mean," he said, "I'm pretty sure it's okay. That's just how he is, I think. Right?"

Jessie shrugged, wide eyed. "I don't know, man."

Kell grabbed his bag. "I'll see you later."

"Good luck," she told him.

He hurried out into the hallway and made his way through the art building, up to the third floor where studio B was located. The floor was quiet—there weren't many classrooms here, mostly just professors' offices and supply rooms, and then the backup studio. He walked down the hall towards the studio's door, his mind and heart racing. Were things going to end as quickly as they'd started?

Damn Parker, he thought. Don't fuck around with me. Don't tell me you're just an asshole after all.

He reached the door and drew in a nervous breath. Then, he pushed the door open and went inside.

All the lights inside the studio were off, and the only illumination was what sunlight filtered through blackout curtains partially pulled over the windows. It felt a little eerie. The room was filled with rows of spare easels, racks of folding chairs and

several mannequins from the fashion department. Parker stood in the middle of the room, and a smile spread across his lips. Kell felt a wash of relief seeing that smile, and he walked over to him. Parker didn't hesitate—he wrapped his arms around Kell and pulled him in tightly and kissed him. Kell felt himself melting into him as all the anxieties disappeared. He held Parker as tightly as he could, reveling in the feeling of his body against his own.

"I didn't want to make a scene in class," Parker said. "Not that I give a damn about what anyone thinks about us. But it's just better that way."

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"I don't care," Kell said. "Nobody needs to know. As long as we can keep doing this. God. This shouldn't feel this good."

"I feel like I'm going crazy," Parker said.

"You're not the only one."

"I've thought about you for a long time, Kell," Parker said. "I didn't want to admit it. But at a certain point I realized I didn't have much of a choice."

"What would've happened if I hadn't made a move on you last night?"

Parker shook his head. "Well, we wouldn't be here right now. But we would've been eventually, I can tell you that much."

Kell nodded. "Yeah. I feel the same way. This is insane, but god, it feels like the rightest thing I've done in a long time."

Parker drew Kell in for another kiss, and this time their tongues met and explored. Kell's cock was aching to be touched. He felt Parker's hand glide down his back until it reached his ass and gave him a squeeze. Kell moaned into the kiss. Then Parker's hand slipped around to the front and answered his desire. He moaned again, harder this time. Parker's touch was like lightning. It was the first time anyone had touched his cock, and Kell felt like he could've come right then and there. He shivered as Parker pushed his hand down into his underwear and squeezed his hand around him.

"W-wait," Kell murmured, glancing towards the door. "Maybe we should wait..."

What was he saying? He knew he couldn't. He grabbed Parker by the arm and dragged him back through the room to a dark corner where they were shielded behind the mannequins and a pile of discarded paint tubes. He fumbled with his pants and pushed them down to his ankles. Parker took care of the rest and tugged his underwear down his thighs. His cock jumped free.

"I thought about this all fucking day," Parker growled as he dropped to his knees.

Kell threw a hand over his mouth to cut the shout of pleasure that burst from him when he felt Parker's warm mouth close around him. His eyes fluttered back as the most incredible pleasure rippled through him from Parker's talented tongue. It was the first time he'd ever gotten his cock sucked, and it felt like he was floating through heaven. He thrust his fingers through Parker's hair, loving the feeling of it in his grasp. His knees quivered as Parker did something wonderful to him with his lips, and he kept his hand clasped tightly across his mouth to keep the moans from escaping.

He didn't want things to end on a cliffhanger this time. He didn't care that they were in the middle of a classroom, or that he'd told himself he'd wanted it to be special. It would be special enough because it was Parker, and he needed it now. He pulled away from him and crouched down. "Will you fuck me?" he whispered. He could feel how wet his entrance was, his omega desire tingling through him, dying for alpha cock. The answer flashed across Parker's eyes, and he opened his backpack, which was on the floor next to them, and pulled out a wrapped condom. He then went over to a storage drawer that was sitting along the wall and pulled out a paint-spattered drop cloth and two of the cushions the figure drawing models used for long kneeling poses. He spread the cloth on the ground and put down the cushions.

"Lay on your back," Parker said in a low voice. "Put the pillow underneath... Yeah, like that."



Kell slid one cushion under his ass to raise it up slightly, and the other cushion beneath his head. He still had his shirt on, but he felt goosebumps spread across his skin as he watched Parker open his pants and pull out his heavy cock. Parker bit the condom wrapper and tore it open with a jerk of his hand, and then unrolled the thing down his length.

Kell ached to feel Parker's cock inside of him, even though he was also terrified of it. He'd never had sex before, and he had no idea how he could fit something like that inside. Parker bent down and kissed him, long and gentle. He nuzzled his face into Kell's neck, lightly biting and sucking him there. Kell moaned and murmured softly and wrapped his arms around Parker's neck. Then he felt Parker's hand slip down between his legs. His fingers brushed past his balls, and Kell spread his legs to allow him to push one into his entrance. He bit his lip as he felt Parker's finger curl into him, pressing up against his spot. Then another finger slipped into him, and he gasped as it stretched him. The shock mostly came from not being used to it. It didn't actually hurt—just the opposite. The feeling of being filled was amazing.

Kell slipped his hand down and took hold of Parker's cock, and gently tugged him closer. "Use this," he whispered, and Parker nodded. He pushed Kell's knees back to his shoulders, opening him up and exposing his entrance, and Kell helped him by holding his thighs to spread himself. Parker took hold of his cock and pressed it up against his hole. He pushed, and Kell squeezed his eyes shut as the pressure stretched into him. He bit his lip but was unable to stop a gasp and a soft cry. It hurt, but he could endure. Parker kept going, pushing in slowly. Kell could feel inch after inch of him sliding inside, splitting him, filling him up to the max. Then he felt Parker's abs press against his legs. He was all the way in. He opened his eyes. Parker was gazing down at him, his icy blue eyes shimmering just for him. Then he started to move his hips.

