



Rocking Cedarwood

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Description: Book five in the Cedarwood Pride series – a newly edited and expanded version! Can the geeky teacher moonlighting as a rock-and-roll metal god find the one man to see both sides and want it all with him? Ever since Michael Jepsen walked into Cedarwood Elementary and spotted Niall Grayson, he's been hooked. He wants to explore every inch of the sexy third-grade teacher in all sorts of hot ways. But Michael has a secret—during the summer months, he morphs into his alter ego, Bandit, and rocks stages all across the country. Can he keep his job at the school while living the rock-and-roll lifestyle and snag the man of his dreams? Niall Grayson never thought he'd catch Michael's eye. Becoming more than good friends never crossed his mind. He's not good at letting people into his private life and he prefers to keep his heart guarded, but something about Michael makes him want to open up. Will he be able to accept the different facets of Michael or will the relationship fail before it gets started? These two are determined to rock Cedarwood to its core.

Total Pages (Source): 46

Chapter One

Michael Jepsen rolled his shoulders. He needed to stay in shape—the more he punished his body, the better he'd feel. Doing two hundred crunches served him better than losing his cool in the classroom. Plus, being at peak physical sharpness meant he'd perform better on stage.

He snorted then admired himself in the mirror. When he'd hired on at Cedarwood Elementary, he hadn't thought his music career would go anywhere. He had the drive and the ability to play his songs, but so did every other starving musician. But most of them hadn't pursued a teaching degree, employed by a small school district and parlayed the experience in front of fourth graders into better stage presence during their shows. But he had done all three. He'd succeeded when others might have quit.

He started the seemingly endless number of crunches, but his mind wandered. When he entertained, he commanded the throngs of fans. If he screamed, they did, too. If he told them to put their hands up, they complied. In the classroom, he held up his hands to silence his students. Sometimes it worked...and sometimes not.

But his students didn't know his other identity. Wouldn't they be surprised if they found out their teacher sang heavy metal music? Would their parents be okay with the knowledge? They'd have a fit. If they knew he was gay on top of everything else...the parents and the coalition in Cedarwood would have his ass. He'd lose his teaching gig. Still, his students might like seeing his stage makeup and learning about where he'd gone on tour.

He finished the first hundred crunches then stopped and mopped his brow. Being a

semi-famous musician was great and all. He loved that part of his life. But the true issue was his loneliness. Only two people outside the band knew the truth. Jesus. He received thousands of comments on his social media, letters and even a few gifts through his lawyer, but the fans loved the image—not the real man. He wondered if some of them even considered there was a human being beneath the makeup.

He sighed then finished the second set of crunches. When he'd completed the reps, he stood and stretched before making his way to the weight machines. What would happen if he found someone he wanted to share his life with? Would the fans revolt? Would that man understand his dual life? He set the weight limit then positioned himself at the handlebars. He worked his triceps and biceps, but his mind wandered again. He should be focused on what he was doing or he'd lose count... He could get hurt, too. But, Jesus. He, Bandit of Bandit and the Blackhearts, was doing a workout in the county metropark recreation center complex. He wasn't in a special fancy home gym with a trainer. Just him in public. His fans would balk. He was so accessible—if the right people found him out. Until he opted to tell his secrets, no one would know.

Michael glanced out of the window and noticed a figure on the walking path. Most people used the limestone trail to walk. A few used it for running. Most runners tended to take the dirt paths instead. He paused. He knew this runner. Niall Grayson. He'd been drawn to the cute man so many times but had kept things light. But damn. Niall looked hot in those tight running shorts, sweaty and glistening in the late-day sun.

Michael finished his current rep then wiped off the bar. He could be running with a buddy instead of shredding muscle alone. Would Niall appreciate company? Michael wouldn't know until he asked. Michael towed himself off then abandoned the towel in the bucket before making his way out to his locker. He hydrated and grabbed his armband from his bag. He tucked his phone into the band. Before he did any running, he needed tunes. He and Niall talked every so often, but why not try getting to know each other outside the school building?

He donned his sunglasses then closed and snicked the padlock on his locker. He'd need another stretch to catch up to Niall, but the other teacher wasn't running at a blistering pace so Michael might be okay if he joined him without much prep. He jogged along behind Niall until he felt comfortable then picked up his pace until he joined his friend.

Niall swerved and waved. "Go on," he shouted.

Although they weren't quite so visible, Michael noticed Niall had earbuds without cords in. Michael should've known Niall would need music, too. He touched Niall's arm. "Hi."

Niall frowned. He yanked his earbuds out and slowed his pace. "Michael?"

"Yeah." He fell in step with Niall. "I'm happy to see you here. Isn't it a great day for a run?"

"It is." Niall smiled. He stopped and scrubbed his hand across his forehead. He panted. "I need a break. I'm at the end of my fifth mile, so it's a good pausing point."

"I would say so," Michael said. "Are you training for a ten-k or just like running? I've done two and they kicked my ass." He winced. "Butt." He should've watched his language. He had no idea if any students or parents were around.

Niall laughed and walked over to the fountain. He took a long draw from the running water before wiping his face again. "We're not at school and I don't mind if you swear."

"We're still public figures and we should have decorum." Michael rested his hands on his hips. Talking with Niall was so easy. Why hadn't he tried to make deeper connections with Niall sooner?

“True,” Niall said. He stepped into the shade. “I’m glad it’s finally warm—I thought the winter would never end—but I’d rather run in the cool. You can add layers, but you can’t take them off past a certain point.”

“Are you saying you don’t run bare-chested?” Now wouldn’t that be sexy? Michael could only imagine Niall in the nude. How would Niall take the news that Michael did most of his stage shows without a shirt on and wearing leather pants?

“I’m not that comfortable with my body.” Niall blushed. “It’s a long story, but I’m trying to stay healthy and active. I’ll work on my internal self-image later.”

“You’re in fine form.” He swept his gaze over Niall. Mighty fine.

“You’re not so bad.” Niall’s blush deepened. “I didn’t know you exercised here. I didn’t know you ran, as well. You’ve done ten-k races? I’m impressed,” Niall said. “That’s what I’m training for, so if you’re interested in a training buddy, sign me up.”

“Yeah.” Michael nodded. He wanted more than a buddy, but he refused to get too far ahead of himself.

“Yes?” Niall rubbed his temples. His hair stuck out, slick with perspiration. “You want me to join you?”

He’d lost his train of thought. Shit. He’d been too enamored with the sweet, sexy man who wore the running shorts too well. Michael knew down to his soul that Niall would be hot as fuck naked. Would he be a moaner, too?

“Michael?” Niall tipped his head. “Are you in there?”

“I’m sorry.”

“You can’t run with me. I understand,” Niall said. “No problem.”

“No, no. I’d love to run with you. We can set up a schedule and it’ll help me prep for the race.” Jesus, he’d embarrassed himself. He should’ve been paying attention. “I need a regular plan to work out and run.”

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“Awesome.”

“When is the race? In case I want to join it.” If the race wasn’t during the tour, he’d be there.

“May twentieth here at the metropark. It’s right before the end of the school year.” Niall fiddled with his earbud. “I’m averaging about forty-five minutes for my race time if I go slow and thirty-seven if I push it.”

He wasn’t sure what his average time might be, but he’d do whatever he needed to in order to keep up with Niall. “I should ask if you can still sign up before I say I’m doing the race.”

“They’ll have people here to do race-day sign-ups, but you can go online, too.” Niall shrugged. “The money goes toward putting in playground equipment for special needs children.”

“Nice.” He’d sign up as soon as he went back into the building.

“Let’s go. I’ve got three more miles on this run and I want to get them in before it gets dark.” Niall tucked the earbud into his ear then pointed to the trail. “Ready?”

“I’m right beside you.”

Niall kept sliding his gaze sideways. Michael was really there. No way. Michael was so handsome and out of his league. He’d never have thought Michael Jepsen would pay him any attention outside school. The spring returned to Niall’s step and he

wanted to show off for his friend. Could he attract the hot teacher from across the hallway? He hoped so.

According to the rumors, Michael wasn't gay. Niall had never asked because it wasn't his business. Who was he to get nosy? He hadn't made a big deal about being gay, but then again, in Cedarwood being gay wasn't a good thing. Too many other gay people in town had been targeted. Barbs, insults and even a few assaults. Ridiculous, but effective. Three couples had left town, but many remained. Colin Baker and his partner, Deputy Jordan Hargrove, practically challenged the coalition to argue with them since Jordan was part of the sheriff's department. Colin's younger brother Farin and his partner, Steve, a fellow teacher, were still in Cedarwood. Both couples were determined to raise their children in the community and be successful. Colt Harrison, the owner of the diner, was with another teacher, Ashley Willis. The token public figure, the center fielder for the Cedarwood Wildcats baseball team, Tanner Fox had a relationship with Dr. Dane Bloom going strong, too. So why couldn't Niall have a similar partnering? Because he didn't know who he wanted to date. There weren't many single gay men in town.

He dashed through his second mile and his legs didn't ache. He appreciated having Michael along. Yes, they were both listening to music, but he had someone there. He slowed once he'd finished the third mile.

Michael yanked out his earbuds. "Is it me? I'm not up to your pace, am I?"

Niall laughed. "You're fine. I'm at the cool-down phase. I'll have eight miles for today, so I deserve a slower pace."

"Holy shit. Eight miles?" Michael asked. "You're a beast."

"Language." He laughed again. He hadn't been this happy in a long time. "I'm going to elevate on the bench in the shade by the woods. Care to join me?"

“Yes.” Michael panted and remained beside him.

Niall kept moving, but mentally paused. He’d spent so much time around non-runners that it struck him odd to not have to explain what he meant by elevating. He stopped at the bench. “How long have you been running?” He stretched out in the grass then propped his feet on the back of the bench. The lactic acid in his legs dissipated a little, relieving some of the pain in his calves.

“About ten years...since just after high school.” Michael matched Niall’s pose. “Why?”

“You didn’t ask about elevating or make a crude joke.” Niall stared at the clouds overhead. He might have overstepped, but since he wasn’t sure if Michael was gay, how was he to know if he was out of bounds?

“Well, yeah. I could’ve made a joke,” Michael said. He swatted Niall’s hand. “But I’m being an adult for now. Besides, you need to hang out with better friends if their mind goes to pervy stuff so fast or they don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re probably right.” He needed to spend time with people, rather than being alone so much. “Are you offering?” Oh God. Was he getting forward again? “I mean...”

“Yeah, I’m offering.” He bumped Niall’s hand again. “Running and school. We’re a good team and we should be together more often.” Michael sighed. “I forgot how hard running can be. My legs are killing me.”

“It’s worth the pain.”

“You bet it is,” Michael said. “What are your plans for the summer vacation? Are you going to do more races?”

“I’ve thought about it. I’m interested in trying to do one in each quadrant of Ohio before the end of August, but we’ll see if I make it happen. I’m not committed to anything yet.” He tipped his head to watch Michael. “I need to get my students through the school year, first. You?”

“I’m not sure what I’ll do.”

“Didn’t you go to London last summer?” Niall asked. “That had to be pricey.”

“London? You knew about that?” Michael paled. “I mean...yeah, I did. I wasn’t there for long. Maybe a few days, tops.”

“I heard it through the rumor mill at the school. Someone said you’d saved all year to go.” Niall tensed. Fuck. He was making a mess of small talk. “I looked at the prices to fly over there, but it was too much for my paycheck.” He shook his head. “I’d love to visit London, Liverpool...and track my family line. One of these days.”

“You’ve got British blood?” Michael asked.

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“I’ve traced my ancestry and while the branches seem to go all over the place, one of them leads back to the Spencer line.” He grinned. “So, I’d like to see where they’re from. Might be cool to know.”

“It would be.” Michael lowered his legs and leaned against the upright of the bench. He brushed the grass clippings from his hair. A blade of grass stuck to his temple. “When I went to Germany, I toured Hamburg and Berlin. It was fun, but different.”

“You’re quite the traveler,” Niall blurted. He hadn’t known Michael had seen so much of the world. “One day, I want to visit the places I’ve only ever seen in pictures. I’d start with the United States, though, first. Not because we’re better, but because it’s local. Mt. Rushmore, the Tetons, Joshua Tree, Route Sixty-Six...”

“Next summer, we should plan a trip down Route Sixty-Six.” Michael tugged his phone from his armband. “Damn it.” His eyebrows knotted. “I need to go. I missed a call.”

Niall lowered his legs then sat up. “Okay.” He stood with Michael. “Do you still want to run together?”

“Yes.” Michael fiddled with his phone. “I’ll find you tomorrow before school starts and we’ll discuss a schedule.” He met Niall’s gaze and grinned. “You’ve made my day.”

“I did?” Sweat and grass covered him. He couldn’t have looked all that sexy and probably stunk, yet he’d made Michael happy? Nice.

“You did. I wasn’t looking forward to endless lonely reps on the weight machines and you saved me. Plus, I’ve gotten to know you, Mr. Ten-k. I’m in awe.”

“Michael.” He couldn’t contain his bashfulness.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Thanks for the run.” Michael hesitated then touched Niall’s arm before walking away.

Niall’s skin tingled. He’d longed to get closer to Michael since they’d met. Being within reach had energized him. He couldn’t wait until tomorrow.

Niall brushed the grass from his shirt and face then walked to the parking lot. He should’ve done a longer cool-down and stretched, but he could miss one session for a change. He unlocked his car and dug through his bag for a towel. He tossed his MP3 player into the bag.

“Excuse me.” Dermott Kane stomped up to him. “Mr. Grayson.”

“Hi?” He knew Dermott from school but only because Dermott’s son had been in his class for three days before being moved to another class. “How are you? How is Tyson doing in Mr. Cramer’s class?”

“Tyson is fine now that he’s not being taught by a degenerate. As for me, I’m disgusted,” Dermott growled. “I’m sick of seeing you people here. This is the community metropark.”

Niall hid his confusion and refused to argue with Dermott. Not in public anyway. “It is.”

“Then why do you congregate here? To meet up for sex?” Dermott asked.

“Lower your voice,” Niall said. Dermott didn’t seem to mind he’d embarrassed Niall.

“No.”

“Stop.” Niall wasn’t known for his pluck, but he wouldn’t take shit from Dermott. “No one is meeting for the reasons you mention. We’re exercising. We—I’m assuming you mean the gay community—aren’t doing anything lewd.” He hesitated to center himself. “Besides, who I love and am with in private isn’t your business.”

“This is why Tyson was moved out of your class. I won’t let someone like you teach him,” Dermott said. “You’re a freak.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but I’m not ashamed of myself. I’m sorry you’re finding issues with me.” He towed off his face and neck then tossed the soiled object into the car. “I need to go. It’s getting late and I have papers to grade.”

“Yeah, you need to leave. Get out of here and go where you’re wanted because it’s not in Cedarwood.” Dermott nodded. “Freak.”

“Enough.” Niall climbed behind the wheel of his car. He closed the door and tamped down his irritation. Dermott excelled at striking the tender spots and had to know he’d make a scene by throwing a fit in public. Niall wasn’t sure if Dermott was part of the coalition, but it wouldn’t shock him. The group was out to ruin lives. He’d seen the effects of the coalition. People had been shouted at and Colt Harrison had been assaulted. The bookstore and diner had both been picketed. Damn it.

As much as Niall loved his hometown, he wished the people who didn’t like the gay community would learn tolerance. He wasn’t parading his sexuality or behaving improperly. One day things would level off and change. He knew it. He had to ride through the rough times first, but things wouldn’t stay this bad forever.

Niall wanted the change would happen sooner than later.

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Chapter Two

Michael donned black running shorts and a white T-shirt with the elementary school logo on the front. He'd planned to meet Niall at six-thirty for the race. He glanced out of the window. It wasn't even light out yet. Who planned the races for such an early hour? He poured a glass of water then downed the cool liquid and contemplated life. In the last few weeks, he'd upped his exercise routine and looked better than ever. He'd rock those leather pants this summer. No doubt.

He'd gotten to know Niall, too. They hadn't spent as much time together as he'd have liked, but still. He admired Niall's determination. The guy ran, rain or shine, and almost always ten miles or more. Crazy.

He liked Niall beyond the almost obsessive need to run. The guy was sweet and good with his students. If he ever became a dad, Niall would be fantastic with those kids, too.

Michael's phone rang. He jerked then glanced down at the ID screen. Niall said he'd be there soon, but he wasn't the type to call. When he saw the name, he knew the caller. Dexter Tryor.

Well, shit. He wasn't in the mood to talk to Dex, but he had to answer or his lawyer would keep calling. "Hello."

"My favorite guy."

"Dex, stop. You don't have to pander to me."

“What? Me? I never.”

“I make you money. That’s the only reason you like me,” Michael said. He’d gone out a few times with Dex, but it had been nothing serious and they hadn’t slept together, much to Dex’s chagrin.

“True, but you’re cool. I love when you’re on stage,” Dex said.

“Get to the point.” He wasn’t in the mood to listen to how important he was or Dex’s desire to get close to him again. He groaned. “I’m waiting on my ride, so I can’t talk long. What’s the deal?”

“Where are you going? You have a car and a motorcycle.”

“I’m running a ten-k with a friend.” Jesus. Does Dex need to know everything?

“Running? Are you crazy? You could get hurt. You could be putting the tour in jeopardy,” Dex said. “Come on.”

“I’m running. Even if I get hurt, I can still perform. I’ve done it before.” He noticed headlights on the street. Shit. He had to get off the phone. “Look, my ride is here. “

“Wait.”

He groaned again and strode out to the front porch. “What?”

“Have you heard anything about your teaching contract? I need to know,” Dex said. “It’s important.”

“No, and I won’t until June.” The decision wouldn’t come until the middle of June. “Why?”

“I want to discuss tour dates.”

“No. The deal is summer only. No extensions. The band is fine with the arrangement and prefers to have the year to do solo stuff.” The lights flashed as Niall pulled into the driveway. “Time to go. Bye.” He didn’t give Dex a chance to answer and instead hung up. He switched his ringer to silent then tucked the device into his armband. He needed to focus on the race.

Niall parked and rolled down the window. “Hi. Climb in.”

“Hi.” He sat beside Niall. “How’s things?”

“Good,” Niall said. “Are you ready?”

“To get sweaty with you and punish my body? Yeah.” He clicked the seatbelt into place then winked. “I wouldn’t miss this for anything.”

“Sweet.” Niall blew out a breath. “Do you need anything? No bag?”

“I have a zipper pocket in my shorts, but my armband has a pocket, too, so my house key is in there with a little cash.” He settled in the seat. “I’m good.”

“All right then.” Niall backed down the driveway. “I almost missed your house. It’s so dark. Were you waiting on your porch? Eager much?”

“I’m excited. I had to run off some of the nervous energy.” He shrugged. No, he’d been energized to see Niall. Was he excited to run? Kind of, but not as much as he should’ve been. “Are you?”

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“I almost threw up.”

“Why? Something you ate? Nerves?”

“Nerves.” Niall flexed his hands on the wheel. “It’s like the morning of the race is so stressful that my stomach cramps up. I want to puke, but I don’t.”

“Nothing to sweat. We’ll rock this.” He grabbed Niall’s free hand. “It’s going to be epic.”

“You sound like my students.” Niall laughed and didn’t pull away. “According to the chatter around my classroom, a few of the students are supposed to be here. If we get little voices cheering, that’s why.”

“Cool.” He’d mentioned the race to the kids? Nice. “I wish I’d have said something to mine.”

“We made it a project. They read books and we counted the pages until they’d read enough pages to reach six-and-a-quarter miles. If they filled the distance, then I’d run it. I’d already planned to compete, but it gave them something to aim for. This way, it feels like they’re running with me.”

“How long did it take for them to do it? Read the books?” Michael asked. He liked the idea and would incorporate it into next year’s curriculum.

“They shattered the goal in two months. I could have done an eight-mile race with the amount of books they read. I have their names and the books they read in lists on my

shirt so they're kind of going with me in the race."

"Sweet." He couldn't help but be mildly jealous. "Next year, I'm doing it, too."

"You should." Niall parked at the far end of the metropark lot. "We're here."

"What's your usual pace for these? Go flat out or pace yourself? Run with whoever has the time signboards?" He shifted in his seat. "So I know what to do." He doubted he'd keep up with Niall if the man really let go, but he could try.

"I do the same stretches we do before our practice runs and a few quick jogs to warm up, then go to the bathroom... I make sure I'm hydrated, but not too much. I ensure my bib is on and not going to come off then get my watch set." He shrugged. "Just mostly like before we practice."

"Cool." He loved the camaraderie with Niall. He didn't have to be Bandit or anyone else. Being Michael was enough. Granted, Niall didn't know the truth, but that wasn't important today. The crowd hadn't shown up for him. The fans weren't there screaming. He was just another runner...just Mr. Jepsen.

"Michael?" Niall stared at him. "You left me for a while."

"Left? I'm right here." But he knew what Niall meant. His mind had wandered. He checked his armband for his key and cash then closed the top. "I'm ready. Sorry. Just have stuff on my mind." Like Dex and his need for more Blackhearts shows. The asshole.

"No problem." Niall put his sunglasses on. "Did you bring shades?"

"Shit. No."

“I have some.” Niall offered up a second pair of sunglasses. He tucked his water bottle under his arm then left the car. “Once I lock up, I’m good.” He closed the door. “Should we stretch?”

“According to my watch, we have forty-five minutes to race time and I need to get my bib. Do you have yours?”

“Got it.” Niall pinned his number to the front of his shirt. “You should be able to get your sat registration.”

“I’ll be right back then.”

“I’ll meet you at our bench.” Niall nodded then walked off.

Michael headed toward the registration table. He loved the anonymity of being Mr. Jepsen. If the students didn’t pick him out, then no one cared if he ran the race. He’d hoped Niall might join him in his walk to the registration area, but oh well. They weren’t attached at the hip. He located the table and joined the line. Within seconds, he was the next at the table. “Hi.”

“Mr. Jepsen.” The brunette woman smiled. “I wish Addy would’ve told me you were running.”

Addy Osborn...one of his quieter students. He’d never met her parents and assumed this must be her mother. “I didn’t mention it to the kids. Are you her mom?”

“I am.” She smiled. “Her father and I are divorced. Have been since she was three. Maybe you and I can grab coffee sometime.”

“We’ll see.” He hadn’t known Addy’s parents were divorced, but he’d keep an extra eye on her—not that he’d seen anything wrong, but still. Did he want to grab coffee

with her mother? No. He preferred not to mix work and play. “Where do I need to go to get my bib? I registered online.”

“Oh.” Her eyes lit up. “I have it.” She flipped through the stack of bibs. “Get your pins. The timing chip is on the back. Do you know where you start?” She handed over his number.

“I’ll catch up to Niall and find the start. Thanks.” He held on to the safety pins and took the bib.

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“Niall? Grayson?” Her brows rose and she clicked her tongue. “He’s a good teacher, but you don’t want to get mixed up with him.”

He paused. She hadn’t said that. “Why? He’s an educator, not a criminal.”

“No,” she said, drawing out the word. “But he’s one of those.” She crooked her finger, expecting him to lean forward. When he didn’t, she groaned. “He’s...you know.”

She could insult Niall in private, but not in public? Nice. “What do you mean...those?”

She lowered her voice. “Gay.”

“So?”

She shook her head. “That doesn’t bother you?”

“Why should it? He’s a person.” Besides, she had no idea he was gay, too.

“But...he’s a gay person.”

He’d had enough. “I should find Niall and the line,” Michael said. “I believe we need to stretch and warm up. He’s a great guy and nice human being. I enjoy his company. He’s a killer with conversation.”

“Yes.” She crinkled her nose. “You should stretch. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“Does this mean we’re not on for coffee?” Michael asked.

She said nothing, but the lines deepened around her mouth.

“Guess that’s a no.” He suppressed a smile and left. He wasn’t happy she’d reacted so strangely to Niall being gay, but he knew she’d be the type to seek him out if she found out he was semi-famous. He had style and was considered handsome to some. She’d want to be connected to the fame and his status. Too bad he wasn’t looking for her.

Niall stood by their bench. He’d affixed his bib and wore his sunglasses. He didn’t remind Michael of the quiet, mousy teacher, but rather a confident sports figure. Niall waved. “Long line?”

“Talkative attendant.” Michael pinned his bib to his shirt. “Did you stretch?”

“Some. I’ve been waiting on you,” Niall said. “Mind if I ask about the chatterbox?”

“Nope.” He finished attaching the last pin. “Why?”

Niall hesitated then rested his hands on his hips. “I get strange looks and every time I go inside the main building here on the grounds, one of the attendants makes comments.”

“And says what?” Michael suppressed his irritation. Who would want to cause trouble for Niall? Or was his secret out?

“They know I’m gay. It’s not hush-hush, but there are those in town who don’t want gays here. They don’t like homosexuals. I get snarled at in the parking lot. I’ve received hate mail and kids have been pulled from my class because their parents thought I might teach them to be gay. It’s crap, but it happens, and if it’s affecting you, then I want to know.”

“So you can put space between us?” Relief washed over him. The chatter wasn’t about Bandit or the Blackhearts. Good. He wasn’t ready for everyone to know his other life. But he couldn’t help but be irritated by what Niall was going through. They didn’t have to be shitty to him. “The gal at the registration table told me to stay away from you because you’re homosexual. Her daughter was probably one of the ones pulled out of your class.”

Niall growled. “It’s getting old.”

“Well, today we’ll be better than the hate by crushing it on the course.” He elbowed Niall. “I like you the way you are and I’m scared I won’t be able to keep up.”

He couldn’t read Niall’s expression and the glasses hid his eyes.

“I’m serious. Let your running do the talking. Fuck ’em.” He nodded then clapped Niall on the shoulder. “Yes?”

“Okay.” Niall shook out his arms then legs. “On the track.”

“Yes. Stomp the hate with each footstep.” He tapped Niall again, not wanting to stop touching him. The added excitement of the race combined with his desire to show off for the crowd. The electricity within him reminded him of the feeling just as he stepped onto the stage. He wanted Niall to be proud of him. “Let’s warm up so we can kick some butt and show your kids they read those books for a good reason.”

This time Niall grinned. “Yeah.”

“That’s the smile I love,” Michael said. One day he’d be honest with Niall and tell him his truth, but not today. What he did over the summer wasn’t important right now. Running and overcoming the hate was paramount. They had each other—which was more than Michael deserved.

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Niall's nerve endings buzzed. He ran through the stretches and pre-runs but barely realized what he'd accomplished. Michael required too much of his attention. He joined the line with Michael and set his watch. When the gun went off, he started. Michael kept up with him for the first three miles. At the halfway mark, the Michael-induced haze lifted and his focus returned.

He'd never been affected like this by anyone else. Michael intoxicated him. Michael said the right things and kept touching him. The heat scorched him. But Michael wasn't gay, so none of the electricity between them mattered.

At least Michael wasn't disgusted by him being homosexual. Michael was an ally.

Niall refused to check his watch. The race was going too well. He'd kept ahead of the pace he wanted to run but noted the man with the seven-minute-mile pace pinny was a bit in front of him.

He glanced to his side, looking for Michael. But instead of being with him, Michael wasn't in sight. He should check for his friend, but he wanted to get to the finish line. Niall pressed forward. People at the edges of the course shouted.

"Almost there!"

"You've got this!"

He loved the encouragement. At this point in the race, he needed all the cheers he could get. He spotted some of his students waving banners. Go Mr. Grayson.

A lump formed in his throat. No way he'd stop, but he wanted to hug the kids. They'd made his day. He pressed on until he saw the finish line. A gigantic inflatable arch denoted the end. He pushed himself. Never surrender. He broke into a full sprint as he reached, then passed through, the arch. A hundred meters or so past the line, he finally stopped his watch and read his time on the device—44:07. Hot damn. A personal record.

Niall panted and walked to keep his legs from cramping as he scanned for Michael. Where was he? Already done? Michael had started strong. Someone offered Niall a bottle of water as he continued to look for his friend. "Thanks." He checked the bottle seal then opened the lid. The water chilled him but only for a second.

Brian and Jacob Williams, the pair of twins in his class this year, bounded up to him.

"We read and you ran," Jacob said. "Mr. Grayson, you did it."

"We saw you start," Brian said. "Mr. Jepsen ran with you."

"He did," Niall said. He hugged both boys. "Did you like the race?" He ruffled Jacob's hair. "Thanks for cheering. You helped me go faster."

"Told you," Jacob said. He elbowed his brother. "We shouted and the wind made him fast."

"Boys." Tonya Williams chuckled. She turned her attention to Niall. "They swore they needed to be here. They said they read the books and you would run if they did, so they wanted to be sure you were true to your word." She shrugged. "You got them to read and that's huge. I'll bring them to every race if that's what we need to do. Thank you."

"Whatever works." Niall grinned. "I'm planning on doing it again next year. I'm

hoping for similar results, but I'll take what I get."

"You will be fine. These two won't stop talking about the race and the list, so you're good." She snapped photos of the twins.

"Mr. Jepsen," Brian shouted. "He's here, too."

"Yay!" Jacob jumped up and down. "Go fast!"

Niall clapped and the lump in his throat increased. Pride welled within him. "Go, Michael," he managed. Tears burned in his eyes. Good thing he had his sunglasses to hide his emotions.

Michael crossed the line and jogged beyond the arch. Within a few moments, he doubled back. Sweat glistened on his skin and his shirt clung to his upper body. His hair stuck out in strange angles when he ran his fingers through the sweaty mess.

Niall fought the urge to drool. He wanted to throw himself into Michael's arms.

But that wasn't possible.

Why'd he always pick men who weren't available or in his league or those who weren't gay? Because the type of guys he liked didn't seem to like him in return.

Michael walked over to Niall, the boys and Tonya. "Hi," he said, panting. "That was super tough."

"You finished. That's huge," Niall said. "I'm proud."

"I'm beat." Michael sat on the curb. "Hey, guys. Did you check on your teacher? He was so fast I couldn't keep up with him."

“Yeah,” Jacob said. “He did great.”

Tonya jabbed Niall in the ribs with her finger then gestured him aside. “You know...”

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He knew what she was thinking and he'd have to put an end to it now. "He's not gay, so don't think about it."

"He's not? I could swear he is and he's looking at you," she murmured.

"Nah, he's not. We're just friends." He turned his back on Michael and the twins. "If he is gay, then I'd hate for him to suffer the insults I get, but I don't think he's gay. He hasn't said he's not, but I don't get the homosexual vibe."

"Insults?" Tonya asked. Her eyes widened. "From whom?"

"Don't worry about it." He shouldn't have mentioned anything about the nasty comments.

"I will worry. I like you and want you to stay in our school. Whoever is being rotten to you can answer to me," she said. "But I was going to say you and Michael make a good couple."

Did they? They had attraction but nothing more. "He's not gay."

"That stinks," she said. "Well, I hope you don't let the haters win. The boys and I love you."

"Thanks." The tips of his ears burned and not from the sun.

Michael joined them. "Hey, I hear there are awards. Should we attend?"

“Nah. I wasn’t fast enough to medal,” Niall said. “I’m probably in the middle of my age group.”

Brian darted over to Niall. “You gotta stay, Mr. G.”

“Why? Did you plan a party?” Niall laughed. He wanted to drape his arms around Michael. He’d grown too comfortable with his friend. Besides, the kids were watching.

“You’re getting an award,” Brian said. “I saw the list.”

Jacob pointed. “I did, too. You had a two.”

Michael shrugged. “You were quick, my friend.” He jerked then whipped his phone from his armband. He frowned. “I’ll be right back.”

Niall tensed. His brain hurt. The attraction wasn’t imagined, but Michael wasn’t interested. Compound that with Tonya’s nudges and his desire to be loved and he sure looked like a mess. Michael acted almost jealous over the medal. Niall didn’t want to see the results. He knew he’d run well and that was enough. “Thanks, guys, but I’ll look at the list when I get home. There are runners still finishing.”

Brian and Jacob tugged their mother to the board, leaving Niall with Michael.

Niall inched up to his friend. “Congrats. You did it.”

“I’ve run these before.” Michael put space between them. He held up his phone then resumed texting. “You looked great.” He paused. “I’ll be right back. I need to call someone.”

“Sure.” Niall left Michael and wandered over to the results board.

Jacob pointed again. “Right there, Mr. G. See it?”

He looked at his name and the rank he’d earned. He’d finished second in his age group. “Well, what do you know?” He hadn’t expected any awards. Competing was enough.

“See?” Tonya asked. She bumped shoulders with him. “The boys are thrilled. I doubt it’ll take more than an hour for the rest of the class to find out how you did.”

“Probably,” he said. “They’re more tech savvy than I’ll ever be.”

“Do you mind if the boys bring cupcakes on Monday? They want to celebrate,” she said.

“That’d be great.” He chuckled. “We can all party.”

“What’s with Mr. Jepsen?” she asked. “He finished then got right on the phone. Is he talking to his girlfriend?”

“I don’t know.” He tried to be cool, despite the rising bit of jealousy within him. “Whatever it is, the call seemed important.”

“I see. Here he comes,” she said. “He’d better congratulate you.” She snagged the twins. “Guys, we’ll watch the awards from over there.” She winked then left him alone with Michael again.

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Michael stopped beside him. “Hi.”

“Hi. Everything okay?” He picked up another bottle of water. “You seem upset.”

“I just finished an argument with someone.” Michael sighed. “I should go.”

“Okay.” He didn’t need the medal. “Let’s get moving.”

“No, you stay. You’re going to be recognized. As for me, my friend Dex is coming to get me.”

“Why?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Are you sure? You’re pale.”

“I’m fine.” Michael nodded to the awards stage. “Get ready for your medal. The kids want to see you accept it. Plus, it’ll be a good photo opp.”

“Michael.” This wasn’t how he’d wanted to celebrate the end of the race. “We should share the award.”

“I was fourth in my age group.” Michael offered a small smile. “I didn’t earn anything, but you did. Bask in it.” He paused. “I’m proud of you. You earned the praise.”

“You should have some, too.” He wasn’t sure what was happening, but the walls were going back up between him and Michael.

“I see Dex. I’ll talk to you on Monday. Thanks for the ride and run. We’ll start up after school on Monday, right?” Michael asked.

“After school.” He wasn’t sure how to make his friend stay.

“Perfect.” Michael hesitated. He flexed his hands then dipped his head and walked away.

Niall’s heart sank. He’d wanted to share this moment with Michael. He’d thought they were getting along and closer. Had he misread the friendship as well as Michael? That sure seemed to be the case. But the electricity between them felt special. He had a great guy as a friend, a fast time, a medal to show for his work, but now he didn’t want the award.

He stopped Tonya. “Do you mind accepting my medal? I want to go home.”

“No.” She stepped in his way. “You can’t leave just because that jerk broke your heart. So he isn’t who you expected. So what? Does that make him bad? Maybe he had a good reason for needing to go. You can’t be sure until he tells you and I’m assuming he didn’t. Don’t take this moment away from the kids. The boys feel like they’ve run this race with you. If they could, they’d get the medal with you. This isn’t about Michael or even you. It’s about the kids and their hard work paying off.”

He didn’t see the relation, but he wasn’t about to argue. He needed to sac up. “You’re right.”

“See?” She nodded to the table. “They’ve got another ten minutes before the ceremony. Make sure you’re presentable.”

“Mind if the twins come with me to accept the medal?” he asked.

“You bet and I want photos, so be prepared to pose.”

“Done.” He forgot about his disappointment with Michael. The kids’ needs were more important. Men and awards would come and go, but this meant too much to his students. This was a teachable moment. They couldn’t know how he’d pushed past the crushing feeling, but they would see he kept trying and going. They hadn’t quit, so neither would he. If Michael wanted to find him, then that was on him.

Chapter Three

The following Monday, Michael hadn't talked to Niall. How could he? The embarrassment was too much. Besides, he was still in the midst of an argument with Dex.

"No one can know about this," Michael growled into his phone. He hated talking to his lawyer almost as much as he hated root canals. "I'm this close to getting a longer contract. They always announce the contract stuff at the end of the school year. If you tell everyone now, I'm screwed." He rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. Some secrets were best kept under lock and key, and he had one doozy of a secret.

"I've got people begging for the Blackhearts to play Christmas, New Years and Halloween. Come on. You can chuck the day job and make a killing," Dexter snapped.

"I don't want to make a killing." He checked his wristwatch again. Damn. If he didn't get off the phone soon, he'd be late for the staff meeting. "Look, I've got to go. I'm not ready to disclose anything, so keep it under wraps. I don't care if you're a goddamned lawyer, I will sue your ass for defamation or disclosing my identity or whatever."

"I'm not going to disclose or defame. I want you to be happy and follow your dream. The last I knew, the dream wasn't teaching. It was music," Dexter said. "The school gig was temporary until the band hit it big. Now we're five years down the road and you're not ready to leave, are you?"

No, he wasn't. He glanced through the window at the people in the hallway. Niall stood with one of the second-grade teachers. At the beginning of the year, Niall had moved from teaching first grade to third grade and had ended up in the classroom directly across from Michael. He considered Niall one of his closest friends, but after the way he'd abandoned Niall at the end of the race the other day, he wondered if his friend would even speak to him. Niall didn't know about Michael's secrets. Then again, only two people knew the truth.

"Well?" Dexter asked. "Are you even still there?"

"I'm here." He spied Niall walking down the hallway. Niall pointed to his watch and grinned. If he was mad, he wasn't showing it in public. Michael nodded once and held up one finger. He'd be there in a second. "Okay, I have to go. No other shows besides the ones already scheduled. After August sixteenth, the band is on hiatus again. That's how it's going to be. I'm not going to discuss this anymore. Bye, Dex."

He swiped his thumb across the screen to end the call, tapped the button to silence the phone then jammed the device into his back pocket. He was still on the clock at the school.

Michael headed back into the building. Niall waited in the doorway of Michael's classroom.