Kell bit the back of his hand to stop the moan. It felt so good. Parker was picking up speed, thrusting in and out of him as the muscles of his neck tensed like braids of

steel. Kell could see that he was also fighting back moans of pleasure.

"You're so fucking tight," he murmured. "Fuck..."

Kell threw his arm around the back of Parker's neck and pulled him into a kiss. Their tongues collided as their lips crashed together. Kell was drowning in him, incapable of even wanting to come up for a breath. It was ecstasy. Pure ecstasy. He'd never felt anything like it. He was connected. Whole.

And Parker felt the same.

Parker had always believed that he'd never feel this way for an omega. He was convinced that he didn't need anyone, that he was fine with pushing people away, because he didn't need to be close. Until now, he was fine being alone. Kell had changed everything. Parker knew that all he needed was him. Kell was everything. Kell was a fucking masterpiece.

He thrust deep into him, and this time Kell was unable to stop the moan. He clawed at Parker's back and balled the drop cloth in his fist as he felt his cock drive deep inside of him. "It feels so good," he said. "It feels so—"

They both froze and looked towards the door as the knob clicked and turned, and the door pushed open. Kell slapped his hands over his mouth, his eyes wide. Two students walked into the studio.

"I hate coming in here," one said. "It's so creepy. Where's the light?"

"Forget it. Let's just get the gesso and go. It's over here."

They walked to the opposite side of the room and began to dig through a metal storage cabinet. Parker and Kell exchanged a glance, their breaths quick and startled. The two

students had no idea they were there. A slight smile spread across Parker's lips. Kell shook his head at him, but Parker continued anyway. He thrust his hips slowly, pushing himself in slowly from tip to hilt. Kell bit his hand. It felt so fucking good that it was almost impossible not to make a noise.

"Doesn't it feel like the mannequins are watching us?" one of the intruders said.

"Shut up. I'm already creeped out."

Parker thrust slowly, keeping silent, enjoying seeing the strained pleasure that crossed Kell's face. Kell glared up at him, angry but loving it at the same time.

"Where the hell is the gesso?"

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"Check the bottom drawer. Maybe we should get the lights..."

Kell's cock throbbed with each of Parker's languid thrusts, and to his alarm, he felt himself coming close to the edge. The thrill of being caught had hurtled him there, and he was fighting with everything he had not to plummet over. If he did, he didn't think he could hold anything back. They'd be caught for sure... And Parker, dick that he was, wasn't doing him any favors. He was enjoying this situation. But it'd be a lie if Kell said he wasn't, too. Parker thrust harder. Kell squeezed his eyes shut, muffling a tiny moan into his hand.

"What was that?" the nervous student said. "Did you hear that?"

"Ah. Got it. Here it is."

Kell's eyes rolled back as Parker fucked him with slow, deep thrusts. He was hitting every right spot. It was impossible to hold on. The orgasm rolled over him like a fucking tidal wave of pleasure, crackling through his body with explosive force. He let out a low, guttural moan that sounded more like an animal than a person as his cock tensed and came. Parker grunted. His expression tensed into a snarl of ecstasy as he hit the finish too.

The two students practically jumped into each other's arms. In the darkness of the room they couldn't see Kell and Parker from their spot behind the mannequins, but they had heard the sound of their finish. They yelped and bolted for the door, slamming it so hard behind them that one of the mannequin's arms dropped off.

Parker's cock throbbed inside of him as he felt the waves of his climax continue to

wash over him and then finally begin to recede. Then he started to laugh. Parker grinned down at him.

"Now that was something," he said.

"Asshole," said Kell, and he pulled him into a kiss.

After cleaning up, the two of them cautiously poked their heads out the studio door into the hallway to check if the coast was clear and then slipped out. They walked together to the parking structure that was next to the art department, their hands hanging just a few inches apart. After a moment of internal debate, Kell reached over and took Parker's hand. He expected Parker to pull away, but instead he slowly tightened his hold around Kell's hand. A tingling, happy excitement bloomed within the both of them.

"I kinda wish the project had been longer," Kell said. "I wouldn't have minded being forced to see you every night for a couple weeks."

"I would've gotten tired of it," Parker said. "Kidding," he added, after a cheeky pause. "Who said we can't continue to see each other every night? We're neighbors."

"That's true," Kell said, with a laugh. "So... Are we going to keep seeing each other? Like this?"

"Do you want to?"

"Yeah," he replied, without hesitation. "I actually... really like you."

"Believe it or not, I really like you, too," Parker said. "I shouldn't. But I do."

"Why shouldn't you?"

"Because. You know how it is. Time is precious, and we hardly have enough of it as it is. But I think you're worth making time for. Just a little bit of time."

Kell smiled and kicked Parker's shoe. "Yeah? I hope so, jerk. So... what about tonight? Maybe I could come over to your place when you get back from work."

An odd expression crossed Parker's face for a moment. "Not my place."

"What's wrong with your place? I'm sure it's much nicer than the closet that's my apartment."

Parker shook his head. "It's... it's a mess. Filled with equipment and supplies and stuff. I don't want you to see it."

"I don't mind..."

"No," Parker said, firmly. "Not my place."

"Alright, okay," Kell said, slightly taken aback. "Sorry."

Parker sighed and drummed his fingers on the roof of his car before opening driver side door. "Do you still want to meet tonight?"

"Yeah..."

"Okay," Parker said. "I'll call you." He moved to get into the car and paused. He turned and grabbed Kell and pulled him into a kiss that took his breath away.

Kell watched as Parker drove away, his heart fluttering in his chest. He was realizing that Parker had the incredible ability to piss him off in one moment and leave his heart racing with happiness in the next. He was curious why Parker was so against

having him over. Kell really didn't care about a mess. He was sure that Parker was overstating it, anyway. Whatever mess there was, he was willing to bet money that it was probably an artistic mess. Incidentally aesthetic. Parker was always so fastidious and perfect in his appearance that he couldn't believe it could be that bad.

Maybe he actually does live in squalor, he thought. Or maybe he thought that he was living a destitute lifestyle compared to the one he was normally used to living and was self-conscious about it. Kell could imagine that being the case for someone who came from money and was living below the standard of living they'd been accustomed to. After all, he did drive that extravagantly fancy-ass car.

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He had a hard time imagining Parker being self-conscious about anything. Maybe I'll take a walk around the complex, he thought. If I run into him there, I can at least get a peek at his place.

Kell went home, and the first thing he did was send Jessie a text message.

KELL: We did it.

JESSIE: What?

KELL: It.

JESSIE: ....

JESSIE: omg.

JESSIE: ewlfkjaeljwflefw.

JESSIE: WHAT.

JESSIE: Omg, Kell. Are you guys official, then?

Official... Kell had no idea what made a couple "official." It was obvious they were something. They were seeing each other, even though it seemed like it might continue to be on the down low for awhile.

KELL: Don't say a word.



JESSIE:Ok, ok. So, was it as romantic as you wanted it to be? Candles, flower petals, all of thatshit?

Kell laughedas he read her message. He couldn't believe how quickly those ideas had gone out the window. He'd gotten so worked up about it needing to be special, and he realized that he'd probably thought that as a means of making himself feel better for having such a difficult time losing his virginity. When it'd come down to the moment, he'd completely forgotten. It seemed like Parker had that effect on him. After all, Parker used to be on Kell's "no-fucking-way" list ofalphas.

KELL:We may have done it in art studioB...

JESSIE:OMG. Who is this newKell??

KELL:Haha... I know. It was crazy, but it was so in the moment. I couldn't wait forit.

JESSIE:So hot. How's Parker? Not asking in a pervy way. Is he different, now?Sensitive?

KELL:He's about the same. I've got a sense of how he thinks, now. He's still as rough as ever. But I think the things that he does that drive me crazy and piss me off also do the same in a good way,now.

JESSIE:Power couple! Haha, seriously. That kind of compatibility means you're mate material. I read a book onit.

KELL:Jesus, it's too early to talk about mates. Anyway, the next thing is to get him comfortable enough to invite me over to hisplace.

JESSIE:What's the big deal? You'reneighbors.

KELL:I know. But he's embarrassed or something. I asked and he got all weird and defensive.

JESSIE:Huh.

Kell stared at his phone. He was bothered about the apartment thing more than he had any right to be. It was day two, for god's sake. They were still just getting to know one another, basically. They were only just coming to terms with this crazy thing that'd come over them. And yet, it still bugged him. He just wanted Parker to know that he couldn't care less about money or appearances or anything like that. It was him he was into, not how organized or clean or fancy his apartment was. And he hoped Parker felt the same way about him.

Another message chimed through from Jessie, and he frowned as he read it.

JESSIE: You don't think he's hiding something?

KELL: A dirty apartment? That's what he said. I think he's just self-conscious because it's not the luxurious accommodations he's used to.

JESSIE: Hmm... I see. Well, it's okay. It's still early.

KELL: Yeah.

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JESSIE: This is all great! I'm happy for you. I gotta get back to painting but keep texting if you want!

Kell looked at the time. He'd just gotten home, he had hours until Parker would be done with work. He groaned. He wanted to see him. With no new project due, Kell actually had some free time to kill before Parker would get off work, and any extra time he had was a gift he could use for doodling or working on personal projects. He decided he would paint something for Parker to give to him as a gift; a portrait. He didn't have any reference photos of Parker, but that was fine. He would use his own memory. With how vividly Parker appeared in his head, it'd be no problem at all.

He went to his corner of painting supplies and dug out a small canvas, about two feet long, and placed it up on his easel. He moved the lamp that he and Parker had set up and put it next to his easel, and then brought over his paints and brushes. When he looked at the canvas he could already visualize the painting in his mind, and he dug out several tubes of paint from his box. Yellow ochre... cadmium red... cobalt blue... Prussian white... And several others. Then, he brought out his palette and began to squeeze dabs of color onto it. He worked quickly and confidently and began to blend the paint using his palette knife. He then grabbed a brush, and in heavy swipes began to put down big swashes of color onto the canvas to prime it.

Kell loved the zone he got into when painting, a meditative state of flow that carried him away from all other thoughts other than the task at hand. He was in that zone now, but this time his mind was also occupied by thoughts of Parker. His feelings for him were fueling his creativity, and he was becoming more and more excited as he painted, until it felt like pure glee was flowing out from within. He and Parker were together. It was such a crazy thing to think about, something he never could've

imagined before. He was thrilled. He was excited to learn more about him, to crack a bit of the enigma that he was. And he was excited for the new realms of pleasure that he knew he would be experiencing with Parker.

He still ached from earlier. The soreness thrummed through him, but it was a delicious soreness, like the kind imbued from a particularly good workout. And the itch—the one that seemed to have been building up deep inside—had been relieved, just a little bit. It was still there, of course, and he couldn't wait for Parker to scratch it again that night.

Kell grinned as he thought about it, and his cock responded too. The things that he wanted to do to that man... and have done to him. Dirty things. Dirty, dirty things.

Power couple.

He did like that title. Mostly, he just liked that they were a couple.

The scaffolding of the portrait was starting to appear on the canvas. Parker's defined jawline was there, along with the shape of his eyes and the slight curl of his mouth. Kell took a step back to admire the emerging likeness, and then went in to start adding in the big blocks of color.

He really liked him. He'd never had these kinds of feelings bloom up so powerfully before, and from seemingly out of nowhere. He'd never felt this way about anyone before.