"Ready?" Niall fell into step with him. "We're meeting in the cafeteria for the year-end wrap-up meeting then going to Havermeier's room for the transfer meeting. Christ, it's hot. Who decided Monday needed to be this freaking humid? We're almost to June."

"I'm not wild about the humidity either." He stuffed his hands into his pockets. "I'm glad you were paying attention. I'm horrible with schedules unless there's a bell involved." Not a total truth, but he couldn't be completely honest with Niall. When

he went out with the band, Michael knew every schedule better than the people creating the schedules. He had to know what time to be where in order to get into the character of Bandit—his musical alter ego. If anyone found out about what he did with his summers—especially anyone in the school system—he'd lose his position teaching fourth grade. Until now, there hadn't been a problem. Hell, the band cooperated, and as long as he kept everything about his other life quiet, everything stayed balanced. No one at the school questioned where he was over the summer and the band liked having the rest of the year to work with other bands. As long as he didn't discuss or mix his two worlds, he was good. He wanted to tell Niall about Bandit, but with the system working so well, he hadn't gotten around to having the discussion.

"I've got to sit with the other third-grade teachers so we can discuss the upcoming school year, but I'll catch up with you for our run afterward." Niall half grinned. "We were nominated to retrieve the sandwiches for the meeting. Want to drive, or should I?"

"You can." He suppressed a sigh. He'd get to spend quiet time with Niall?Score.Maybe then he'd have the chance to apologize for leaving so fast after the race. He parted ways with his friend and headed to the designated fourth-grade teachers' table.

For the next hour, the principal and vice principal droned on about the switches in teaching positions, introducing the new core standards and the schedule for the next school year.

Michael doodled on the notepad in front of him. Each teacher had been given a pad and pen for note taking. Lines for songs came to him while he half-listened to the core standard descriptions. The benchmarks hadn't changed much.

The lyrics weren't any good, but at least they looked like poetry. If the other teachers

at his table noticed, they'd think he was doing something for a creative writing lesson. He flipped to a new page. Thoughts of the band and his summer schedule filled his head. For the short term, the two needed to be separate. No mentioning the band to the school staff and no mentioning his teaching position to the band. If everyone was left in the dark, then no one would spill his secret.

Michael turned his attention to Niall. Go figure the third-grade teachers would be across the room during the end-of-the-year meeting. It would be too easy to have them at the next table over. At least Niall was in a place Michael could ogle him without looking too obvious.

Niall met Michael's gaze and smiled. Michael's skin warmed all over. He'd noticed the twinkle in Niall's eyes and the way his cheeks always seemed to feature five-o'clock shadow, but he hadn't wanted to touch him as much as he did right now. He longed to run his fingers through Niall's blond hair and rub his cheek against Niall's. He suppressed a shiver.

Unlike most guys Michael's general age, Niall was sweet and chatty. He didn't expect anything but managed to see the good in people. He wasn't one of the burned-out teachers but seemed to come to school every morning with a renewed zeal for teaching. He was everything Michael wanted to be—except he wasn't a heavy metal music star.

Michael doodled again in the notebook, but this time he drew Niall. He probably should keep the drawing covered, but whatever. If someone saw, then they saw. He was friends with Niall and liked looking at the hot man.

He should ask him out. Not to run or exercise together, but a real date.

Michael snorted. Should, but come on. He'd be leaving on tour in seven days and wouldn't be back to Cedarwood for the next two and a half months. How was he

supposed to date a guy he couldn't really see and explain to the guy why they had to have a long-distance relationship? Easy. I can't. Until now, he hadn't had to worry about dating anyone or having said long-distance relationship. He and Niall ran together, but that was it.

He should beg off from going with Niall to get the food. He had the feeling once they spent time alone together outside the school without the excuse of a run to buffer the desire, he'd rethink his tour plans.

As the meeting wound down, fear swept over Michael. In seven days, he'd be out on tour. He'd done some rehearsing, but the new material was still rough. The band hadn't had much time in the studio because he'd been busy wrapping up the school year with his fourth graders. He worried about his music and his contract. Would the school renew his one-year contract or would they offer him a two-year deal? The chance was there, but it was only a chance. He closed his notepad.

The principal grabbed Michael's attention. "This year, the Cedarwood schools will be extending plenty of contracts to the newer teaching staff."

Michael dropped his hands into his lap to hide the shaking. Niall had already attained a two-year contract and would be eligible for tenure at the end of the school year. Michael tallied the number of years Niall had been at the school. He'd started when he was twenty-two and was now twenty-eight. He'd done his time with four one-year contracts and would be at the end of his two-year contract.

Michael focused on the principal and superintendent. The superintendent nodded. "This year, we're extending two-year contracts to Mr. Claron, Ms. Bledel and Mr. Jepsen."

The room erupted in applause and Mr. Barton, another of the fourth-grade teachers, slapped Michael on the back. Michael couldn't believe what he'd heard. He'd earned

the contract he'd wanted so much. He met Niall's gaze. The warmth and happiness in Niall's eyes resonated to Michael's core. He shouldn't be so happy Niall was proud, but screw it. He liked having Niall's approval. He loved knowing Niall had been proud of him when he'd finished the race, too. But then Dex's phone call had fucked things up.

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At the same time, Michael inwardly cringed. Shit. He should've seen this coming—he'd have to decide which life he wanted to lead. Did he want to keep being a teacher or continue with his music career? He hadn't thought he'd get a longer-term contract. Well, fuck. Why hadn't he considered the possibility that his contract would be extended?

More names were read in conjunction with contracts being offered, but none of it mattered until the principal mentioned the tenure contracts. "We're only extending one tenure contract this year. Either we've got teachers with less than five years' service or they've already reached tenure." He laughed. "Mr. Grayson, we're extending the offer of tenure to you. Congratulations."

Niall's eyes widened and the color drained from his face. His lips parted and he stared at Michael. I did it, Niall mouthed.

Michael applauded his friend. Later, when they were in the car together, he'd show his approval. Would Niall be attracted to him, too? He'd sure seemed to be when they'd met up to run, but what did Michael know? He'd been wrong before.

Ten minutes later, the meeting ended. Michael followed his fellow fourth-grade teachers to their hallway with the third-grade teachers. Niall caught up to him and bumped shoulders with him.

"About ready to go?" Niall asked. "I have to grab my wallet and phone from my room."

"I'm ready." He patted his pockets. He already had his phone and he refused to leave

his room without his wallet or keys. He strolled out to the staff parking lot behind the school building and watched the kids playing basketball on the nearby courts. Behind him, the door clicked and he heard footsteps. When Michael turned, Niall bounded up to him.

“We’re going to Maynards. They called the order in before the staff meeting.” Niall unlocked his two-door car. “Feel free to change the station. I had the metal station on this morning. I needed the pick-me-up.”

“You? You’re always up.” Michael bit back a laugh. He wanted to know if he could get Niall up, but that was beside the point. “Metal makes you happy?”

“Yeah. I like the post-hair metal stuff and the classic stuff. I’m really into this band Bandit and the Blackhearts. Like crazy into them.” Niall climbed behind the wheel of the car. “Metal music is loud, unhinged and uninhibited. It makes me happy because it’s like I can lose control in a safe way.” He paused. “I’m surprised you never asked before. We always listen to music when we run.”

“Never occurred to me to inquire.” Michael nodded. He liked knowing Niall’s thoughts on his preferred genre of music. He wanted to share his love of metal music, but he feared he’d give away too much information.

“What about you? What’s your favorite kind of music?” Niall backed out of the spot and zipped across the small parking lot.

“I like metal for the same reasons you do. I like the loud volume and the frenetic styling.” Given the chance, he loved to improvise during the guitar solos and see how fast and intricately he could play. “Why didn’t you mention you liked Bandit? We’ve been friends for the whole school year.”

But they hadn’t discussed music before.

Niall shrugged. "I don't know. You never asked me what kind of music I like and I keep my metal music listening to the car. In the classroom, I play orchestral stuff. It helps me concentrate. When I run, it's to whatever's fast."

"Makes sense."

"I bet Bandit would be fantastic at writing music for movies. He's so emotional in the stuff he writes." Niall gripped the steering wheel. "I've got most of his music memorized. I listen to it too much." He blushed. "Sorry. I'm a fan, but I'm not like...a crazy fan. I wish they'd play more than just summer gigs."

"Why?" He'd always wanted to ask a fan if their concert schedule was inconvenient. The guys in the band played with other bands during the rest of the year unless they were in the studio. For the most part, the schedule worked.

"I wish they'd come around more, I guess." Niall pulled into the restaurant parking lot and stopped in one of the spots. "I don't mind. I'm off in the summer and can see more than one show, but for other fans, it seems like a pain. I suppose that's how it goes, though. Most of the best concerts are in the summer, so maybe they're smarter than the rest of us." He paused. "I'll be right back."

Niall left Michael alone in the car. When he returned five minutes later, he knocked on the window. Michael rolled down the glass and accepted the three bags of food. He placed the bags between his feet then took the beverage carrier from Niall.

"Where were we?" Niall slid behind the wheel again. "Oh, the Blackhearts. I do try to be the first in line for tickets. They're about the only band I'll go see because the tickets aren't outrageous."

"I bet they love knowing they've got loyal fans." Michael was damn happy he had at least one loyal fan in Niall. Part of him wished he could leave the band and focus on

teaching. That way he'd be able to focus on turning the friendship with Niall into something more. But the rest of him enjoyed the rush of the audience and the thrill of playing live. He craved the music.

Niall shrugged and backed out of the parking spot. "I bet they're happy to get the money. Well, that and to have the fans. They seem really cool."

"Even with the makeup?"

"Yeah. It works for the music. They've got to keep up the appearance that they're tough. Without the makeup and pyro, they risk being boring."

Michael gripped the beverage carrier. Niall had given him something to think about. He'd been so worried about hiding behind the makeup and the image that maybe he'd sacrificed the integrity of the music. As they turned into the school lot, Michael sat up straighter. He'd wasted the ride!Fuck.

Niall pulled to a stop in his normal parking spot. "If you'll carry the drinks, I'll get the bags."

"Wait," Michael said. "I want to apologize for leaving you so abruptly after the race."

"It's fine."

"No, it's not. My friend who courts drama needed me. It wasn't anything that required my immediate attention, but I let him think so. I'm sorry. I should've been there to congratulate you."

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“It’s no big deal.”

But the situation felt huge.

“Anything else? You look like you’ve got something else on your mind,” Niall said.

“Want to get drinks sometime?” He was being impulsive, but he didn’t care. He wanted to see Niall again and without running shoes involved.

“Me?” Niall froze with his hands on the steering wheel.

“Who else?” Michael smiled. He wanted to touch Niall, but he feared he’d spill the drinks on his lap if he let go of the carrier.

“You don’t want to go with someone else?” Niall asked.

“No.” Michael paused. Maybe he’d made a mistake. But he’d never know if Niall returned his affections if he didn’t ask. “I thought you might like to go out. I’d like to go out with you.” If he was nothing else, he was forward.

“You’re gay?” Niall’s voice cracked. “I didn’t think you were.”

“You’re surprised?” Michael forced himself to smile. “I don’t wear it on my sleeve, but I prefer cock to pussy.”

“I’m shocked.” Niall settled in his seat and let go of the wheel. “All the girls love you and the moms all line up to see you during conferences. Every time I look over there

when you're with parents, you seem to enjoy the female adulation. You've never mentioned you're attracted to men." He turned the car off and lowered his gaze. "Sorry. That's rude. I assumed you were straight and now I'm bashing you."

"You're not the first to assume and not the first to say what's on your mind." He debated what to say next. He needed to move with caution. "I'm gay and I'm attracted to you."

"And you want to go on a date with me." Niall finally looked at Michael. "I can't believe you're into me, but I'm all for it." He grinned, although the tips of his ears were red. "When? I'm free pretty much every day once the staff meetings are over tomorrow."

"How about Thursday night?" He'd prefer Friday night, but he'd have to pack by then.

"I'm free Friday. We could go then?"

"I'm busy on Friday." He wanted to tell Niall the truth, but he couldn't. No way he'd disclose his secret yet.

"Another guy?" Niall lowered his gaze again. "I should've known."

"It's not like that. I only date one person at a time." He eased his hand free from the carrier. "I've got a second job and I need to be at that Friday night."

"Oh." Niall covered his face with his hands. "I'm so...sorry. I speak before I think and it gets me into trouble." He glanced over at Michael. "What the hell? Why not?"

"You're unsure." Michael wanted to keep questioning Niall, but they were late in getting the food to the other staff members. "Clue me in after the meeting?"

“Don’t have to wait that long.” Niall opened his car door. “I’m crap at dating. I’ve only had one boyfriend and we didn’t really...date.”

“All sex, all the time?” Not that so much sex with Niall didn’t sound wonderful. He wanted to be the man tangled up with Niall between the sheets.

“With Kurt when it was good, it was great. When it was bad, it was over.” Niall shrugged. “If you’re willing to give me a chance and to take things slow, we’ve got a shot.”

He grabbed Niall’s hand and squeezed his friend’s fingers. He needed to act on instinct and not fight his attraction to Niall. “Then let me give you a better perspective.” He leaned across the console of the car and kissed his friend. Sparks shot through his body and his lips tingled. He never should’ve waited this long to give in to his crush.

Niall moaned and opened to him, allowing Michael to suck on his tongue.

Niall grabbed the front of Michael’s shirt. He broke the connection first and gasped for breath. “I like the new perspective.”

“That doesn’t have to be the only kiss.” Michael rested his forehead against Niall’s. “Come over tonight.”

“After the meeting, I’m all yours.” Niall let go of Michael and when he climbed out of the car, he wobbled a bit. He wandered around the front of the vehicle and grabbed the bags from between Michael’s knees.

Michael didn’t bother to hide the smile. This was the start of something great and he couldn’t wait to get through the meeting. He wanted so much more of Niall Grayson and in every way possible.

Chapter Four

Niall sat in the meeting and participated but noticed only about half of what was being said. How could he? Michael consumed his thoughts. He jotted down notes and flipped through the pages of test scores, but every time he glanced over at Michael, his skin tingled.

Arnold Havermeier tapped the table with his pen. “Okay, so we’ve got three troublemakers coming out of third and heading to fourth.” He read off the names. “I’ve had two of them. Niall, you had the McKinnon boy in your class. I don’t know about yours, but I know mine cannot be in the same class together. Not only are they dangerous together, they are oil and water. Niall?”

He needed a moment to compose his thoughts. “Jake McKinnon isn’t a bad kid, per se. He’s misunderstood. His folks divorced this year and his mother is in a relationship with another woman. It’s been a lot for him to handle. He needs to be in a class where the teacher is willing to work with him. He’ll push the limits, but once he knows the teacher will enforce the boundaries, he does better.”

“I’ll take him.” Michael nodded. “His parents don’t know what to do with him, do they? They see the acting out as just being trouble?”

“His mother doesn’t want him to grow up too fast. At the same time, Mom’s new girlfriend scares him. I don’t think he understands the idea of two women being a couple. I think it’s great they’re finally happy.” Niall slid Jake’s paperwork across the table. “He’s not sure what to think about having a mom and another woman who wants to be like a mom. His dad doesn’t help matters much because he’s part of the

antigay group. The kid gets mixed messages. Just be patient with him.”

“I can do that.” Michael’s voice dropped an octave. The lower tone sent a shiver through Niall’s body.

“We can discuss Jake again when the new school year starts.” Niall tapped his files together. The upcoming school year seemed so far away. First, he needed to get through the summer.

He listened through the rest of the meeting but didn’t have much to add. He still couldn’t wrap his mind around Michael asking him out and the fact that he’d been offered tenure. Tenure! The gay teacher who didn’t back down from admitting he was homosexual had been extended a long-term contract. Goodness, in Cedarwood admitting he was gay could get him into trouble. Now he wouldn’t have to worry as much about losing his job. The nasty comments and letters would no doubt continue.

When the meeting adjourned, he tucked his papers into his messenger bag. “Hey, Michael, I’ve got to go to the office to sign that contract. I—”Crap.He couldn’t say they were meeting. “I’ll drive you home afterward. Okay?” The lie probably wasn’t much better.

“I’ve got to sign mine, too. I’ll just follow you.” Michael gathered up his papers. “I need to drop these by my room first.”

“Sure.” He adjusted the strap on his bag then checked his phone. No texts, but three emails about his fantasy football league and one from a college friend. He wondered what his friend wanted. Probably a reunion or something. Another email popped up as he flipped through the messages. Bandit was playing a concert in Cleveland at one of the smaller club venues on Monday. Tickets would be going on sale in the morning.

Well, shit. He had meetings at the school. If he was lucky, maybe he'd get away from the meetings long enough to order his ticket.

"What's wrong?" Michael eased up beside him. "Got a nasty email or did you get news you weren't expecting?"

"Yeah. My fantasy football league sent reminders about the upcoming season. The guy who runs it is a friend from high school and he's really anal about getting things organized ahead of time." He wandered down the main hallway toward the office. "Also got an email about Bandit and the Blackhearts. They're playing the Odeon in Cleveland. Tickets go up for sale tomorrow at ten. I'll try to get them, but there's no guarantee."

"I'm sure something will happen and it'll work out."

"I hope so." He opened the door for Michael. "Go ahead."

The secretary slid the contracts across the counter. The school board president, Mark Johnson, observed the signing and acted as the witness.

Niall's heart beat a little faster once he slid the signed page back across the desk.

"Congratulations, Mr. Grayson. We hope to have you at Cedarwood Elementary for many years to come." He shook hands with Niall then turned his attention to Michael. "Two years. I'm glad you're coming back to Cedarwood Elementary. Thank you both."

Michael smiled and shook hands with Mr. Johnson. "One more set of meetings and we're free for the summer."

"You sound as bad as the kids." Niall left the office first before he turned to Michael.

“You’re that excited to be done?”

“I’m excited to get a break,” Michael said. “I love teaching, but near the end of the school year, the kids get just as goofy as we do. We all need the summer to recharge.”

“True enough.” Niall stopped at his classroom. “I’ve got some chairs to stack and to disconnect my computer. What time...did you want to...” He glanced down the hallway. They seemed to be alone, but he couldn’t be sure.

“I’ll get some stuff done in my room and in half an hour, I’ll let you know I’m leaving.” He winked. “You know where I live, so you can meet me there when you’re ready if you’d rather.”

Niall nodded then headed into his classroom. He wouldn’t need the whole half hour. Unplugging and storing the computer wouldn’t take long. Within a few minutes, he had the job completed. He stacked the student chairs in the corner and double-checked his desk. The drawers were cleaned out already, but he needed to do one last spot check. He slapped his palms on his thighs and nodded.

“All done?” Michael leaned against Niall’s door frame. He’d done the same thing so many times, but he’d never looked so sexy before. The man reminded him of a model.

“I am.” Niall closed the main drawer of his desk. “I won’t have much to do tomorrow aside from year-end meetings and putting in my final supply list. My grades are already in.”

“Cool.” Michael crossed his arms. “I was thinking about ordering a pizza tonight and watching one of the basketball games. Want to join me?”