Kell worked on the painting for a couple hours, until he was forced to stop when he ran out of red paint. He dug through his box, looking for another tube, but he was fresh out. He cut open the back of the rolled-up paint tube and extracted whatever leftovers were inside and dabbed them onto his palette, but it wouldn't be enough to complete the painting. He swore to himself, annoyed that he hadn't bought a

replacement tube even though he'd known he was getting low. The apartment move had gotten him alldisorganized.

He had time.He could run to the art supply store and grab more and probably still have time to keep working before Parker gotback.

### Chapter Nine

William had another job interview that evening, so Parker got out of work a little early to go pick Nate up from the day care center. The little boy sat strapped into his car seat in the back of Parker's Bentley and filled him in on what had happened during the day.

"And then, we pretended to be fish, and we all swam around like, fsshhhhh." He waved his hand through air. "And then, after that, we sang a song."

"What kind of song?" Parker asked.

"I don't know."

"Oh," he said, chuckling. "Did you have fun?"

Nate nodded.

"Make friends?"

Nate nodded again.

"That's good."

Parker loved talking to Nate. In fact, he was probably the only person in the world who managed not to test his patience. Sure, he could be stubborn and bratty in all the ways a little boy could be, but Parker could tolerate that. He was just a kid, so it was

to be expected. Parker was delighted by Nate's naturally inquisitive nature, and the innocence and joy he had about everything. It reminded him of what it was like to be a kid himself and helped him tap into new ideas for his artwork.

If it hadn't been for Nate, Parker probably would've had no interest in ever having kids. Not that it was necessarily on his list of things he had to do, but now he was at least open to the idea. And Kell coming into his life had pushed things along even further...

He was happy with Kell. It was a strange thing to feel for someone who didn't often feel that way, but it was true. It'd only been two days since they'd discovered how they felt about each other, but even in that short amount of time he'd experienced a level of warmth, happiness and excitement that he hadn't felt in a long time. Not even his paintings had been able to bring him those feelings, which was a bit of a shock to realize.

He was hesitant to even think the thought, but... maybe he was in love with him?

Could it be love? The feeling was so much more powerful than the one thing he knew he did love: his painting. It was something strong. Something passionate, like a smoldering ember deep in his heart that was ready to become a bonfire. Put a bit more fuel on it, and it would. Kell was that fuel.

Maybe he and Kell might even someday... have kids?

He laughed to himself. He couldn't believe he was even thinking about something like that. He had so many other things to take care of, how could he even think about having a kid? Especially with a guy he'd only just started seeing. But that's how strong the feelings were. It almost felt normal to be thinking about things like that.

"What's funny?" Nate asked.

"You are," Parker said. "Your face is funny."

"No, it's not!" Nate said, laughing. "Your face is funny!" Parker laughed with him.

Nate was nearing pre-school age and he wanted him to have that experience, but there was no way that he could afford to take care of him on his own. He knew what he'd have to do. It was simple, and hardly a sacrifice at all—he'd sell his car. With the money he could easily buy a modest car, send to Nate to preschool, and have money left over for living expenses. He could even put it towards his loans. He didn't want to be relying on his parents for anything, and with the Bentley gone, it'd be a complete fresh start. The beginning of a new life.

He pulled into the apartment parking lot and parked the car, and then went around to the back to get Nate out.

"Carry me?" Nate asked, and Parker obliged. He hoisted him up, carrying his work bag with one hand, and Nate perched up in the crook of the other arm. He walked through the complex to their front door, set down his bag, and put the key into the lock. The moment he did, the door flung open. William stood there, grinning widely.

"Jesus, you scared me," Parker said.

"Daddy!" Nate shrieked, happily.

"Hi, sweetheart," William said to Nate, and then he stepped forward and wrapped Parker in a tight hug.

"Whoa," Parker said. "You're happy. Why are you so happy?"

"I've got some amazing news," he said.



Parker went inside and shut the door, and Nate bounded off to the bedroom. "What is it?" Parker asked.

"I. Got. A job!" William pumped his fists in the air. "Yes, yes, yes, yes! I start tomorrow!"

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"That is amazing news," Parker said, hugging William. "Good job, bro. So, what is it?"

"I," William said, proudly, "am a customer service associate. Doesn't that sound fancy? Associate. They really needed help, so I've got nearly full-time hours. The pay isn't great, but I can at least contribute, finally."

"That's great," Parker said. "That's a relief to hear. We can think about Nate's preschool."

"I'll think about his preschool," William said. "Let me take care of those things. I want you to be able to focus on your career, and your life. You've got to, even more so, now." He grinned and nudged him. "Eh? Eh, loverboy?"

"Shut it," Parker said, smirking. "Speaking of which, I've got to make a phone call."

"Go get 'em," William said.

Parker pulled out his phone and dialed Kell, his pulse starting to race just a little faster. He'd been looking forward to this since the moment he left him at school.

The phone rang and rang. And kept ringing. There was a beep, and then a recorded voicemail message sounded. Parker frowned, hung up, and immediately re-dialed. The same thing happened.

PARKER: Hope you didn't fall asleep. I'm back.

He slipped the phone into his pocket and then went to sit on the couch to start looking

into how to sell his car. William chased a stark-naked Nate into the livingroom.

"Into the bath, young man!"he said, following him. "Come on, don't make me say it again." Nate giggled and ran pastParker.

"Hi, Uncle Parker!"he said, doing a loop around the room, bouncing twice on the couch, and then disappearing into thebathroom.

"That kid,"William groaned, walking after him. "What's going on? Not going to your man'splace?"

"He didn't answer,"Parker said. "I sent him atext."

He fiddledaround online but wasn't able to concentrate on anything. He pulled his phone back out and started at the message screen. Where the hell washe?

Calm down,he thought. He was aching to see him again, but he needed to not let it get to him. It'd only just been a coupleminutes.