Pizza and basketball sounded good. “Want me to bring anything?”

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“Nah. I’ve got plenty. Just show up.” Michael stood tall and tugged his phone from his breast pocket. He didn’t say anything but waggled the device in his hand.

Niall nodded. He didn’t need words to get the message. He waited for Michael to leave then checked his phone. Sure enough, Michael had texted.

See you soon, hunk.

Niall plopped down hard on his chair. Hunk! He wouldn’t be able to get finished fast enough. Michael had never talked to him like that before and he wanted to hear more kind words.

He stuffed paperwork into his bag then locked the cabinet containing his computer parts. Instead of racing out of the door, he hesitated. A vision of Michael formed in his mind. He laced his fingers together on his belly and leaned back in his chair. He closed his eyes.

In his mind, Michael grinned. His icy blue eyes sparkled. The muscle in his arms and legs rippled. Niall wondered if Michael was just as muscled everywhere else. Was he hairy or smooth? What would it feel like to be snagged up in those arms? He sighed. Probably heaven.

Niall snorted. He’d never know if he didn’t get moving. He opened his eyes and grabbed his bag. He pulled his keys from his pocket. Michael hadn’t given him a specific time, but if he remembered right, the basketball game wasn’t on until after nine.

Would he be sticking around that long?

Niall locked his classroom door and strolled out to his car. Once behind the wheel, he pulled the mirror down and stared at his reflection. He wanted to overthink the date but stopped short. Just because he didn't see much in his looks didn't mean Michael saw him the same way. It also didn't mean Michael was interested in something longer than a couple of nights. Yes, they had worked across the hall from each other, but other than seeing each other at meetings in the morning or running into each other after school, they weren't stuck together.

He drove across town to the Windmill development. He'd looked at the houses in the allotment but hadn't purchased. At the time, he'd wanted something bigger than a two-bedroom place. He'd settled on a fixer-upper home just off the main drag. Replacing the gingerbread along the roofline and switching out the old windows had been more expensive than he'd wanted, but he liked the way the house looked in the end.

He pulled into the driveway of 892 and parked. He'd been to the house once before, but it'd been in the dark. Now that he saw the house in the light, he liked the place.

Michael strode out of the door and stood on the tiny porch. He'd ditched the thick-soled dress shoes and his socks. He wiggled his toes and gripped the lone railing. He'd switched his dress shirt for a tight T-shirt and the cotton showcased the muscle in his upper body. The fabric clung to him like a second skin. He padded across the rangy grass to the driveway.

Niall hesitated a moment. He wasn't sure how he'd landed an evening, instead of a run, with the handsome man, but he seriously wondered what the hell Michael saw in him.

"Are you coming in? Or are you going to sit out here?" Michael rested his hands on

the roof of Niall's car. "Niall?"

"I'm coming." He hesitated.

"I'm—I'm nervous." He closed his mouth. If he didn't shut up, he'd babble and say something silly.

"Well, don't be. I don't bite." Michael didn't move. "But seriously, there's nothing to worry about. Two guys hanging out." He bobbed his eyebrows. "You know?"

Ah, that's what he thinks. Niall had read too much into what was going on. He nodded and stuffed his phone and keys into his pockets.

"Oh, grab your wallet and anything valuable. We've had a rash of thefts out here." Michael half shrugged. "It used to be a good neighborhood."

"No sweat." Niall rolled his window up. With his wallet already in his messenger bag, he slung the strap across his shoulder then hit the lock on the car. "Ready."

"Cool." Michael strode ahead and opened the door to the house. "Make yourself at home."

Niall sucked in a deep breath and exhaled. The living room smelled of Michael's cologne. The scent comforted him and scared him to death. This was happening. He was at the home of his crush. Holy shit! He kicked out of his shoes and left them by the door.

"Put your stuff on the table. I only use it for the computer anyway," Michael said. He opened a pizza box. "I went ahead and picked up a pie on the way home. I remembered you like the pepperoni ones at school. This one's much better."

“Smells good.” He dropped his things off on the table but didn’t venture any closer to Michael. The nervousness came back in a tidal wave.

Michael handed him a piece of pizza on a paper plate. “Talk to me. You’re practically shaking. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this scared.”

“It’s nothing.” He accepted the pizza and retreated to the living room. He was twenty-eight years old and acting like a scared, horny kid.

“You don’t have to run away from me.” Michael sat on the couch with Niall. “I showered when I got home. Even put on cologne.” He smiled and rested his plate on his lap. “What are you worried about?”

He debated what to say. Be honest and screw things up now? Or just keep my mouth shut?

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll pester it out of you.” Michael munched on his slice of pizza. “Is it a kid? One of the other teachers? Me?”

Oh boy... “I’m not afraid of being alone. I get I’m a geeky guy who talks football and stats. I like my comic books and superhero movies. I know my limits and I’m not the kind of guy who hooks the hot man. We’ve had lots of fun running and getting to know each other. In all that time, you never said you were gay or even attracted to me. I don’t understand why you’re interested in me.” There. He’d been honest. “I’m not sure what you expect. If you want a quickie or a one-night, I’m not sure it’ll work. Let me know now so I can deal accordingly.” He gripped the plate so tight the edge ripped.

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“You cut right to the chase once you open up.” Michael moved the plate to the glass-top coffee table. “I’m not a ‘couple of dates, a fuck, and it’s over’ kind of guy. If I say I like you, it’s because I’m interested.”

“Oh.” He wasn’t sure what to think.

“Now.” Michael took the plate from Niall and scooted closer on the couch. “About that confidence issue.” He curled his fingers under Niall’s chin. “I like comic-book movies and football, too. I love spending time with you when we run and the stretching afterwards.”

“But...”

Michael placed his thumb over Niall’s lips. “It’s been hard sharing a hallway with you.” His knees brushed against Niall’s and his breath warmed Niall’s cheeks. “We were friends and I knew you weren’t interested in becoming more because of our jobs, but it was difficult. I wanted to spend time with you doing more than talking about school. You’re very sexy.”

“In a geeky way,” he said around Michael’s thumb. He sucked it into his mouth. Maybe if he redirected Michael, they’d stop talking about his lack of self-confidence and get down to what he knew Michael wanted—sex.

“You’re teasing me.” Michael eased his thumb from between Niall’s lips. “You’re dangerous. You almost made me forget what I wanted to say.”

“That was the point.”

“Maybe, but I want to finish.” His eyes flashed. “You’re a sexy man. I wanted to make a move back in September. I’d see you in your classroom and wonder about you. School’s over now and I can’t wait.” He crushed his mouth down on Niall’s.

Damn. The same rush came back. Niall smoothed his palm over Michael’s chest. He wanted Michael closer. Michael gathered Niall in his arms and leaned back against the couch. Niall crawled onto Michael’s lap. He rubbed his crotch against the bulge in Michael’s pants. Being with him felt so good, so right.

“I’m not sure why I held back for so long.” Michael rested his forehead against Niall’s. “I should’ve offered to buy pizza before.”

“Michael.” He held on to Michael’s shoulders. “I—we need to talk. Kissing is good, but I want to talk.”

“Sure.” Michael didn’t let go. Instead, he stuffed his hands into Niall’s back pockets. “What’s wrong?”

What’s wrong? He should be basking in the heat between them, not questioning Michael. But he wanted to spill his guts. He needed to know Michael would stick around. “I’ve only had one boyfriend.” He paused. “One partner. I’ve been with three guys, but one boyfriend.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” Michael feathered kisses around Niall’s mouth. “There’s no rule saying you’ve got to have a lot of experience.”

“If you’re not wanting a relationship, tell me now. Okay? I don’t want to get fucked over because you’re looking for a one-night stand.” He’d probably screwed up his chances with Michael, but he’d know where he stood.

“You don’t give a guy the opportunity to get to know you that way.” Michael kept his

hands in Niall's pockets. "How about we see where this goes? Could be good, could be a disaster, but we won't know until we give us a try."

His heart sank. He'd hoped Michael wouldn't say that. "I understand."

"No, I don't think you do." Michael nipped Niall's bottom lip. "Stick around. Why can't we have fun right now?"

"Michael." He scurried off Michael's lap and threaded his fingers in his hair. If he did what Michael wanted and stayed...he'd probably have a great time with the guy who featured in his fantasies. He didn't want one chance with Michael. But if he left, he'd regret it.

"Have some supper with me." Michael scooted away from him. "I'm sorry. I forget not everyone wants to move at zero to sixty—once I get my engine going." He averted his gaze. "But I have to confess I'm a horny bastard."

He couldn't say Michael wasn't, but then he couldn't say he wasn't a horn ball. He wanted to strip down and allow Michael to have his way. He sank onto the couch beside Michael.

"So you're not good at relationships, are you?" Michael smiled. "What'd the guy do? Cheat? Or was he one of those jerks who seem perfect but are on the way out before you realize what's going on?"

"It was too much, too soon and over before I knew what happened." He took a bite of the pizza. Michael hadn't been kidding. The pie was good.

"I had a boyfriend like that." Michael finished his slice of pizza. "He wanted something from me I couldn't give. I knew we weren't going to last more than a couple of months, but he saw forever." He stopped and smiled. "Want more?"

“No, I’m good for now.”

“Cool.” Michael turned the television on. “The game doesn’t start for another couple of hours.” He flipped through the guide. “See anything good?”

Niall didn’t answer right away. He saw lots of things that looked great—Michael among them. So why didn’t he take what he wanted? Because he’d told himself being alone was safer than getting his heart broken again.

“What?” Michael patted Niall’s thigh. “I know. There’s nothing on. The news is depressing. The commercials are goofy.”

“Fuck me.” Niall placed his empty plate on the coffee table. Time to make a decision. Take what he wanted from Michael or go home and be alone again. He didn’t want to be lonely any longer and he’d never get what he wanted if he didn’t find his gumption. What did he want? Michael.

Chapter Five

Michael nodded once. Fucking Niall sounded pretty damn good, but he didn't want to push his friend and he sure didn't get the impression Niall was convinced. He tossed the paper plate onto the coffee table then reached for Niall.

"Not here." He stood and tugged Niall down the short hallway to his bedroom. "I'm not one for a quick fuck on the couch. I prefer the bed. More room to move." He sat on the edge of the bed and spread his legs. "Now, what did you have in mind?"

"This." Niall sank to his knees. He palmed Michael's thighs and rubbed his face on the bulge in Michael's pants.

Jesus, that feels good. He threaded his fingers in Niall's hair. He loved when a guy paid him special attention beyond the act of fucking. He wanted his man to treasure him and their time together. He scooted forward on the edge of the bed to give Niall more room to work.

Niall glanced up at him once then pulled the zipper on Michael's pants. The denim split, displaying Michael's lack of underwear. He eased Michael's cock free from the tight fabric then dragged his nose along Michael's shaft.

"Oh fuck." Michael jumped and tugged Niall's hair. He patted the bed for the sheets. He couldn't pull Niall's hair so much or the poor man would end up bald. "Put it in your mouth."

Niall closed his eyes and flattened his tongue on the underside of Michael's cock.

Once he reached the blunt head, he sucked the tip into his mouth.

Michael groaned. He wouldn't need much prep before the orgasm hit. He'd kept to himself for the lion's share of the school year—using his hand for relief. Having a hot, sexy man in his home was so much better. “Suck it,” he bit out. He rammed his cock in and out of Niall's mouth. The rush of the moment swept over him and his balls tingled. Every nerve ending in his body sizzled. Heat flowed through him. He didn't want to finish like this. Not in Niall's mouth. He liked Niall and wanted something more perfect for him, with him.

But he couldn't withhold either. He tipped his head and moaned. “Niall.” He pushed his dick farther down Niall's throat.

Niall gurgled and moaned but didn't pull away. He buried his nose in Michael's pubic hair and swallowed.

The move damn near turned Michael's insides out. He nudged Niall away. “Stop.”

“What?” Niall plopped backward on his ass and his eyes widened. “What'd I do?”

“Nothing.” Well, no. He'd done plenty. Niall had Michael right on the edge, but that wasn't the point. “I want you on the bed. I want to be inside you.”

“What about what I want?” Niall's eyes flashed. “I might want to fuck you.”

“You're a natural bottom.” Michael stood and shoved his pants to the floor. “Don't try to tell me otherwise. I know you.”

“Yeah, you do.” Niall unbuttoned his shirt.

The garment slipped off his shoulders with a shrug. He dragged a deep breath into his

lungs. The move flexed his muscle and showed the power in his lanky body. Under all that clothing, the man had the build of a swimmer. He'd be willing to bet Niall was a natural at holding his breath, too.

Niall stood and tossed the shirt to the floor. His nipples beaded and a fine sheen of sweat slicked his chest.

"Naked. You. Now." Michael hiked his own shirt over his head then tossed the garment onto the bed. He grabbed a bottle of lube and a couple of rubbers from the dresser top.

Niall dropped his pants and eased his boxer briefs down his hips. His cock bobbed and pre-cum shone on the tip.

"You've been holding out on me." Michael strode up to his friend and rubbed his body on Niall's. The feel of cock on cock and chest on chest spiked his need once again. He nipped Niall's mouth, loving the taste of his friend. He should've pushed before now and should've shown Niall he was interested. They could've been fucking the entire school year, not starting something on the last couple days.

"Michael." Niall smoothed his palms up and down Michael's sides. "Why'd you pick me?"

"Because you're fucking handsome." He turned Niall around. "Hands and knees on the bed. I want to see that ass."

When Niall climbed onto the mattress, Michael swatted his butt. Niall wagged his ass. "I like that."

"I bet you do." Michael stepped up behind Niall and dropped the condom wrapper on the bed. He dribbled lube down the crack of Niall's ass.

“Chilly.” Niall wriggled. He glanced over his shoulder. “Gonna fuck me? Or make me wait?”

“I should make you wait.” He swatted Niall again. “But I won’t.” He squirted the clear fluid on his middle finger then eased his digit into Niall’s hole.

“Oh fuck.” Niall groaned and bore down on Michael. “Want more.”

“Like that?” He eased his finger in and out of Niall’s ass, prepping him. He couldn’t wait to breach the tight pucker of the man’s ass. First, he needed to know Niall was ready. He twisted his hand, moving his finger around within Niall’s hole. Niall bucked against him, fucking himself on Michael’s middle digit.

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“Horny bastard.” Michael eased a second finger into Niall. “Taking me right in.”

“I want you.” Niall glanced backward again. “Wanted you since you showed up at orientation.” He tipped his head back and moaned. “Didn’t think you were...gay.”

Oh, the surprises he had in store for poor Niall. He’d worry about those problems later. Right now only Niall mattered.

“Can’t wait.” He picked up the wrapper and opened it with his teeth. Not smart to use his teeth, but he couldn’t hold out any longer. He rolled the condom over his cock then lined himself up with Niall’s asshole. “Breathe.” He moved slowly, in and out of Niall. He couldn’t think, just feel.

Niall shivered but complied. A long groan escaped his lips. He grasped the sheet and grinded in time with Michael.

Michael dug his fingers into Niall’s hips. The synapses in his brain went into overload. Each time he buried himself to the hilt in Niall, he felt like he’d come home. This was where he belonged—with Niall.

“Faster.” Niall wriggled against Michael. “God.”

Michael slapped Niall’s ass and grabbed his shoulder. By extending his reach, he shoved himself deeper into his friend. Fuck. A bead of sweat slipped down his temple and his knees buckled. He needed to come.

“Michael.” Niall panted and dipped his head. “Fuck me.” He propped himself up on

his knees and one hand.

“Get yourself off with me. Come apart.” Michael increased the speed of his thrusts. Just a little more and he’d be over the edge. He shoved harder into Niall. He needed to own this man. Fucking balls. He squeezed his eyes shut and pushed balls-deep into Niall. His restraint splintered. No more holding back. He buried himself in Niall and gave in to the orgasm. His thoughts blurred, the room spun and nothing mattered but Niall. He emptied his load in the condom in Niall’s ass.

“I’m almost there,” Niall bit out. He tensed beneath Michael and grunted. When he relaxed, he moaned.

The boy was so loud. Michael preferred a lover who told him how he felt. He liked Niall more than he’d realized. He collapsed on his friend’s back and wrapped his arms around him.

Niall chuckled and sank onto the bed. “I can’t hold myself up.”

“I don’t want to move.” He kissed Niall’s shoulder. “Want to stay right here inside you all night.”

“Works for me.” Niall grasped Michael’s hand and laced their fingers. “Feels good.”

Too good. Michael withdrew from Niall. Being snuggled together filled the void in his soul, but he’d never be able to keep up the separation of his teaching life and his musical career if he allowed Niall into his heart.

“Michael?” Niall squeezed Michael’s fingers. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m fantastic.” He eased away from Niall and let go. He removed the used condom and chucked it in the wastebasket. Christ. He hadn’t realized how connected

he'd be after one round of sex. God, he needed to do some serious thinking—after a nap.

“I know that tone.” Niall flopped onto his back and sat up. “Okay.” He nodded. “This is what I thought would happen.” He stood. “I’ll...I’ll find my way out.”

“No.” Michael snagged Niall as he passed. “That’s not it. Don’t go.”

Niall averted his gaze. “Then explain.”

What in the hell was he supposed to say? I’m infatuated with you, but I can’t see you after tomorrow because I’ll be on tour? I’m really a metal god, but I refuse to disclose my double identity? Yeah, none of those would work. Niall deserved honesty, but Michael had nothing. His stomach churned. He was so fucked up.

“I thought so.” Niall shrugged away from Michael. He snatched his shirt and pants from the floor. “Where are my underwear?”

“Stop and listen to me, please?”

Niall picked up the boxer briefs. “Why? So I can make a fucking fool of myself? I’m okay not doing that.” He stepped into the underwear and his pants. “I should’ve known.”

“That’s not what I meant at all. I don’t want you to make a fool of yourself.” Why was he having this argument in the damned nude? He yanked a fresh pair of boxer shorts from his drawer. “Niall.”

“What?” Niall paused. “What deep-down dirty secret are you hiding that you can’t tell me? Huh? You’ve got a boyfriend? You’re married? You’re only looking for casual sex and knew I’d put out? What is it?”

Jeez, he'd asked a lot of questions. Michael rested his hands on his hips. "First, I'm not married or in a relationship. I don't want casual sex and I had no idea you'd put out." But he did have a secret. Fuck. "I didn't want to go this fast. We're friends and I like being with you. I'd really planned on watching the basketball game with you. If we had sex, then fine, but it wasn't the only thing I wanted."

Niall twisted his shirt in his hands. "That's it?"

"Yeah." Well, it was all he was ready to discuss at the moment. "Stick around. Have some more pizza. I promise I won't jump you or expect another blow job." He cradled Niall to his side. "Maybe some kissing? Like when we get a basket?"

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Niall shook his head, but a smile curled on his lips. “You’re bad.”

“Because I like you and fucked this all up?” He nuzzled Niall’s neck. “I promise to be better.”

“Just don’t fuck with my head.” Niall looked Michael in the eye. “That’s what I want. To know that if we’re going to do this, you’re honest with me. I’ll do the same for you.”

What was he supposed to say? Eventually maybe he could be honest. Or he could stick to only talking about the teaching side of his life... He’d do that. “Okay.”

“Now let’s get more food. I’m starving.” Niall strode away from Michael.

“Good sex will do that.” He watched Niall move. The man had a delicious ass. He couldn’t wait to tunnel it again. He headed into the living room and plopped onto the couch beside Niall. Being together suited him. He hefted a piece of pizza onto Niall’s plate then one onto his own. He sat with Niall in relative silence as they ate. Once the game started, Niall cuddled up to him.

The bit of domestic bliss pleased Michael. He looked forward to a few kisses during the game.

“What’s that?” Niall sat up. “It’s not my phone.”

Michael tipped his head. Phone? He recognized the tune. Shit. It was one of his earlier Bandit songs. That ringtone only meant two people—the manager, Blake, or

his lawyer, Dex. “It’s mine. I need to take this.” He snatched the phone from the table. He swiped his thumb across the screen to answer the call.

“It’s Michael.” He rubbed his forehead. “Talk to me.” He was gruff, but damn it, he didn’t have time for the phone call. He should’ve seen this coming, should’ve known his worlds would collide.

“Slow down. It’s Dex. You sent me a text earlier. I thought you were available. What tickets did you need?”

“Oh.” He’d forgotten about the text. How was he supposed to word this? “Can you hook me up?” He ducked out of the room and dropped his voice to a whisper. “Cleveland. You know the deal. I don’t ask for much, so if you come through, it’ll mean the world to me.”

“Backstage passes and best seat tickets. Yeah, I can do that. I assume he’s sitting right there and you want to surprise him. Gotcha,” Dex said. “You’re packed and ready to shove off Monday, right? Or do you need the extra night? We could use the drive time to get to Columbus. The bus is ready to go.”

“Things are looking promising,” he murmured. “I need the extra night.”

“Then be at the hotel bright and early on Monday. Blake wants to head out at eight.”

Shit. That wasn’t too late, but he’d hoped to spend more time with Niall. “I’ll be there.”

“You’re with someone, aren’t you? Whoever he is, you seem to like him, don’t you?” Dexter paused. “If you like him, then tell him about your other life.”

“I’ll take your thoughts into consideration.” He needed to think through how to tell

him and if he really wanted to be honest with Niall about his other life.

“Sounds like you’re either getting a blow job or you’re being a dick, so I’ll let you go. I’ll have the tickets waiting for him and will make sure something gets delivered to the school tomorrow during your last staff day. Later.”

“Yeah.” He hung up and turned off his phone.

“Sorry.” Michael returned to the room, plopped onto the couch beside Niall and plunked his hand on Niall’s thigh. He glanced over at the clock. “It’s almost nine already? Crap.”

“We were having fun, then you got a call. It’s fine.” Niall stood and brushed his hands over his pant legs. “I need to go. One more morning to get up for school.”

“You probably want a shower, too.” Michael hopped to his feet. “Sorry about the phone call.” He couldn’t say it was his lawyer. That wouldn’t work. “My friend had a problem with his friend.”

“You’re a good person to talk to when you’ve got a problem.” Niall stood by the doorway. “So...”

“So?” Michael grasped the front of Niall’s shirt. “I wish we didn’t have school. I’d like you to stay, but I understand.”

“One more night.” Niall shrugged. “We’ll figure it out.”

“What? You and me?” He caged Niall between his body and the door. “I’m not the kind of guy who fucks on the first date, but I kind of broke my own rules. One rule I don’t break is my rule of when I’m sleeping with someone, that’s the man I’m with.” He kissed Niall, wishing they didn’t have to part for the night. “You’re it for me. No

one else.” He doubted Niall would wait all summer for him, but he could hope.

“You’re my friend.” Niall scrunched up his nose. “It’s kind of funny to think of us as dating.”

“But it feels right.”

“It does.” Niall gazed into Michael’s eyes. “I know you said you’re busy tomorrow night, but maybe we could have dinner?” He waggled his head. “We don’t have to fuck, but definitely get some supper? Can you find an hour for me?”

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“You bet.” He’d find plenty of time for Niall. Hell, he’d have a long night to think about what he wanted to do next with Niall.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” Niall kissed him then tweaked Michael’s nipple. “Bye.”

“Bye.” He stood in the doorway until Niall climbed into his car, started the engine and drove away. A piece of his heart left with Niall. He’d never felt so attached to someone the way he did with Niall.

He closed the door and turned off the television. Once the pizza ended up in the fridge and the lights were turned off, he wandered down the hall to his bedroom. He flopped onto the bed, landing on his phone. Fuck. He moved the device and checked the screen. No new messages or important notices from the other apps on his phone. Good. He left the phone beside him on the bed and covered his face with his hands.

After one night, he shouldn’t be thinking about spilling his secret to Niall. They’d just decided to date. But they’d been friends for almost a year and had known of each other since he’d started working at the school. Niall had helped him get through the reviews by the administration and had stuck with him when he’d been new at the school. Did all that make Niall trustworthy?

He closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of Niall on his sheets. Above everything else, he liked Niall. Deep down in his gut, he knew he could trust him. Would his friend accept him and his lies by omission? He wasn’t sure. He’d considered telling a few other people, but knew down to his soul they’d try to cash in on his fame or run the hell away.

He'd see how things went tomorrow and after the concert. If Niall acted like one of the super fans, then he'd keep the secret away from his friend. He wanted a lover who loved him—not Bandit. Niall had the potential to be the long-term lover he needed, but he'd wait and see what happened.

Chapter Six

The next morning, Niall drove to the school. Knowing he had one day left until the teachers were given summer break helped him wake up. He'd also be able to see Michael. If that wasn't a reason to head to school, then nothing was. He pulled into his normal parking spot and looked for Michael's car. He didn't see the vehicle and decided to head into the building. No point in waiting on Michael. He wanted to get his final paperwork done and finish locking down what needed to be put away in his classroom.

He busied himself with filling out the order for his supplies for the fall. Every so often, he glanced out of the door and looked for Michael. By ten a.m. he finished looking. He had to turn in his paperwork.

Niall wandered down to the office with the supply order. He placed the papers on the desk. One of the receptionists left her chair.

"I've got something for you." She shuffled papers on her desk. "It was just here."

"Well, here's my order for supplies. Mostly office stuff—paper, pens, chalk and so forth." He folded his hands on the counter. "If you find whatever it was, you know where I am. I'm either in my room or the cafeteria in the meetings."

"No—I found it." She picked up an envelope. "A courier delivered this." She strode up to the counter. "I forgot there were still couriers working. I thought they'd been phased out. I hope whatever this is, it's something good."

“Me too.” He turned the envelope over. His name had been typed on the front. He slid his finger under the flap and opened the item. Three pieces of paper slid out and fluttered onto the counter. A ticket? His heart raced. A ticket to see Bandit and the Blackhearts. Holy shit! He turned the other papers around. He recognized the gold lettering. A backstage pass?

“Is it something good?” The receptionist pointed to the ticket. “Oh, you’re seeing the Blackhearts? I love that Bandit. He’s sexy.”

He hadn’t expected her to say that. But he had to admit, she had good taste. “I like him, too.”

“A backstage pass? Wow. Someone really likes you.” She smiled. “Who sent them?”

“I don’t know yet.” He winked at her and gathered up the contents of his envelope. “I’ll keep you posted.” He wondered who’d sent the ticket. Just one. Why wouldn’t they want him to go with someone? Maybe them?

When he returned to his room, Michael sat behind his own desk and twiddled with his phone.

“Hey, you.” Niall knocked on Michael’s door. “Anything good on your phone?”

“No.” Michael switched off the screen and shoved the device into his messenger bag. “Nothing important. How about you?”

“My order is in, the grades are done and I got one hell of a surprise when I went to the office.” He held up the envelope. “A ticket to see Bandit. I’m stoked. I hadn’t even tried to go online. I forgot about it.” He chuckled. “What a great fan I am...I forgot about them.”

“Things happen.” He folded his arms. “So you got a ticket? That’s awesome.”

“And a backstage pass.”

“I know. That’s why I needed to duck out and take that phone call. A friend of mine works at the arena and he pulled some strings. I hope you like it.”

“I love it. Thank you. Wow.” He rushed into Michael’s classroom. “I’d love it if you’d go with me, but they only sent one of each. Did you get a ticket on your own?”

“Niall.”

“Were they sold out already?” He gripped the envelope. “Maybe?”

“I couldn’t get the time off. Sucks.” Michael left his chair. He rounded his desk. “But I can meet you afterward? How about that?”

“I’d rather you were with me at the concert, but hanging out after could be a lot of fun.” Niall nodded. “Well, it’s about time to head to the final meeting. I’m going to put these back.” He turned on his heel and made his way across the hall to his classroom. Part of him wanted to be angry that Michael couldn’t accompany him to the concert, but the rest of him understood. He’d see Michael afterward—better than nothing.

“Wait.” Michael chased after him. His footsteps thumped on the tile floor. “I’ll go along with you to the cafeteria.”

“Cool.” He stuffed the envelope into the inner pocket of his bag then closed the snap.

“Do you want to pick a place to meet after the concert?”

“How about we meet out front? Kind of an old-school old-movie romantic sort of

thing.” Michael sighed and smoothed his hand over Niall’s chest.

The simple gesture sent heat through Niall’s system and made him wish they had more time before the meeting. “That works.”

“Since it’s the last day of school, we can have fun tonight before I have to leave. I changed my schedule just a little and don’t have to go until tomorrow morning” Michael kissed him light on the lips. “I thought about you last night.”

“Did you?” The idea made him hotter all over. “Good things?”

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“Very.” Michael kissed him once more. “Let’s get this meeting over with so we can close up shop and head home. What time I’ve got free tonight is devoted to being with you.”

“It is?” He shouldn’t have sounded so shocked, but he was. He still hadn’t wrapped his mind around them dating. He liked that they were together, but he never would’ve guessed he’d attract such a handsome man.

“Yeah,” Michael said. He disengaged from Niall. “Ready? Or do you need a minute?”

He needed lots of minutes, but he didn’t have them. He blew out a long breath and followed Michael out of the room. He locked his classroom, then, with Michael beside him, wandered back down to the cafeteria. Unlike during the meetings the day before, the teachers weren’t broken up into grades. He sat beside Michael at one of the back tables. Ashley Willis strolled into the cafeteria and waved.

“Mind if I sit here?” Ashley asked.

“Have a seat.” He’d always liked Ashley. The guy was normally pretty quiet, but once Niall had gotten him to open up, he’d turned out to be a cool guy. “What are you and Colt doing for the break?”

“Not sure.” Ashley folded his arms on the tabletop. “After the incident last September, Colt’s changed his thoughts about the diner. It’s his baby and he loves it, but he’s more willing to divide his time between there and home. But because it’s always busy in the summer, I’ll probably help there while Wyatt’s at Mom’s. On top

of that, I promised Wyatt we'd go to the amusement park and to that new water park over in Sandusky. I'm thinking July, but who knows? You?" His gaze switched between Niall and Michael. "You know, you two should date."

Michael chuckled. "You're perceptive. We are."

Niall suppressed his shock. He hadn't expected Michael to be so honest.

Ashley stared at Niall and tipped his head to the side. "Were you clued in on this announcement?"

"I was." Niall nodded. The more they talked about dating, the more he felt comfortable about admitting he liked Michael. "It's pretty new between us, so I wasn't sure if we were going public with it."

"I'm glad you did," Ashley said. "We need more people to admit they're happy together. This town needs to realize the LGBTQ community isn't a bunch of freaks. We're like everyone else. If that means two studly teachers dating, then I'm all for it."

Studly. He wouldn't have considered himself so, but whatever. Thank goodness the meeting started and saved him from having to answer Ashley.

Half an hour later, the meeting adjourned and Niall breathed a sigh of relief. He needed to get out of the cafeteria. Despite the air-conditioning, the body heat in the room made the temperature unbearable.

"Is it just me, or did the temperature spike in here?" Michael stood and fanned himself with the handout. "It's a sauna."

"It's you." Ashley slapped Niall on the shoulder. "Come to the diner this

summer—both of you.” He winked then wandered away from the table.

“Coming out to him as a couple was scary as hell.” Niall left his seat and made his way toward the main hallway.

“It was fine.” Michael bumped shoulders with him. Not an obvious romantic gesture and Niall appreciated the discretion. Michael walked alongside Niall until they reached their classrooms. “So, I need to grab a shower and change my clothes, but I meant what I said about spending tonight with you. What did you want to do?”

“Think you’ll be done around six?” Niall retrieved his bag from his classroom then strode back into the hallway. The weight of the school year finally lifted from his shoulders. It was summer and he had no worries for the next two months.

“I’m sure I can be. Want me to bring anything? Wine? Beer?” Michael strolled out of the building with Niall. “Condoms?”

Niall shivered. “You’re bad, but I like it.” He stopped at his car. “I also love how you think—but I wish you’d wait until we were out of the building.” He unlocked his vehicle and placed his bag on the front seat. “We’ve never gotten together for anything outside of school. I suppose you’ll want my address. I’m at 314 Canton Road. I’m past the main drag. It’s a huge Victorian with a balcony and wraparound porch. It’s really too big for just me, but I couldn’t pass her up. She was too beautiful and at the right price.”

Michael nodded. “I’ve driven past that house plenty of times but didn’t know it was yours. You restored it, didn’t you?”

“I did. Cost me a bundle, especially to replace the gingerbread, but it’s been worth it.” He loved talking about his house. “I’m trying to get it back on the registry of historical homes. I guess it was taken off when it was abandoned and Cedarwood

thought it was to be torn down.”

“You stepped in and saved the day.” Michael grinned. “Smart and sexy man.”

“I try.” He couldn’t wait for Michael to visit. “I’ll see you around six?”

“You bet.” Michael climbed behind the wheel of his car then backed out of the spot. He zipped away, leaving Niall in silence.

Niall collapsed onto his driver’s seat and sighed. He wasn’t about to obsess on what could happen that night. No, he’d take things as they came. He drove home, ran through his mail and switched on his laptop before he decided what he’d serve for supper. He should’ve asked Michael if he liked steak, but he’d shared plenty of lunches with Michael. He wasn’t a vegetarian, so hopefully grilled steaks would be fine. He pulled two bottles of wine from the wine fridge.

While he prepared for his supper with his boyfriend, Niall kept thinking about Michael. The memory of Michael fucking him came to mind. He stopped at the cutting board, halfway through chopping veggies for the salad, and bowed his head. He’d never expected Michael to look his way from the first time they met. Now they were a pair. He’d been so lucky.

Behind him, his phone buzzed. He opened his eyes and wiped his hands on a towel. He scooped the phone into his hand and swiped his thumb across the screen.

“Hello?” He frowned when the caller didn’t answer. “Hello?” He checked the screen to ensure the call was still connected. “What’s going on?”

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“I hear you’re dating Michael Jepsen,” the caller said. “He’s not big on dating anyone.”

“Okay? What’s your point?” He hooked his fingers on his pocket. “Who are you?”

“I’m no one important to you, but since Michael is important to you, I think you should know the truth. Ask him about Bandit.”

“What? Bandit? What are you talking about?” The call wasn’t making much sense. Who in the hell was this person? “Why?”

“Just ask him. You’ll find out your future isn’t going to happen the way you want. I’d suggest getting the hell out.” The caller, a man, hung up and left Niall in silence.

Nothing made much sense. He placed the phone back on the table. Although he wanted to call Michael straightaway and get the situation sorted out, he refrained from making the hurried phone call. He’d learned not to push too far too fast. Most people weren’t willing to give up secrets right away. Even a little finesse didn’t always work. He’d bide his time and ask later.

He finished chopping the vegetables and switched on the grill. While he stood on the back porch, he noticed Michael’s car in the drive. Michael pulled to a stop by the garage.

“Holy shit,” Michael shouted through his open passenger-side window. “You live here? I knew it, but I’m...I’m blown away.” He left the car and strolled through the gate in the back fence. He’d ditched the button-down for a pale blue T-shirt and black

vest. Paired with the faded jeans and white-tipped sneakers, he looked like he'd stepped straight out of a fashion magazine. He held up a bottle of red wine. "I wasn't sure what to bring, but I couldn't show up empty-handed."

"I was just about to get the steaks. Want to help?" He nodded to the back door. "How do you like your steak done?"

"Medium and yeah, I'll help. I expect the tour when we're done eating." He stopped at the top of the stairs leading to the porch. "We're eating out here?"

"I'd thought about it." Niall chuckled. He'd forgotten how nice it was to have guests. "Help me carry the stuff out here and we can spread out on the table."

"You bet your ass I want to spread you out on the table." Michael eased up behind him and wrapped his arms around Niall. "With the tall bushes and huge backyard, you've got a great setup for outdoor sex."

He'd thought the same thing when he'd bought the property. "I suppose you want to help me break it all in?" He opened the door and went into the kitchen with Michael hot on his heels. "Take the salad stuff out. I was going to make potatoes but ran out of time. Think the salad will be enough? I've got wine, too."

"I'm sure it'll be fine." Michael stacked the salad bowl, the smaller bowls and the dressing on the tray, then tucked the bottle of wine under his arm. "Got a corkscrew?"

"Right here." He opened one of the drawers and handed over the requested item. "Keep the door open for me so I can bring out these steaks." He hefted his own tray and grasped the tongs. "Ready?"

"Always." Michael led the way and held the door as asked. Once he and Niall were both outside, he closed the door. "You have no idea how much I've wanted to do

something like this. My family disowned me years ago for being gay, so even if I called them, they wouldn't visit." He chuckled. "Not that I've got tons of room for guests. I barely have enough of a backyard for a couple of chairs."

"I understand. I've invited my family, but they're all too busy." He shrugged and placed the steaks on the hot grates. He closed the lid on the grill. "I should be upset about it, but I'm not. It's par."

"But you shouldn't have to worry about that kind of stuff." Michael arranged the items from his tray on the table. "All we need are plates, wineglasses and silverware."

"Right inside." Niall turned to grab the items, but Michael stopped him.

"You tend the steaks. I can help with this." He swatted Niall's ass. "Besides, you're hot as hell in that apron."

The tips of Niall's ears burned. The apron...he'd forgotten about wearing it. He glanced down at the garment. Oh well.

Michael returned after a moment with the rest of the dinnerware. "You said you grew up in Cedarwood."

"I did. We lived in the development next to where you live. When you don't have a ton of money, you make what you have work. I didn't mind. When I went to college, I made a point to save up money. I paid for my education with part-time jobs and stuff. Would you believe I used to cook on campus? I worked the grill." He opened the lid and turned the steaks. "That's where I learned what not to cook."

Michael poured the wine and plopped onto one of the deck chairs. "I bet you were handsome back then."

“It wasn’t that long ago.” He picked up the platter. “Steaks are done.” He plated the food then switched off the grill. “Not long for you either. You’re, what, a year younger than me?”

“I am.” Michael nodded once. He smiled. “The more I get to know you, the more I like you.”