But when thirty minutes passed,he started to really get impatient. And then a littleworried.

"I'm gonna go over there,"he announced to William, who was cookingdinner.

"Have fun,"Williamsaid.

He walkedthe short distance over to Kell's and knocked on the door. Then again.Nothing.

"Kell?"he said. "You inside? Youasleep?"

There was no response. He walked around to the back of the apartment building where his window was. It was dark inside, and the blinds were drawn. He knocked twice on the window, and there was no response.

"What the hell," he muttered to himself. Was he okay?

He walked through the parking lot to look for Kell's car and stopped in front of his reserved parking space. It was empty.

Where the hell was he?

### Chapter Ten

Just as he'd pulled into the apartment parking lot after getting back from the art supply store, Kell had seen Parker's Bentley rolling into through the gate.

He decided he would try and sneak up on him. It'd be fun to jump from the bushes and scare him, or something like that. He wondered if Parker was the kind of guy who would jump in the air and get all freaked out, and then try to play it off afterward. He laughed to himself, thinking about it. He hopped out of his car and found a well-hidden spot behind a tall bush of bougainvillea and peeked out to watch Parker.

Parker climbed out, went around to the rear driver-side door and ducked into the car. Then, when he came back out, Kell's stomach flipped. Parker was holding a little boy in his arms. The boy held on to Parker around his neck, and the two of them chatted as Parker walked up the sidewalk towards the apartment complex.

Whose child was that? Did Parker have a baby brother? If he did, why wouldn't he have mentioned that he'd be visiting today? And he hadn't seen a child's seat in his car before...

Kell felt a dizzying chill spread through his body as he thought back to Parker's odd insistence that he not see his apartment. Was he hiding something?

That couldn't be Parker's kid, could it?

Why couldn't it be?

Kell had only just moved into his apartment here, and he'd never even seen the outside of Parker's apartment. He hadn't spent enough time here to run into him a second time, let alone run into him with a kid...Or...

A mate.

Another chill went through Kell's body. Jesus. Could Parker already have a mate? He knew so little about him. He was so secretive at school. He had no friends in class that he'd talk to, so there'd never been a chance to overhear him talking about his home life.

Kell's heart was racing as hard as it had the first time they'd kissed. He watched Parker walk into the complex, and slowly followed after him, making sure to stay hidden. Parker hung a corner towards the opposite side of the complex from where Kell lived, and finally, he stopped in front of a door. With the boy still up in one arm, Parker set down his bag and moved to unlock the door. It flew open, and Kell's heart just about stopped. Standing there was a young man around his age, maybe a year or two younger.

"Daddy!" the boy squealed.

"Hi, sweetheart," the man said. And then he pulled Parker into a tight embrace.

Kell's head spun wildly. Everything blurred. He didn't want to believe it was true, that he'd been deceived. How could Parker do this? He was furious that Parker would do this to his mate. And he was furious for allowing himself to be drawn into this. He felt sick. He'd invited Parker into his home, and they done those things together while his mate and his son were waiting for him to come back? That was the kind of alpha that Parker was? Kell wanted to scream. He stumbled back to his apartment and collapsed onto the bed.

He couldn't stay here. Parker would come by looking for him soon, and he did not want to be here to face him. He called Jessie, and when she picked up the phone he found himself spilling everything out to her in a frantic jumble. Soon he was at her front door, and she pulled him inside and hugged him tightly. He was too angry to cry. He'd never felt so betrayed in his life.

"That bastard," she said. "That complete, fucking, son of a bitch."

She sat him down on the couch and went to the kitchen to get him a drink. She had her easel set up in the middle of her living room and had been working on a painting. He thought of the portrait he'd started painting for Parker and pushed his face into his hands. Why'd he have to let himself fall so hard for Parker so damn fast? He was so sure it was the start of something good. All those hopes he'd built in his head... Why'd he let himself get so carried away? He should've known better.

Jessie brought him back a mug of hot tea. "I've got stronger stuff, if you want," she said, and he shook his head.

"Thanks, Jessie," he said weakly.

"Has he contacted you?" she asked.

He rubbed his eyes and shook his head. "I turned my phone off. I don't want to see anything from him."

"Jesus," she muttered. "A mate and a kid... You're sure it was his?"

"He called Parker sweetheart and hugged him," Kell said. "Yeah."

"Jesus. Well... I guess it's better you found this out early, I guess..."

He nodded. "Yeah, I guess. I just feel like shit."

"It's not your fault, Kell," she said. "There was no way you could've known. This is all on him."

"Yeah..." Kell felt numb. He held the mug of tea in his hands but didn't drink from it.

"Stay over here tonight," she said. "Keep that phone off and just stay over here. Okay?"

"Okay," he said, nodding. "Yeah. Thanks, Jessie."



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She hugged him again. "I need to keep working on this painting, but we can talk while I'm doing that. Or you can just chill out. Anything you need."

"It's beautiful work," he said. And then he started to cry.

He felt silly for feeling so hurt. Angry, he could understand, but he and Parker hadn't even been intimate for very long! He shouldn't have been this hurt about a guy he'd barely had a relationship with. But just in that short amount of time, Kell had dropped his guard. He'd let him in to his heart, and he'd let him in deep. Kell'd thought that Parker would be his first boyfriend, and the firsts always caused the most pain.

Jessie hugged him again, rubbing his back until he'd gotten control of his tears. "I'm sorry," he said, sniffing. He felt so pathetic, and so powerless. Damn him.

Kell lay on the couch while Jessie painted. Sometimes he would turn to watch her, but mostly he was lost in thought and pain. It would come at him in waves, as his mind took him back to that painful moment when he saw Parker and his family. He didn't know what he would do from here. Seeing him in school was going to be horrible. Running into him at home, knowing he was there with his family, would be torturous. There seemed to only be one answer--his art. Art had always been his therapy, his refuge and his outlet for both the best and worst moments of his life. He'd turn to his art.