“Good thing.” He placed a steak on Michael’s plate. “I like you, too.”

Niall kept quiet while they ate. Part of him wanted to question Michael about the phone call. Was it a prank? He wasn’t sure and didn’t really know how to ask. Once they finished eating, he placed his fork and knife on the plate. He watched Michael sip his wine.

“What are you thinking about?” Niall asked. “You’re all deep in thought over there.”

Michael drank more of his wine until a dribble remained in the glass. “I wish I didn’t have to work tomorrow. It’s beautiful here and I don’t want to leave.”

“No one says you have to.” Niall left his chair. “Help me clean up and we can sit on the swing.”

“You have a swing, too.” Michael gathered up the dirty dishes and followed Niall into the house. “I’m in love.”

When Niall turned around to retrieve the empty wine bottle, Michael caged him in his arms. He kissed Niall, taking time to nibble on Niall’s bottom lip and to make his way to Niall’s earlobe. His breath warmed Niall through to his core.

Niall grabbed the counter for stability. “Michael.”

“That’s me.” Michael licked a path of fire along Niall’s throat. “Want me inside you?”

Niall didn’t have to think about the answer. He knew what he wanted—Michael in his bed. “Yes. Please?”

Chapter Seven

Michael regretted having to head out in the morning, but he had to get some practice time in with the band. Tonight, he'd make a night to remember with Niall. He couldn't divulge his secret just yet. He didn't want everyone to know about his other life. Jesus. A teacher who rocked out over the summer... No one would understand. He held on to the hope that Niall would, despite Michael's gut feeling he wouldn't. He should've known he'd have to clue Niall in to his dual life.

Michael kissed Niall once more. He wanted to take things slow and spend quality time with Niall, but his heart wanted to move faster. He didn't have much time before he'd have to go out on tour.

"What?" Niall's eyes widened. "The Italian dressing was too pungent?"

"No." He trailed his fingers over Niall's mouth. "This is so perfect."

"Me? Or my house?"

The fact that Niall had to ask those questions bothered Michael. The boyfriend he'd had before had really done a number on Niall. Like he'd be much better?

Up close, he noticed the amber flecks in Niall's brown eyes and his thick lashes. The man possessed a special kind of innocence.

"You wanted a tour." Niall grasped Michael's hand. "The basement's a boring basement. There's nothing down there. But in here is the dining room." He led

Michael into a bare room. “I don’t have a big table or anything. I did get the walls painted and installed hardwood floors.”

Michael hugged on Niall from behind. The room was beautiful—empty, but beautiful.

“I want to put a nice chandelier in here. The original one was broken.” Niall rested his head on Michael’s shoulder. “I put the Christmas tree in here.”

“I’m sure it’s stunning.” Michael allowed Niall to walk him into the next room. “The living room,” Michael murmured.

“Technically it’s the parlor.” Niall chuckled. “One of these days, I want to go antiquing and find the right couch and love seat for in here.” He glanced over at Michael. “I doubt you’re into antiquing.”

“I could be convinced.” The lack of furniture prevented his going down on Niall. “I like the navy blue in here and the curved windows. Are you going to put a window seat in?”

“Eventually. I’ve got a friend who can make the cushions. I need to ask her.” He grasped Michael’s hands. “Want to see upstairs?”

“I do.” He followed Niall up the grand staircase and marveled at the beautiful dark wood of each plank. “You redid these too, didn’t you?”

“Uh-huh. Eventually I’m putting a carpet runner down the middle.” Niall tugged him into the first room at the top of the stairs. “The other three bedrooms are bare, but this one is mine.”

Michael stopped short. Where the rest of the house had been lightly furnished or not

furnished at all, this room had been finished. A gigantic simple bed hulked at one end of the room. The curved windows from the first floor had been added to the second floor along with the window seat Michael liked. He appreciated the clean lines and simplicity of the room.

“I’ve even got a master bath.” Niall nodded to the far side of the room. “I knocked out one of the bedrooms and had a bathroom added. I’m not going downstairs to pee or shower.”

Michael guided Niall to the rectangular ottoman at the foot of the bed. He couldn’t wait. He eased Niall onto the plush gray upholstery then sank to his knees.

“Don’t you want lube or rubbers?” Niall asked.

“Not yet.” He opened the front of Niall’s pants and eased his lover’s cock free from the denim and cotton fabric. He wasn’t about to wait for something he didn’t need—yet. He glanced up into Niall’s eyes then engulfed Niall’s cock in his mouth.

Michael groaned around Niall’s dick. He wasn’t one for bottoming or giving head. Usually he took what he wanted, but Niall was special. He hooked his fingers in the belt loops of Niall’s jeans.

“I like that.” Niall lifted his hips long enough to ease the pants and underwear down his legs. The clothing balled up around his knees. He threaded his fingers into Michael’s hair and set the pace.

Michael embraced the freedom in giving himself over to Niall. He bobbed his head, taking Niall to the back of his throat then pulling almost all the way out. At the same time, he smoothed his hands over Niall’s chest. He flicked Niall’s nipples, eliciting groans from Niall’s throat.

“Jesus.” Niall tugged harder on Michael’s hair. He undulated his torso, sending his cock deeper into Michael’s mouth. “You’re good at this.”

Michael withdrew and licked along Niall’s shaft. “I’d better be.” Although he hadn’t had tons of practice, he’d had enough to know what to do. He raked his teeth over the length of Niall’s erection then sucked one of Niall’s balls into his mouth. When he glanced up at Niall’s face, he bit back a chuckle. The man was so sexy in the throes of oral sex.

Niall gritted his teeth and his brow furrowed. He’d closed his eyes and a fine sheen of perspiration slicked on his chest. His nipples beaded. He panted.

Michael stroked Niall while he lapped at the blunt head of Niall’s cock. Salty precum spilled onto his tongue. The man tasted as good as he looked. He licked Niall clean then sucked him deep again. Niall trembled and gripped the edge of the ottoman. When he panted, his chest caved and defined the muscles in his abdomen.

“I’m...fuck.” Niall balled his fists. “Fuck.”

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“Close?” Michael eased away from Niall. “Flip over.” He didn’t give Niall much of a chance to arrange himself, but rather took over for his boyfriend. He feasted on Niall’s mouth first, sucking Niall’s tongue between his lips. He swallowed Niall’s moan and his desire soared when Niall cupped Michael’s jaw. The tenderness in his touch along with the sweetness of the kiss nudged Michael closer to his own orgasm. He’d need to be inside Niall before he’d come, but his desire had been ratcheted up a few notches.

When he ripped his mouth from Niall’s, he stared into Niall’s eyes. Fires burned in Niall’s deep brown depths. His cheeks were tinged pink and his lips felt a tad swollen from the kiss. Fuck, the man drew Michael in like no other.

“Now, flip over.” He propped Niall up on his hands and knees. The pants and underwear were still around Niall’s calves. The new pose gave Michael the ultimate access to Niall’s body.

Michael liked the frenzied look. “Where’s the lube?”

“Drawer.” Niall tapped on the side of the ottoman. “Handy, eh?”

“You are.” He swatted Niall’s ass then retrieved the bottle and a condom from the drawer. Although he wanted to bury himself in Niall, he held back. First, he needed to prep his lover.

Michael eased Niall’s ass cheeks apart and stared at the puckered pink skin. Niall flexed his hole.

“I feel your breath on my ass.” Niall groaned. “It tickles.”

“Does it?” Michael gave in to his lust and rubbed his nose along Niall’s ass cheek. He darted his tongue over the rosette, pleased when Niall jumped then moaned. Each lick and nip seemed to push Niall closer to coming apart.

“Fuck. Oh, my fuck.” Niall rolled his hips, backing into Michael’s face. “More.”

“Not yet.” He flattened his tongue and dragged it over Niall’s hole. Niall squirmed and grunted. He flexed his hole.

“Please?” Niall arched his back. “I can’t...I need...”

He’d brought Niall to the edge and forced him to speak in partial sentences. Nice. Michael stabbed his tongue against Niall’s hole then sat back on his heels.

“Michael.” Niall glanced over his shoulder. The pleading in his eyes along with the break in his voice spurred Michael on.

“I will.” Michael stood. He shucked his pants and boxers. He didn’t need any prep other than to cover his dick and to slather lube all over his cock and his lover’s hole.

Niall rested his shoulders on the ottoman and turned his face to the side. He reached between his legs and stroked his cock. Another moan escaped his lips and he closed his eyes. “Fuck, I needed this.”

“No, you don’t.” Michael swatted Niall’s ass. “Better wait for me.”

“Can’t.” A lazy smile curled on Niall’s lips.

Was the punk teasing him? Or trying to tell him to hurry up? Either way, Michael

didn't care. He ripped the condom wrapper open then covered his dick. Once he tossed the wrapper on the floor, he dribbled lube on his cock. He stroked himself, needing the hand on his body to take a little of the edge off before he sank into Niall.

Niall panted and rocked against Michael's thigh. He didn't say anything, but the way he flexed his asshole told Michael plenty. The orgasm wasn't far off.

Michael slathered lube over Niall's hole then eased his finger into his lover.

"Fuck," Niall shouted. He pushed himself onto Michael's digit until Michael sank in two knuckles deep. "More. Shit."

Michael flattened his free hand on Niall's lower back and used his other hand to pump in and out of Niall's hole. "Breathe for me."

Niall shuddered and panted again. "I can't hold out much longer."

"Me either." Michael worked his finger from Niall's body then lined his dick up with his lover's hole. Inch by inch, he sank into Niall's ass. Once he filled Niall to the hilt, he paused. Dear God, being inside Niall sent shivers through his body. He needed this—needed to be with the man who made him feel complete. He grasped Niall's hips. He'd have to move soon, but he basked in the tightness.

"Michael." Niall arched his back again. "Please? Fuck me."

"Yes." Michael shifted his hips, pulling his cock almost free of Niall's ass. He wouldn't need long for the orgasm to overtake him. Heat filled his veins and his skin prickled. A bead of sweat slid down his temple. He smoothed his hand over Niall's back, comforting him.

Michael reached around Niall and wrapped his fingers around Niall's on Niall's cock.

He built a rhythm and rocked his hips in time with Niall's pulls on his dick.

"Fuck, that's good." Niall buried his face against the ottoman top and shuddered.

"Very good." Michael increased his speed. He couldn't have gone slower if he'd wanted to. The heat in his belly and the tingles in his veins swarmed him. He gritted his teeth and pistoned his hips. From his head to his toes, everything within him seemed to turn to goo. He growled and slammed into Niall. The climax hit him at full force and fuzzed all the thoughts in his head. Nothing mattered but Niall and Michael never wanted the moment to end.

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He pumped his hips a few more times as the orgasm rumbled through him. “Come for me, Niall.”

“Fuck,” Niall said, drawing the word out. He tensed beneath Michael and squeezed his asshole. He held Michael tight within him. Another shudder racked his body before he moaned and collapsed.

Michael let go of Niall and braced himself on his hands as he eased out of Niall’s hole. He needed to ditch the condom and wanted to lay with Niall. They’d just shared one hell of an intimate moment and he refused to let it end. When he stood, his knees wobbled. He swatted at Niall’s ass, brushing his fingers across Niall’s skin.

“Crawl onto the bed,” Michael said. He managed to stand without help and removed the used condom. He tossed the rubber into the waste bin then wobbled over to the mattress. The moment he landed on the sheets and breathed in the scent of Niall, he knew—he’d found his place. He belonged with Niall.

Niall cuddled up beside Michael and sighed. “I know you have to go.” He kissed Michael’s bare chest and rested his head over Michael’s heart. “You wore me out, but I like it.” His breathing evened out. He squeezed Michael’s midsection. “When you leave, let me know. Wake me up and say something. Don’t just disappear. I like you more than I thought I could and I’m tired of being alone.” He paused. “I can’t ask you to date only me, but I’m not interested in dating anyone else. Don’t want anyone else.”

Michael sucked in a ragged breath. He’d hoped to hear those words from Niall, but he knew better than to expect them. Now his crazy dream was at the cusp of coming

true. But he wasn't able to be honest with Niall.

"I don't need my shields up when I'm with you." Niall sighed again. "I'm me when I'm with you. Nothing to hide." He moaned and stopped moving.

Michael stared at the ceiling of Niall's bedroom. He couldn't sleep—not when he couldn't shut off his brain. Niall claimed he could be himself with Michael.

Not Michael. He still clung to the idea he could have two identities and few people would be none the wiser. He debated his next move. He had no choice but to go on tour. He could text message Niall and video chat, but then he'd have to explain the shaved head and different locations each time they talked. Eventually Niall would ask questions.

He could break things off in the morning and ask to pick back up in the fall. He rolled his eyes. That wouldn't work and it was inhumane. He'd gained Niall's trust and what was he wanting to do? Crush it. No, he refused to do that.

He went through his mental list of items needed for the tour. He hadn't packed much and kept a bunch of stuff on the bus. He missed his guitar. If he had the instrument, he could lull himself to sleep. Maybe he'd even impress Niall.

Fuck. The same problem kept cropping up. Niall. He liked his friend and wanted to keep up the relationship.

He'd have to disclose his other life. Niall deserved the truth.

But what if Niall walked away?

Then Michael would know they weren't a good fit and would save himself heartache. Hell, he could use the shitty feelings for his music...but he didn't want to go through

hell for his music. He wanted to be in a good place for a change.

Michael closed his eyes and sleep overtook him. He'd have to worry about Niall and disclosing the truth later.

When he woke in the morning, Niall snored beside him. He breathed in the scent of old wood and polish in Niall's house. He could see himself living there. Unfortunately, he needed to go. He checked the clock. Six a.m. If he got moving, he'd have plenty of time to gather his crap before he had to leave. He scooted out of bed and searched the floor for his clothes.

"Heya." Niall stretched but didn't leave the bed. "Gotta go?"

"I do." He stepped into his pants then wadded his vest and underwear up together. Where were his shirt and socks? "I've got to be in to work at eight."

"Ah." Niall sat up and scrubbed both hands over his face. "I meant to ask you something yesterday and forgot."

"Oh?" He located his shirt and turned the garment right side out. "What?" He could only imagine what Niall wanted to ask.

"Yesterday before I finished getting supper around, I got a phone call." He raked his fingers through his hair. "The person on the other end of the line said something about asking you about Bandit."

Fuck. His blood ran cold. Only two people knew his secret besides him. He wanted to know who blew it. "What about Bandit? I've got all their songs on my MP3 player in the car. I like his stuff." He should since he was Bandit.

Niall frowned. "I cannot wake up." He leaned back on his hands. "Okay, so the

person said I needed to get the hell out, but I can't remember what. He also said I needed to ask about your future, whatever that is." He looked Michael in the eye. "I don't know what the deal is, but all I ask is for you to be honest."

He had to think fast. "I don't know what the person meant about getting out." He found his socks and sat on the edge of the bed to put them on. He couldn't look Niall in the eye when he explained himself. "I'm a bad boyfriend to have because I have to work all summer and I don't have much time for a social life. You've seen my house. It's so tiny. I figure if I save up, I can eventually afford something bigger." He'd spoken the truth. He wanted a bigger place, but he didn't want to let on about his musical career.

"Makes sense. Where do you work?"

Shit. What was he supposed to say? The longer he hesitated, the worse things would get for him. "In Cleveland, downtown. That's how I can meet you after the concert. I'll already be there." Not at all, but he couldn't be honest. Besides, Niall would never believe him.

"Oh."

"I'll text you and call you when I can." He stood. He wasn't going to be able to look Niall in the eyes, but he couldn't leave without a kiss. He turned to his boyfriend. Fuck. His boyfriend. He'd gotten in too deep, but he didn't want out either. "I need to go." He knelt on the edge of the bed and leaned in for a kiss. "It won't be long."

"Yeah." Niall palmed Michael's cheek. "I don't understand any of what you told me, but I'll trust you."

Niall's words sliced straight through Michael. For a split second, he wanted to tell Niall the truth. He held back and kissed his boyfriend again. "Won't be long until I'm

back and school starts.”

Michael forced a smile. As he walked down the stairs and left Niall’s house, the full weight of what he’d done and what he was about to do crashed down on him. God, I’m a shit. He climbed behind the wheel of his car and forced himself to leave his boyfriend’s home. If he stuck around, he’d never go out on tour. Would Niall love him when he found out the truth? People tended to want the man fronting the band, not the teacher. Would Niall be one of those people to turn him away once he learned the truth? The last time Michael let anyone in, the relationship ended in disaster. His ex hadn’t wanted to be with a poor teacher. No, he had wanted a rich rock star.

Christ. He didn’t like who he saw when he looked in the mirror. Bandit was confident. Bandit knew what to say. Michael needed his lesson plans and running. Was he good enough and exciting in his life as a teacher to keep Niall interested? He wasn’t sure.

As he drove away from Niall’s, he spoke to his lover—not that Niall could hear him. “I’m sorry, babe. I fucked up. I am Bandit and I’m heading out on tour. I want you to love me for me, not the guy on the stage. I can’t ask you to believe in me, since I know I’ve torn your trust to hell, but I’m falling in love with you. I don’t deserve you and I’m scared I’m going to lose you because I can’t be honest.” He stopped at the traffic light and rested his head on the steering wheel. “Give me a chance and it’ll all make sense. I’ll make this up to you. Just don’t give up on me.”

Chapter Eight

An hour later, Michael pulled into the parking lot of the record company. He'd spent the better portion of the week in the studio with the band, but made a point to schedule time to run with Niall. He needed that private time with his boyfriend. Niall meant more to him than he'd ever thought possible. But Niall didn't know the truth about him. Still, he hated lying by omission. He wanted to tell Niall everything, but what the hell would happen if he found out? He'd walk. Niall didn't strike him as the type to need praise or fame. He'd shy away in seconds.

Part of Michael's agreement to go on tour meant the company kept his car in a private, guarded parking garage. He doubted anyone wanted his vehicle, but fans could be strange. He parked in his spot and left the car. Right now, he needed to practice. The songs were always part of him, but a few hours to refresh himself wouldn't hurt. He'd spent the last three days and nights with Niall. Part of him wasn't ready to leave Niall behind. The rest of him wanted to get the tour started so he could get back to Niall. Craziness.

One of the bouncers hurried up to him and grabbed Michael's guitar case.

Dexter stood beside the tour bus. "You haven't shaved your damn head. We leave in less than forty-eight hours. The first concert is tonight and you need to look like...you."

"Good fucking morning to you, too." He slipped into his Bandit persona. "I'll take care of it before we roll away. I've got time."

“Was he good?” Dexter followed close behind Michael. “I smell sex on you.”

“Jesus.” He whipped around and stared at his lawyer. “I had sex. Big deal.” He paused. Something Niall had said came back to him. Warning Niall about Bandit. Dexter? He doubted, but he needed to know. “Why?”

“What are you talking about?” Dexter folded his arms and widened his stance. “Are you on something? I told you to keep your nose clean.”

“Christ, I’m not high. I don’t touch the stuff.” He turned around and boarded the bus. Instead of the usual relief, his heart sank and his stomach churned. Something didn’t feel right.

“Then what are you talking about?” Dexter shut the bus door. “It’s you and me here. The others are inside getting shit around. Spill your guts.”

“We’re going to Columbus, Cincy, Indy, then Ft. Wayne, and back to Cleveland for one night only, right?” Michael asked.

“You know where we’re going. You set up the schedule.” Dexter narrowed his eyes. “What’s going on?”

“I saw the ticket and the pass for Niall. Thanks.” He rummaged in the tiny bathroom for the clippers and the paper towels. “Niall wanted to meet Bandit.” He’d already met the Bandit, but Michael couldn’t be that honest. He plugged the clippers in and stepped in front of the mirror. He hated this moment. His hair actually looked good for a change, and what was he about to do? Shave it all off and slather on eyeliner.

“You’d better get moving.” Dexter knocked on the open door. He glanced down the aisle of the coach then dropped his voice. “Okay, since you won’t talk, I will.” He closed himself in the bathroom with Michael. “We have to talk. It’s big.”

Michael turned around as best he could. He liked Dexter as a lawyer, but he wasn't attracted to him. "Like the implosion of the band big or what?"

"Normally I'd tell you to sit down, but we're squashed into the bathroom, so you can't." Dexter dropped his voice to a whisper. "Leif found out about you."

Michael wobbled against the toilet and plopped onto the closed seat. His blood ran cold and his head ached. Tension filled the tiny room. "What do you mean, he found out? Please, God, don't tell me you spilled my secret to him."

"I didn't." The color drained from Dexter's face and his eyes widened. "I told him I wanted to get engaged and I thought he could be the one. He said something about merging households. That snapped me out of my romantic fog. I couldn't see living with him. Fucking him, yeah, but not spending all my time with him. Anyway, he got the idea I had a ring and went snooping. I know because I've got security cams set up to record what goes on in my office. I saw him in my safe and my private files. I don't know how he got the combinations, but he was flipping through my stuff. He found the contracts with your name on them."

"Fuck." He shoved both hands into his hair. Now the phone call made more sense. "Then it was Leif," he muttered.

"What was?" Dexter asked. "Did he contact you? The ass wants fifty thousand to keep quiet. I refused and he upped the price to a hundred thousand."

"No." No arguing. He wasn't going to pay the little shit to keep his mouth shut, especially when he knew damn well Leif had already spilled the beans. "He already went public. He's lying about not doing it so you'll give him money."

"Jesus. He did?" Dexter sank backward against the door. "How?"

“Niall asked me this morning if I knew why someone would call him and tell him his future wasn’t going to happen the way he wanted. The only person I know who talks like that is Leif. I don’t know if he used his name, but it doesn’t sound like he used mine just yet. Niall’s smart. If he thinks a little bit about the call, he’ll figure it out.”

“He will. On top of that, Leif contacted the Coalition Against Gays in Cedarwood. They know, too. They’re threatening to kick you out of town.” Dexter folded his arms. “What do you want to do?”

“Corner the little shit and give him a piece of my mind, then take on that fucking coalition. This has got to end.” He shook his head. “I should’ve known the secret wouldn’t stay that way forever. Too many people knew.”

“Just the three of us. You, me and your manager were the only ones in on the deal...until Leif found out.”

“But Niall deserves to know.” Michael stared at the clippers. “Give the fucker a couple grand and keep him right beside you until we get back to Cleveland. As long as he’s quiet, I can do this my way.”

“You’ll tell Niall backstage in Cleveland?”

“Yeah, and I’ll accept it when he tells me to get fucked.”

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“You think he will?”

“I’m sure. I lied. I said I had a summer job.” He closed his eyes. For the first time since he’d formed the band, he wasn’t looking forward to playing. The music wasn’t soothing his soul or easing his mind.

Dexter groaned. “I thought Leif could be the one. I did. I fell hard for him.”

Michael opened his eyes. “We all make mistakes. Some are bigger than others.” He stood. “I need to shave my head and pretend to be a rock star. I don’t feel like one, but I get to play one.”

Dexter opened the bathroom door and stepped into the aisle. “We’ll get it straightened out.”

“I don’t see how. Leif might have opened his mouth, but this was my doozy of a secret. I never should’ve tried to lead a double life.”

“You did what you needed to do in order to have what you wanted.”

What he really wanted was to be back in bed with Niall and fucking their way through their first full day off school for the summer.

* * * *

Niall looked at his phone for the hundredth time. He loved the texts he’d gotten from Michael over the last week. Seeing him was better, but he appreciated the little notes.

Part of him still wondered what the heck was so important and top secret about Michael's job. Why was he being targeted by the coalition? He was gay. So what? They'd known that all along. Something didn't make sense, but what was he supposed to do? Throw a fit? Picket? Scream? That wouldn't do any good. He'd learned that with his ex, Kurt. The tighter he'd tried to hold, the more Kurt had wanted to get the hell away from him. He could still hear Kurt insulting him and laughing as he moved his stuff out of their shared apartment.

He refused to make another mistake and push Michael away. But how did he know he hadn't done so already? The date and the sex afterward had been off the charts. To him, they'd clicked. According to the texts, Michael cared about him.

Can't wait to see you at the concert.

Miss you.

The day job would be so much easier if I had you across the hall.

His heart fluttered when the messages came in. He couldn't wait to hear from Michael and treasured the texts. Did that make him a pushover? He wasn't sure. Here he was blindly accepting Michael's story and going along with Michael's rules, even when down in his guts he didn't totally buy into what he'd been told. He knew something wasn't right. People didn't just disappear for the summer unless they were deployed by the military, or maybe he worked on a cruise ship?

Niall groaned and turned the phone over to hide the screen. According to Michael, he was downtown. He could go look for Michael's office building, but why bother if he didn't know which building to look for? He didn't want to waste the gas or the time when he had other things to do. Obviously Michael wasn't that invested in spending time with him, or he had a really good reason not to. Why he couldn't share that reason was beyond Niall, but he'd keep those thoughts quiet for now. He turned his

attention back to what he needed to do around the house.

For the last week, he'd been busy painting the parlor and sitting room as well as doing yard work, but he'd been alone. He crossed off the days until he reached the only thing on his calendar. He still couldn't believe Michael knew someone at the arena and could get the ticket. It was unreal. Still, he'd see Michael after the concert.

He checked the clock function on his phone. In less than three hours, he'd be seeing Bandit live. He smoothed the wrinkles out of his shirt and ruffled his fingers through his hair. He wasn't going to win any awards, but he looked good and wanted to impress Michael.

Niall glanced out of the window. A limousine had parked in his driveway. What the hell was that there for? He opened the front door and stepped onto the porch.

A man in a sport coat strolled up the walkway. "Hi. My name is Dexter Tryor and I'm here to give you a ride."

"I didn't order a limousine." He crossed his arms and widened his stance. Looking tough had never been his strong point, but he'd try. Good thing he could tamp down the fear. From his time in the classroom, he'd learned to project a calm facade.

"Sorry, I didn't explain." Dexter bowed his head. "You were given a special ticket and backstage pass to the Bandit and the Blackhearts show, correct?"

"I was." How did Dexter know about this? And why did this guy look familiar?

Dexter strode up to the bottom of the steps. He stuffed his hands into his trouser pockets and widened his stance. He smiled and reminded Niall of every boring, stuffed-shirt lawyer he'd seen on television—too smooth but a little slimy around the edges.

“I’ve met you, haven’t I?” He wasn’t about to cross the lawn to the limo without a little more explanation. He’d seen Dexter’s face before. “Ashley? Or were you the one who tried to keep Steve Moore in the Cedarwood district?”

“Yes, I represented him, but the school district decided to go in a different direction and Mr. Moore found better employment.” Dexter squared his shoulders and looked Niall in the eye. “Now, about the tickets. Part of that package was a limo ride to the concert. Courtesy of Bandit, himself.”

“Bandit is in the limo?” Bandit...the man he loved to see onstage, had been the reason he’d been given the tickets? But Michael said he knew someone at the center... Niall stared at the man. His words made sense, but he had no idea what the hell the guy was getting at.

“No, he’s at the venue doing sound checks. He wanted to be here.” Dexter reached into his pocket. “I’ve got a video message for you.”

“A what?” He knew what a video message was, but things were getting a bit surreal. He crept to the steps and stopped. Dexter turned the phone around, and sure enough, a video played.

Bandit, in his bald, pierced and all-black-attired glory, stood beside what appeared to be a bus or an RV. His dark sunglasses gleamed and the labret piercing below his bottom lip jiggled when he smiled. The black T-shirt gripped his upper body like a second skin and when he flexed his arm, the tattoo of the snake bulged. Niall wished he could see Bandit’s eyes. Something about the way the man carried himself and his crooked smile reminded him of Michael. But Michael worked in an office—he wasn’t Bandit. Still, Niall focused on the screen.

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“I couldn’t let my superfan come to the show all alone. I’m hoping the limo ride will make up for some of your sadness and make it great when you meet up with Michael afterward. He works for me and couldn’t tell you where he was. You’ll get to see him very soon, so hop in the limo and get your ass to Cleveland so we can rock this house tonight.”

The video ended and the screen darkened. Michael worked for Bandit? How was that possible? Niall sagged to the steps. “That’s why he couldn’t come but was able to get the ticket. Odd.” He peered up at Dexter. “Is this for real?”

“Yep.” Dexter tucked his phone back in his coat pocket. “Coming, or are you still going to ride alone?” He nodded to the car. “Between Michael and Bandit, they’ve gone to a lot of trouble.”

“I need to get my keys and stuff,” Niall murmured. “Give me a few minutes and I’ll be ready.”

“You’ve got plenty of time. I’ll be in the limo.” Dexter turned on his heel and strolled down the sidewalk.

Niall watched him walk away. He couldn’t process what was going on. No way...but he wasn’t about to miss out on the concert. He found his footing and headed into the house. He tugged his license and a credit card from his wallet then tossed the wallet into his desk drawer. He scooped up his keys as well as the ticket and locked the back door. He made his way through the house to the front door and locked that once he stepped onto the porch. He checked the garage doors to be sure those were locked as well as the door to the basement. Once satisfied, he headed to the limo.

Dexter opened the door for him. “Ready?”

Niall climbed inside the massive vehicle and collapsed on the wide leather seat. He’d never seen such luxury, not even when he’d gone to prom back in high school. Deep brown leather everywhere and sparkly lights ringing the ceiling. The brown carpet muffled his footsteps as he switched seats to face forward.

“Bandit wanted to treat you right.” Dexter settled on the seat along the side of the vehicle. Someone outside closed the door. Dexter opened a diet soda. “He’s a good man with a big heart. Want something to drink? The bar is packed. Hard and soft stuff.”

“I’m sure he is, but no thank you. I’m fine.” He folded his hands in his lap and watched the world zip by. He didn’t say much because he wasn’t sure whattosay. Besides, he worried he’d throw up if he had something to drink. Riding in the backseat tended to make him carsick. He measured his breaths and focused on things outside the vehicle that weren’t moving, like the horizon.

When he stole a glance at the man in the car with him, he noticed Dexter fiddled with his phone and talked to the driver a couple of times, but didn’t make much of an effort to talk to Niall.

“What’s Michael’s job with Bandit?” Niall asked. He might as well try to make conversation. He glanced over at Dexter once more before focusing on the horizon again. “Sorry, I get carsick easily or I’d look at you when I said something.”

“Huh?” Dexter looked up from his phone. “Oh, Michael...he’s...I’m not sure what all he does anymore. He’s Bandit’s right-hand man once the concert season gears up. You’ll see him in a few minutes. We’re almost there.”

“Oh.” Niall wiped his hands on his pant legs to hide the shaking. He wasn’t even sure

now what he was excited about—seeing Bandit or Michael. If he could hold Michael while Bandit belted out one of the few slower songs...

Outside the car, the world darkened. “What’s going on?” Niall asked. “I’m supposed to meet him in front of the arena right after the show.”

“We’re in the tunnel beneath the venue,” Dexter said. “For privacy purposes. Bandit wouldn’t dare step outside the venue, even if it was to meet a limo.”

“Oh—wait, for Bandit to meet me?” The car stopped and the cabin filled with light. He wasn’t sure what he expected, but no one seemed to be outside the car. He peered out of the window.

“This is our stop.” Dexter scooted across the seat then exited the car. “Come on.”

Niall, not sure what else to do, followed the lawyer into the tunnel. A couple of men in polo shirts and black pants strode past him. He hurried to keep up with Dexter.

“Here you go. Wait in here. I’ll be back.” Dexter nudged Niall into a room. Before Niall could question him, Dexter closed the door.

Niall froze. Where in the name of God was he? Things had gone from surreal to freaking scary. He turned around to take in the view of his new surroundings. On the beige couch sat Bandit. Niall gasped. He’d know Bandit anywhere. The bald head, the piercing—now a hoop—and the all-black ensemble.

“It’s a real treat to meet you.” He stepped up to his musical hero. “I hope I’m not interrupting something.” He wanted to stick out his hand for a handshake but hesitated. Bandit wasn’t talking and Niall suddenly wished he hadn’t been quite so forward. “Sorry. I’m excited about seeing the concert and getting to meet up with my boyfriend later.”

“Don’t need to be sorry,” Bandit said. “You’re fine. Your boyfriend, eh?”

Niall gulped. When Bandit rose to his feet, he stood only a couple of inches taller than Niall. He hooked his fingers in his belt loops and flexed his chest muscles. The scent of his cologne wrapped around Niall and made him pause. He knew that musky, outdoorsy scent. Michael wore that scent.

Bandit removed his sunglasses. His Adam’s apple bobbed and he parted his lips. “Hi, Niall.”

Niall wobbled on his feet. “Michael, I thought I was here to meet Bandit.” This had to be a joke, but at least he had Michael there. “What are you doing?”

Michael popped the piercing from his bottom lip and sighed. “Can we talk?”

Chapter Nine

Michael wanted to grab Niall and hug him until everything made sense, but he knew better. Niall needed time to process.

“I’m supposed to meet Bandit. If this is your job, impersonating him so he can be out in public, then that’s awesome and I can totally understand why you can’t tell anyone what you’re doing.” His eyes sparkled and he clapped his hands. “Very cool.” He reached for Michael. “For a moment, I almost thought you were Bandit.”

Michael paused for half a breath to think through how he wanted to do this. “Why don’t we sit? I asked Dex to bring food. Burgers, I think.” He waved his hand at the couch. “I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” Niall leaned in close for a kiss. “Miss you in my bed and our conversations after school. Texts are good, but face-to-face is better.”

“They were great conversations and sexy messages.” Michael eased onto the couch beside Niall. The excitement in Niall’s eyes wasn’t lost on him. His heart broke. He was about to not only crush Niall’s spirit, but destroy Niall’s trust.

“So.” Niall rested his head on the back of the couch. He glanced over at Michael. “I’m looking forward to the concert. Think they’ll play anything off the Atomicalbum?”

“Niall,” he said. “We need to talk.”

“Okay.” Niall placed his hand on Michael’s thigh. “What’s on your mind?”

“Remember how you said you could be yourself with me?” Michael stuffed his hands under his legs to hide the trembling. He wished he could be having this conversation anywhere else but at the concert venue.

“Uh-huh. I feel like I’m myself when I’m with you.”

Fuck. He knew this wouldn’t be easy, but Niall’s honesty and sweet smile made things worse. “Niall, I’ve been lying to you.”

The smile faded and Niall’s eyebrows knotted together. “What—what do you mean?”

He paused but forced himself to look Niall in the eye. Being honest would kill him and destroy his chances of having a relationship with Niall. “I wasn’t around until right before the school year started because I was off doing something else.”

“Because you’re busy being Bandit.” Niall sat up straight. “I can see why you’d keep that away from the school folks. They’d have a shit fit.”

“Niall.” He grasped Niall’s hand. “I don’t know how to say this.”

“You’re pregnant?”

Niall’s ridiculous question made him pause again. “Why would I be pregnant? I’m a guy.”

“It was a bad joke to get you to smile.” Niall rubbed his thumb across the back of Michael’s hand. “If you don’t stop tensing, you’ll blow a vessel.”

He couldn’t smile. The emotion evaporated from him. He composed himself again.

“Remember you asked me about a phone call? You said someone warned you about your future being screwed up?”

Niall nodded slightly. “Yeah. I thought the guy was a kook.”

“He wasn’t.” He swallowed against the lump of emotion in his throat. “I do have a carefully constructed facade.” He placed his finger over Niall’s lips. If Niall said something, he’d never finish. “When I was in college, I was in a band. I didn’t expect it to go anywhere but the rest of the band was ready to go all the way. I got my degree and played in the band. Right after I graduated, we hit it big. I wanted to teach, so the Blackhearts went out on their own. Most of the venues wanted me.” Unable to contain the nervous energy, he bounced his foot on the floor. “I waited two years before I started at Cedarwood because I was on tour. Remember the Axis tour? We played Cleveland like five times.”

“Yeah. I was at the second show.” Niall shook his head. “I don’t understand. You’re playing the role of Bandit. You’re not the real guy.”

“I am.” He touched his arm. “The tattoo, the piercing...shaving my head...it’s all part of the other half of my life. I don’t really have a tattoo—I hate needles—and the piercing was real, but I don’t keep it in. I’d rather cover the hole with my chin fuzz.”

Niall frowned but said nothing.

“I knew I wanted to be in a band, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to be Bandit for the rest of my life. The job at Cedarwood came along and I refused to pass it up because I’ve always wanted to be a teacher, too. Only Dexter and my manager knew. Even the rest of the band thinks I sit in my mansion and write music. They have no idea I’m a teacher and I don’t have a big-ass house.”

“I don’t believe it.” Niall stared at him. “How? Why?” He winced and eased away

from Michael. “Why would you lie about something like this?”

“I didn’t exactly lie,” Michael said. “I omitted the truth.” Only a big, crazy omission that could screw up everything he’d worked for. He could lose Niall.

“Same thing.” He stood and paced the length of the room. “I don’t understand.”

“I know.” Michael rubbed his hands over his head. His scalp tingled from the fresh shaving. “I don’t know how to explain this any better.”

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“Why don’t you try?” Niall glared at him. “Convince me not to leave. Explain to me what you were thinking.”

He wasn’t sure how to say the words on his heart. If he could sing it, he’d be better, but this wasn’t the time for music. “I didn’t want to give up my dream of being a musician any more than I wanted to give up my chance to be a teacher. Until this year, everything was carefully separated. We were friends at the school but hadn’t gotten close. Then we did and I started thinking I didn’t want to keep my life so...separate.”

“That’s not awful.” Niall folded his arms but continued to pace. “It makes sense. Doesn’t mean I’m happy, but I get what you were trying to do.”

He did? Maybe the relationship wasn’t totally screwed. Michael forged ahead, buoyed by Niall’s response. “I’d planned on telling you sooner or later, but my lawyer’s punk-ass boyfriend forced my hand. Then the coalition found out and things went to shit. I wanted to tell you. Like a hundred times, but I didn’t know how.”