He decided at that moment that he would stop being afraid. He wouldn't let this thing bring him down. Parker had at least encouraged him to face his fears for once, and so he would hang on to that silver lining. He would continue showing his portfolio to companies and submitting his work to galleries until he found something.

He would angry. He was sad. But for the first time, Kell felt a resilience inside of himself that he didn't know he had. He would get through this. He would come out stronger. But for now, he would embrace the feelings that he had.

\* \* \*

Kell trudged through the work day like a zombie, mostly operating on autopilot, his mind in another universe. He just didn't care anymore. He wanted to be painting. He wanted to be doing something important. And what conflicted him the most was that he still wanted Parker. He missed him, despite what he'd learned. Despite knowing he was a cheater. Kell hated that, but he just couldn't rid himself of those feelings for him. He kept going back to those few short moments he'd shared with Parker, reliving his touch and his taste. He wanted more. He wished he could have more. He wished that yesterday had just been a terrible dream.

He decided he would skip class that day. He had to. He still couldn't bring himself to speak to Parker. He'd read his messages, but he wasn't ready to confront him about it yet. He would, eventually, but not yet. He still needed time to get through what he was feeling. It was a Friday, so he'd have plenty of time to deal with his feelings before the inevitable confrontation. Maybe it was cowardly to avoid him. Maybe it was immature. But Kell didn't care. He kept seeing the face of Parker's mate in his mind and felt that swell of hot anger every time he did. He felt so angry for him.

"Kell!" Montrell shuffled over to him. "Can I speak with you for a moment? Come with me."

"Alright," Kell said. He didn't give a damn about what Montrell had to say to him.

"I've been looking at your sales numbers. I like what I see with that volume, but the warranties. You really, really need to be selling those services. I've been telling you, over and over, and I still don't see the commitment that I want from you."

"Mm." Kell felt pressure building inside. Dammit, if he mentions warranties one more time...

"So, what I'd really like for you to do is to make sure you're offering those warranties on all of your sales. Really push it. You've got the ability to do, I know you do, you've just gotta convince them that it's something they need. Remind them that it's a protection of their investment, and--"

"Is this what you've always wanted to do with your life?" Kell asked.

"Huh?"

"Sell warranties. Sell things."

"Well... I've always enjoyed it, yes."

"Look, Montrell. I hate selling people things that they don't need. I'm here because I've been too damn afraid to sell my own work. Every time I have to try to scam someone into buying a piece of shit computer that's going to break in a year and try to force them to buy a waste of money warranty to go along with it, I die a little bit inside. Let me go back out there and I'll keep doing what I'm doing, or you can fire me, I really don't care."

Montrell looked shocked. "Well... In that case, I think you should just go home, then, Kell."

Kell nodded. "Right. Fine."

He walked out of the back room and made his way across the floor. He felt surprisingly calm.

"Oh! Hello!"

As he passed by the front registers, someone wearing an Electronics World uniform called out to him.

"Hi," he said. "I'm new here."

Kell stopped, and then froze in place when he saw who it was.

There was no mistaking it. He was Parker's mate.

"I'm William Leipold," he said, sticking out his hand. "I'm the new customer service associate."

Kell shook his hand. He felt his face going hot as his vision started to shake. What the hell?

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"H-hi," Kell stammered. "I'm, uh, Kell."

"Nice to meet you. What do you do here?"

"Computers," Kell responded. His mind was reeling.

"Cool. Hey, are you alright? You look a little flushed."

"I'm fine," Kell said. "Uh, I have to go." He stumbled away and practically fell out the front door.

"See you around," William called after him, looking confused. "Is he okay?" he asked Montrell, who shook his head.

Kell got into his car and had to sit there for a while to let his heart settle. He felt like he was going to pop. This was too much. What the hell was going on? He felt tears coming back, and he quickly turned on the car and pulled out of the parking lot before he was able to break down and be incapable of doing anything.

He threw himself into his apartment and slammed the door behind him. Standing on the easel in the center of the room was his portrait of Parker. The anger and the sadness was churning through him like a hurricane. He gripped his teeth, and with an anguished yell he kicked the easel, sending the painting whirling through the air. It smacked against the wall, smearing the still-wet oil paint in aggressive streaks. Kell stared at it, breathing hard. After a few minutes, he gathered himself and picked up the easel and the canvas. He got his jar of clean turpentine and cleaned the streaks of paint from the wall. The unfinished portrait of Parker sat staring at him on the easel.

"Fuck you," he whispered, and he grabbed his paintbrush.

### Chapter Eleven

Parker sat in class, glancing every so often towards Kell's empty seat as Professor Young demoed a digital painting on the classroom's projector screen. Kell's friend, Jessie was there, and occasionally he caught her giving him a deathglare.

What the hell had happened?

Kell hadn't responded to any of his messages or his phone calls. He'd gone back to his apartment several times over the night, but his car was still gone from the parking lot. He'd considered calling the police, but he had no idea what he'd say. In the end, he'd only gotten an hour or so of sleep that night. When he'd left to take Nate to the day care center, Kell's car was still absent from the lot. He was in a furiously bad mood because of how worried and frightened he was. He had no idea if Kell was hurt, or if something had happened to him. And now that he was also absent for class, Parker was really falling off the edge with worry. He tapped his foot, and his palms were sticky with sweat. He just wanted class to be over so that he could talk to Kell's friend and find out what the hell was going on.

Turned out, she'd had the same idea.

As soon as Professor Young concluded the lesson, Jessie stormed over to him and demanded he see her outside the building. He followed her as she marched ahead of him.

"What the hell is going on? Is Kell okay? I've been trying to reach him all night and all day."

"Don't you ask about him," she snapped, jabbing a finger in his face. "You have no right to demand anything. How could you do that to him and to your family?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Parker said. He was getting close to shouting.

"Kell saw," she said. "He knows. He knows what you're hiding."

"Hiding? I have no idea what the fuck you're talking about. What happened to Kell? That's all you need to tell me."

"He doesn't want to talk to you. You need to stay out of his life."

"What did I do wrong? When I last saw him yesterday, we were talking about meeting after I got off work. And then he just disappears, and you're telling me he doesn't want to talk to me now? Tell me what the fuck is going on!"

"You and your mate. And your son. Sound familiar?"

Parker stared at her, stunned. He began to put the pieces together. "Jesus."

"Yeah. That's right."

"Oh my god. Kell. I don't know exactly what he saw, but god, I wish he'd just talked to me. That idiot. That was my brother and my nephew. They live with me."

Jessie blinked rapidly, like someone had just thrown dust in her eyes. "Huh?"

"My parents cut my brother off when he got pregnant. He's been living with me ever since he and his boyfriend split. His son, too. He's four. Kell must've seen me bringing Nate home from daycare. God, I can't believe he just didn't talk to me."



"He saw him hugging you. Calling you sweetheart."

"He calls his son sweetheart," Parker said. "Look, I don't need to convince you of this. I just need to talk to Kell so I can set all this straight. Can you tell him to let me call him?"

Jessie eyed him. "Okay," she said. "You better not be fucking around. I'll end you."

Parker snorted. "I'm not fucking around. Literally or figuratively."

Jessie took out her phone and dialed Kell. "I'll put you on with him. Just hold on a second." She turned away and spoke quietly into the phone. "Kell? Hey, it's me. Hey... Look, I've just learned something, and I think you'd better talk to Parker. No, really. You need to. I have him here, I'm going to put him on the phone. Okay? Trust me. Okay?"

She held the phone out to him. "Make this right."

Parker took the phone. "I'm not going to explain things to you over this phone," Parker said. "I'm going to call out from work and come home right now. Meet me at my apartment in an hour. It's number three oh six. Please."

There was a moment of silence on the line. "Alright," Kell said.

Parker hung up and handed the phone back to Jessie. "Jeez," she said. "You could've been a little more apologetic or sensitive."

"Why? I've got nothing to apologize for."

He turned and walked away. He was annoyed, and didn't want to hear her speak another word. It frustrated him that Kell had reacted this way, but he could

understand how seeing him with William and Nate could've been misinterpreted. He wished he had spoken up instead of hiding.

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As he walked to his car, Parker's temper cooled down. He couldn't blame Kell. If he'd been open about his situation when Kell had asked about coming over to the apartment, then none of this would've happened. It was just a stupid misunderstanding and no one was to blame. He was just glad that Kell was safe, and that nothing had happened to him.

William was at his new job, so the apartment was quiet and empty. He went into the bedroom and dug around in the closet until he found a large leather bound book, which he brought out and put on the couch. He sat down and waited. After some time passed, Parker began to wonder if Kell wasn't going to show up. Then, finally, there was a knock on the door. Parker exploded off the couch and sprang for the door, flinging it open. Kell stood there, his fist still raised in the air to knock again. He stared up at Parker, his eyes wide. He glanced past him, looking into the apartment, no doubt for a sign of William.

Parker stepped back. "Come inside," he said.

Kell entered, looking around, and Parker gestured for him to have a seat on the couch.

"I was worried about you," Parker said. "I was afraid you'd gotten into an accident when I didn't hear back from you. I saw your car was gone."

"I didn't want to talk to you," Kell said. "So, are you going to explain?"

Parker sat on the couch and handed Kell the book. "Here."

Kell stared at it, and then opened it. It was a photo album. The first was an old photo

of two little boys grinning at the camera.

Kell was tense and ready to snap at Parker. He was waiting for lies to come, for him to come up with some convenient excuse for what he'd seen. As he stared at the photo, Parker said, "That's me and my brother, William." Below that was another photo of the two boys. One, unmistakably Parker, was perched up on a horse. William was off to the side, looking up with awe. He turned the page. There were a few more photos of them, this time a family photo of when they were older, maybe twelve or thirteen. Kell frowned. William...

"About four years ago, William got pregnant. My parents saw it as the most unforgivable thing a son could do, and they cut him off. Disowned him, just for having their grandchild. He'd always been a black sheep, though. My parents always had a weird attitude towards him. Anyway, he and his son, Nate lived with Nate's father for a few years. The guy was a real asshole. Could put me to shame."

Kell turned the page again. There was a photo of William holding a little baby boy. Kell's heart just about stopped. William. It was him. The man he'd seen.

"So I took them in. My parents refused to support them, and I wasn't going to let anything happen to my little brother and my nephew. We lived together in the family condo in Hollywood, but my parents took that away too. So we came here."

Kell felt all the anger and sadness crumbling away. He looked at Parker with tears in his eyes. "I'm such an idiot," he said.

Parker smiled. "Yeah, you really are." He reached over and drew his arm around Kell and pulled him in close. "I'm sorry you had to deal with that."

"No, I'm sorry I acted like such a baby," Kell said, hugging Parker. "I was so angry. I thought you had a family. I thought you cheated on them for me. I was so mad at

myself. And mad at you."

Parker kissed his forehead, and then wiped the tears from Kell's cheeks with his thumb. "Jesus," he said, smiling. "Why are you crying? You like me that much?"

"Shut up, asshole." Kell slid his hand around the back of Parker's head and pulled him into a kiss. When their lips met, it felt like a gale force wind had blown over them, carrying away all the anguish and misunderstanding from the last twenty-four hours. They melted into each other, holding each other tight.

Parker felt that ember of heat flaring up inside of him, bursting into a flame of joy and relief. He was fine. They were fine.

"I missed you," Parker whispered, and Kell grinned.

"God. I missed you too. As furious as I was, I fucking missed you just as much. You know what's fucking crazy? William works at my old job."

"What?"

"Yeah, I saw him there yesterday. I almost freaked out."

"That was his first day on the job. That's insane. You and I are just surrounded by amazing coincidences, aren't we?" Parker frowned. "Wait... Old job?"

Kell laughed. "I kind of walked out yesterday."

Parker chuckled. "That's what I'm talking about. But will you be okay?"

"I've got some money saved," he said. "I'll be fine. Besides, I feel a lot better about my portfolio, now. I'll find a design job soon."

Parker smiled and kissed him. "That's what I like to hear. So, William and Nate aren't going to be back until tonight. I'd love for you to meet them. But we have a few hours to kill..."

Kell didn't need to be told twice. He grinned and went for Parker's shirt, practically tearing it from his body. Parker did the same, tugging Kell's over his head and tossing it aside. He pushed Kell into the couch, pressing his lips to his nipples, kissing and licking the swell of his muscles. Kell moaned and wrapped his legs around Parker's waist, his cock hard and ready for him. Parker reached down and squeezed Kell's ass, and then pushed his hands down the front of his pants. Kell gasped as his hand reached his cock.

Parker had Kell's pants off in seconds, tugging them down to his ankles. This wasn't a slow, tender reunion. Kell flipped onto all fours, bending over the arm of the couch and pressing his ass up to Parker. He looked over his shoulder at him, begging him with his eyes. Parker yanked open his belt and popped open his pants and pulled his cock free, stroking it a few times before getting up off the couch.

"Don't move a fucking muscle," he growled. He went into a storage box he kept in the corner of the living room and pulled out a condom. He opened it and unrolled down his length. Then he was back behind Kell again, grabbing him by the waist and pulling him closer. He pushed his cock up to his waiting entrance. He was already so wet.

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"Parker," Kell murmured, and then cried out in pleasure as Parker thrust forward. He felt his cock burying deep into him, all the way to the hilt in one motion. Then Parker started to pound into him, fucking him hard and rough. His face pressed up against the warm of the couch, and he bit into the cushion as the pain and pleasure of his alpha's cock filled him up.

Parker rocked in and out of Kell, biting his lip as the waves of pleasure coursed through his body. Nothing could ever feel as good as this. Kell was perfect. He leaned over and took Kell's chin in his free hand, tilting his head back so that he could kiss him. Their tongues met and danced as he slammed him deep.

"I love you," Parker growled. "I fucking love you, Kell."

"I love you, too," Kell managed, his words low and guttural. He threw his head back and moaned. Parker felt him tighten up around him--Kell was already about to come.

Parker fucked him faster, feeling his climax approaching. He slammed forward one more time all the way to hilt and let out a strained bellow as the orgasm crashed over him. His cock throbbed as Kell pulsed around him, and the two of them collapsed into each other's arms, panting hard.

"I love you," Parker whispered again, amazed at the words.

Kell kissed him again and again, smiling the entire time.

They went and took a shower together, and afterwards, Kell ran back to his apartment to grab the painting of Parker. "I was going to get rid of it," he said. "I'd started it as a

gift, but then everything happened and I kind of went crazy with it. It was therapeutic, finishing it, even though it's pretty fucked up looking."

He handed the canvas to Parker. The portrait was complete but streaked and dotted with an explosion of angry impressionistic color. Parker was amazed by it.

"This is a masterpiece," he said. "The vigor and energy in it, it almost feels like the painting is vibrating. I look like an evil demon, but this is really something amazing."

"Really?"

Parker nodded. "No fear here. I can feel your emotion in the work. This is easily one of your best."

"Well, it's yours," Kell said. "I'd like you to have it."

"Gladly," Parker replied.

When William came home with Nate, Kell introduced himself for a second time, and he and Parker filled him in on what had happened the day before. They were laughing and joking about it, and it already felt like it'd happened in the distant past. All upset had vanished and completely melted away.

They were in love. They both could feel the strength of their connection, one that was born out of rivalry and dislike and had flowered from incredible circumstances. It was very clear that Parker and Kell were two people who were born for one another, with personalities that by all rights should've repelled each other, but instead fit together like puzzle pieces, or the perfect harmony found in the mixture of elements that formed a beautiful piece of artwork.



### Epilogue

Nate turned eight years old one month before his cousin Lianne was born, and all five of them drove home together from the hospital in Parker's flashy new Honda minivan.

Kell sat in the back next to Lianne, who was bundled up and asleep in her car seat, with her Uncle William on the other side. Nate peeked over the seat to get a look.

"Sit properly," William told him.

"She's so tiny," Nate said, his eyes wide.

"You were about this big when you were born, too," his father told him.

Parker smiled, watching the scene through the rear-view mirror. His phone buzzed, and he slipped on his Bluetooth headset. "Hello? Yes, Parker speaking..."

Kell touched his daughter's face. She stirred and gurgled, but didn't wake, and reached out with a tiny hand to grab his finger. He felt his heart melt. In the years since he and Parker had been mated, they'd graduated from ADA and started their own design firm together, with Jessie as a resident artist and William as their receptionist. They were a family now, and life had taken off.

Outside of the company, he was producing fine art for various patrons and was very much in demand. He and Parker even made joint paintings, and the two of them were in talks with a famous gallery in New York. Parker and William's parents had been trying to get back in contact ever since they'd caught wind of the gallery news, but

their calls had gone ignored.

"Thank you very much," Parker said. "We're very much looking forward to working with you."

"What was that?" Kell asked.

"The LAX contract," said Parker, smiling. "They're going to hire us to design the installation for the new terminal!"

"Yes!" Kell and William shouted, and little Lianne started to wail. "Ooh, ooh. Shh..." they both said, and they all laughed.

They drove off, pulling onto the long stretch of freeway toward home.