Niall stopped pacing and glared at Michael. “You weren’t going to tell me, were you—not really. How long were you going to keep this from me? String dumb old Niall along? I get what you were trying to do, but Jesus...I hate that you didn’t trust me.” His voice cracked and the pain in his eyes was obvious. “I thought I loved you.”

Michael sagged against the couch cushions. He’d wanted to hear that word from Niall—love—but not in the past tense. “You do?”

“I don’t know how I feel now. I’m confused, pissed and don’t want to be here.” Niall

rubbed his arms. “I feel so stupid.”

“No.” Michael jumped to his feet and threw his arms around Niall. “Don’t feel that way. You’re not stupid. You fell in love. So did I.” He rested his forehead against Niall’s temple. “That’s why I had to be honest with you. I’m complete when I’m with you.”

“Then why would you do this? You should’ve just told me.” Niall didn’t pull away, but he didn’t hug Michael back.

“I needed to know that you were interested in me, not Bandit. He’s my mask. I hide behind him and accept adulation because I don’t think I’m good enough as Michael.” He’d never told anyone that particular secret.

“You’re gorgeous. I like you with hair better, but you’re still handsome as hell.” Niall scrubbed the back of his hand over his face. “You play music that makes people happy and teach kids that science and English are cool.” He cleared his throat. “You could probably incorporate more music into your lessons, too. Might help some of the kids learn better.”

“You’re right.” This was why he needed Niall in his life. Niall saw things he wasn’t sure could happen. Niall wore his heart on his sleeve and forced Michael to be honest. “Will you stick around for the concert? I’ve got a day off tomorrow and I want to spend it with you.” He refused to let go of Niall—not yet.

“I can’t go anywhere until the limo takes me home. A taxi ride would be too expensive.” Niall shrugged away from Michael. He kept his head low and his voice soft. “I like you, Michael. I respect Bandit as a musician. Will this work? You and me? I don’t know. I need someone I can trust. I don’t know how to feel right now.”

Michael flexed the muscle in his jaw and jammed his hands into his jeans pockets.

Keeping the double life had been fun while it lasted, but Niall had proved to be the reason he wasn't meant to keep up the charade. He wanted the same things Niall wanted and needed—trust, love and respect. He hadn't respected Niall or encouraged Niall's trust by lying to him. He'd destroyed the best relationship he'd ever had.

“Think there's a chance you can forgive me?” Michael asked. He didn't dare to hope they'd stay together. “I'm sorry. You have no idea how much I wanted to tell you.”

“But you didn't until someone forced your hand.” Niall squared his shoulders. “Is there a bathroom close by? I need a walk. Send Dexter along with me if you think I need an escort, but I need to get out of here for a little while.”

Michael nodded. He strode over to the door. Dexter, Leif and a couple of security guards waited by the door. He gestured to Dexter. “Can—can you stick with Niall for a little while?” He glanced over at Leif. “He needs some air and I want to have a chat with your other half.”

Dexter nodded once. “Trust me, he's not, but he's all yours. I'll keep an eye on your boy.”

He wasn't sure how long Niall would be his boy, especially now. He waved to Leif. They'd never been friends and barely knew each other beyond casual chats with Dexter around. He cleared his throat and closed the door once Leif entered the room.

“Sit.” Michael hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. He had to approach this with caution. “So. I hear you're getting serious with Dex. That must be why you're here—because I know he claimed he revoked your backstage access.”

“Yeah, he lies.” Leif sprawled out on the couch. He draped his arms across the back and spread his legs. “Once the tour's over, we're getting married.”

“Really?” That was news. “I see.”

“Why? Are you interested in getting in on the action?” He slid one hand over his crotch. “There’s plenty of me to go around.”

Michael bit back a gag and frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve seen you look at me. You want me. I get it.” He stroked himself through the fabric of his jeans. “Let’s do this thing.”

“No.” Michael folded his arms. “I don’t want you—in bed or in my entourage. I’ve got a good thing going with the guy I’m with. That’s what I want.” He wanted Niall in every way, but would they last beyond the revelation about his identity?

“Your loss.”

“Aren’t you supposed to want to be with Dex? If you’re getting married?”

“At the end of the summer. I’ve got time to play until then.” Leif sighed. “Then what did you want? I’ve got shit to do.”

“Like extorting me?” He pressed his lips together and let the question linger.

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Leif shrugged. He draped his arms across the back of the couch again. He didn't say anything.

"Oh, so you don't talk when you want something? You did enough talking the other night when you called my boyfriend." He hated to be the one accusing. He'd rather have Leif out himself.

"I'm not the one trying to pull a fast one on the country. You're trying to be someone you're not and get this guy—he seems sweet but dumb—to fall for you while you're expecting the music business to accept you as this hard-ass metal god. You can't have both and he needed to know the truth. Everyone did."

"Coming from you?" Michael snapped.

"Someone had to tell him."

"You wanted money and to be part of the entourage. You wanted to be part of the staff, but did nothing besides out me."

Leif smiled. His eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. "Whatever works."

"It doesn't work." Michael met Leif's wolfish smile with a glare. "You see, I've already told him. I had planned on telling him at this concert."

The muscle in Leif's jaw twitched.

"I wouldn't have paid you blackmail money no matter what. If you needed cash for

something, I might have given it to you. Hell, until you came on to me a few minutes ago, I would've given it to you anyway. Not now."

"You're an ass," Leif growled and shot to his feet.

"Probably."

"How can you do this?"

"Do what? Prevent you from getting a payday? Pretty easily. I don't feel guilty about it." He widened his stance. He wanted to see this ass crumble. "Oh, and Dex told me he'd kicked you out. He's not marrying you or anyone else."

Leif stepped toe-to-toe with Michael. "How do you look at yourself in the mirror? You have a decent guy wanting to be with you. Doesn't he understand the rock star isn't the guy who sleeps at night? Once the persona's off, you're a boring piece of shit. You lied to him, right?"

"Nope." He refused to let this jackass see him angry. No way.

"Bullshit," Leif spat. "I looked your boyfriend up on the Internet, and when I found his number, I called him. Yeah, I tried to extort you, but you're fucking him over. He actually really liked you. I say that past tense. Once he learned the truth, he wanted to run the fuck away from you. You're a goddamn idiot. You could have me and you want that asshole."

"I never would've picked you." He gritted his teeth. Christ. He hadn't thought this out at all. He was so screwed. Leading the double life wasn't working out at all how he'd planned and he'd sort of known all along he'd end up on the losing end. Fuck.

"I will ruin you."

“No, you won’t. You fucked up my life, yeah.” He’d messed up so much. Michael rubbed his head, wishing he still had his hair. “But you’re not winning.”

“Your problem, not mine.” Leif ducked his head. “Time to put out the fire with Dex.”

“I doubt he wants to see you since he never invited you along, but good luck. When you need bail money, don’t call.” He waited for Leif to leave. Christ. He should’ve kicked the guy’s ass. God knew he hated Leif’s guts right now. But damn it, Leif was Dex’s problem. Michael needed to focus on Niall. If there was a chance to get Niall back and to salvage his life, he needed to take the chance. But how? Niall wasn’t going to talk to him. Niall wanted nothing to do with him.

He checked the clock on the wall. Fuck. He had to go onstage in less than half an hour. Even if Niall wanted to talk to him, Michael didn’t have time. He still had to apply the fucking makeup again and reattach the piercing.

Michael looked at his reflection in the glass of the painting above the sofa. He didn’t recognize himself. The bald head, the piercing and makeup weren’t him. They used to be his persona. But things had changed. He didn’t want to be known primarily as Bandit. He wanted to rule his classroom and enlighten the minds of children.

God, he was fucked up.

Behind him, the door opened. Dexter inched into the room. The lines around his eyes seemed deeper and his shoulders were slumped. “Okay, so where are we?”

“Last time I checked, we were beneath the arena.” Michael rested his hands on his hips. “Oh, you mean, with Niall and Leif? I’ll tell you what I know if you spill what you know.”

Dexter shook his head. “I couldn’t get anything out of Niall. He’s locked up tight in

the special box you had reserved for him. He just stared at the stage and rested his feet on the chair in front of him. I'd assume he's pissed and hurt."

To the core. Michael kicked the leg of the couch. "Fuck."

"What about Leif? Besides that he's not going to be my partner?" Dexter stepped between Michael and the couch. "What did he say?"

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He sighed. “He tried to get me to pay him, kind of. Then he pissed me off by trying to come on to me.” He dipped his head. “But he made me see what I really wanted.”

“Niall?”

“Yeah. I need to choose. Be the teacher or be Bandit. I can’t.” He held up his hands. “If I quietly walk away from the band, then the fans are pissed and I lose my creative outlet. If I come out to the fans, then I’m almost guaranteed to lose my job at the school. I love my kids and my classroom, but I know Cedarwood won’t like my split personality. Either way I go, there’s no guarantee I’ll get a future with Niall. Giving up my secret could all be for nothing and I’ll lose everything.”

Saying the words out loud knocked the wind out of him. Fuck. Until he’d reasoned through his issue, he hadn’t realized just how deep in he’d gotten himself.

“I can’t help you with the school board. You’re right. They won’t like knowing one of their fourth-grade teachers is moonlighting as a guy who sings about nightmares and getting fucked over by lovers. The makeup won’t endear them, no.” Dexter matched Michael’s folded arm stance. “So I ask you. Which do you want more? The teaching job? Or the band? We can get you out of the band and replace Bandit with someone else. It won’t be the same and the fans will be pissed, but you can duck out without anyone knowing Michael is Bandit—except for Niall. You could teach, but you’d have to hope Niall would keep his mouth shut. Then there’s the coalition. They won’t let this thing die. They know the truth, since Leif told them, so even if Niall didn’t spill the beans, you know they will. If you don’t think you can live without the band but can live without the school, then do that. But do whatever you need to and fast.”

“What about Niall?” Michael widened his stance. “I trust him, but I know he won’t ever trust me.”

“You’ll have to suck it up and be honest with him. All the way and accept whatever it is he says is going to happen.” Dexter checked his thick wristwatch. “But first, you’ve got a concert to perform.”

“That’s my job.” He’d always said he couldn’t sing when he was happy. Tonight, he was anything but happy. He’d fucked up so much. At least now he’d be convincingly dark in his tone. He stepped up to the mirror and eased the piercing back into place. He could live without the band and without his teaching career. He could probably live without Niall as his boyfriend, but he wouldn’t make it if he didn’t have Niall as his friend.

He stuck the dark glasses back on his face and headed out to the hall leading to the various dressing rooms. Michael and his problems weren’t important right now. Only Bandit was and he needed to don his makeup.

Chapter Ten

Niall stared at the stage long after the band left. The lights had dimmed over the instruments and brightened over the crowd. He wanted to leave but couldn't. He still couldn't wrap his mind around what he'd been told. Bandit, the musician he loved, was Michael. He'd seen Michael, heard him say the words, but nothing made sense. How could Michael be Bandit? How?

He hadn't really talked to Michael about music. Not until they'd ridden in the car together had they discussed their favorite bands. They'd talked about school policy and lesson plans. They'd chatted about running methods, distances and managing one's energy during races. Christ. He'd slept with Michael, but he really didn't know him. He'd claimed he wanted to protect his emotions and heart, but he'd opened himself up. He'd brought the pain on himself.

Who was the foolish one?

"Hi."

He didn't have to look over his shoulder to know Dexter was in the box with him.
"Hi."

"How are you holding up? Did you enjoy the concert?" Dexter eased onto the seat beside him. "I made sure there was plenty of food back there."

"I saw and had some. Thanks. It was very nice of you and Ban—Michael." He folded his hands on his belly and rested his feet on the seat in front of him. "I'll have to get

used to that. Michael being Bandit.”

“If it’s any consolation, he kept it very quiet. Until Leif called you, the only ones who knew about Michael’s other identity were Michael, his manager Blake, and me, then Leif because he snooped through my shit.” Dexter propped his feet on the seat in front of him. His shoes glittered when he stretched. “We kept it quiet because he wanted to keep teaching. He loves teaching as much as he loves music. He didn’t leave the music business because the band became famous. By only touring during the summer and keeping out of the public eye other than during the summer months, he’s reached cult status. It’s crazy because we never thought it would get this...big.”

Niall didn’t like what he’d heard, but he understood. Michael wanted the best of both worlds and the only way he could get it was to play different roles. Could he honestly blame Michael? Not really. Wasn’t it the American dream to be successful?

“He wanted to tell you. He did. Then Leif tore the lid off his disguise and forced his hand. He would’ve told you. Trust me. We’ve only been on tour for a week and he couldn’t wait to get back to Cleveland to see you. He talked about you all the time. Even the band knew about you.”

“They did?” Niall stared at Dexter. He shook his head. “I don’t know how to feel about this. I mean, one minute I know what’s going on. I have a boyfriend, he’s handsome and he’s just across the hallway from me at the school. Now, I find out he’s also a famous person. I can’t sort it all out.”

“Do you like him?”

“Which side of him?” Niall asked. “That’s just it. I don’t know if I really know him after all.”

“Here’s the thing. You do know him. Yeah, he’s Bandit when he’s down there on the

stage, but that doesn't mean he's not Michael once he steps off. It's like a writer or an actor. They are whoever they are for the book or movie, but once the movie closes or the book is written, he or she goes back to being their normal self. Michael is no different. If you loved the guy who stood in front of that classroom, then you're in love with the real man."

Niall sighed. Dexter might be right. People were permitted to have multiple sides. He wasn't just a teacher—he liked working on his house and running. Maybe Michael was like him in that way. Maybe.

"Well, he's got a couple days off until the next show. We'll be in Pittsburg on Tuesday. Why don't you try to talk to him and settle this?"

"So you've got a happy guy to go onstage?" He wasn't about to boost Michael up if it was only for a good concert. "Is that bad?"

"If it were up to me, I'd tell you to go fuck yourself. He plays better when he's miserable," Dexter snapped. "But it's not all about you, you pompous asshole. The world doesn't revolve around you."

"I never said it did." Niall shrank into his seat. "I meant—"

"I don't want you to sort things out because I want him happy. He's miserable. This is when he writes the best music, but he's also my friend. There's something about you that got under his skin. You may not be his forever, but he wants you right now. Give him a chance and maybe you'll find out you are meant to go the distance."

Niall picked at the paper bracelet and stared at the backstage pass on his lanyard. Michael deserved his attention. Even if he simply went by the room to apologize, Niall needed to see his—Michael.

“Let’s go find him. If I have to navigate this place by myself, I’m going to get lost.” Niall stood. “I owe him an apology.”

Dexter half smiled. He shook his head and pointed to the door but didn’t say anything.

Niall followed Dexter down the main corridor of the building then to a nondescript door near the ticket counters. Dexter pressed the Down button at the bank of elevators. The music in the elevator car was one of the few Blackheart ballads. The words got to Niall.

Having my heart ripped out. I’m torn. I’m bleeding. You think you know me, but you can’t see. I’m a shadow. I’m not me.

Niall sagged against the wall of the elevator car. Bandit—Michael was singing about himself. Was Niall ready to forgive Michael for the lies by omission? Not yet, but he still wanted to spend time with Michael.

The bell dinged and Dexter nudged Niall out of the vehicle first. “He’s in the car. Straight down the hall. I’m heading back upstairs, so if you get cold feet, you’re fucked.” He closed the elevator doors.

Niall rubbed his arms and glanced back at the elevator once before he headed down the short corridor. He made his way up to the door. When he looked out of the window, he noticed the limo. His heart hammered. This could be the door to his future or the doorway to a nasty split. He’d never know if he didn’t talk to Michael.

Niall opened the door and strode the few steps up to the large black vehicle. He knocked on the window. His hands shook and he wiped them on his pants. Jeez. He was standing in an alley, knocking on the window to a car, and more or less alone.

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The door opened and Michael stepped onto the curb. Not Bandit, but Michael with a shaved head. “Hi.” Michael waved to the open door. “Want a ride home?” He’d scrubbed his face clean of the makeup, but the tiredness and dark circles under his eyes were evident. He’d also ditched the all-black ensemble in favor of a simple white T-shirt, black cotton vest and muscle-hugging jeans. The tattoo was gone from his arm. Niall sucked in a ragged breath. He liked the Bandit look, but he preferred Michael being himself.

“Yeah, I would.” Niall climbed into the vehicle and sat on the backseat. His heart went out to Michael. He couldn’t begin to understand how Michael felt, but he assumed the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

Michael eased into the vehicle and closed the door. He settled on the side-facing seat and crossed his ankles. He rubbed his head with his palm. “Did you enjoy the show?”

“I did.” Although he could snap at Michael and keep up the argument, Niall refused to be a prick. Michael was hurting as much as he was and he didn’t see any point in being mean. “I liked the second encore the most. Those were my favorite songs.”

“Good.” Michael nodded. “I like the stuff off the third album. Ricochet was big for us.”

A heavy silence settled between them. I’m sorry seemed too simple.

“Look.” Michael slid across the seat and bumped knees with Niall. “I wasn’t sure what to say to you or how to tell you the truth. I love my music and I love teaching. Until we got closer, I didn’t see any reason to mix the two. The guys I met as Bandit

didn't give a shit if I was a teacher and only wanted to say they'd been with Bandit. Most of them didn't get their wishes, but whatever. The other teachers didn't give a crap about me because I was new. Then came you." Michael reached for Niall's hand and Niall didn't pull away. "You made me start thinking about what I really wanted to do."

Niall sighed. "You don't have to explain." He didn't want to put Michael through any more pain. "I understand. Kind of. I can't say I would've done the same thing in your place, but I see why you kept things separate."

"What would you have done?" Michael asked. He draped his arm around Niall's shoulders and propped Niall's leg across his lap. He cupped Niall's knee with his palm and caressed him through the fabric of his jeans. His touch heated Niall through to his core.

"Number one, I wouldn't have been a musician." Niall smiled. "I can't keep a beat to save my life. Number two, the multiple sides of me—the things I like—aren't that far apart. Teaching, running and working on my house aren't that radical. I can't say I'd have hidden my interests. But that's me." He tipped his head and scooted around enough to stay in Michael's embrace but to also look him in the eye. The passion between them and the tenderness buoyed his spirits. He loved Michael—no matter who Michael happened to be. They were good together.

"I didn't really want to hide." Michael rubbed Niall's shoulder and rested his cheek against the side of Niall's head. He laced their fingers together. "Like I said, I never thought my music career would take off. The summer tours meant we were harder to see and people clamored for tickets. Word got around and the crowds got bigger. It's crazy. I never expected this."

"You're a great musician." Niall breathed in the scent of Michael's cologne. Or was it his soap? Niall wasn't sure, but he loved being so close to the man who'd stolen his

heart. “I don’t know how you’ve kept it under wraps. Still, you’re also a fantastic teacher.”

“Yeah. About that.” Michael’s voice dropped an octave. “I looked into our contract. Actually, I had Dex do it. There’s nothing there saying I can’t have a second job or a summer job, but I don’t think they’ll let me stay at the school once this hits the fan.”

“Probably not. If they got rid of Steve Moore because he’s gay, then metal music is probably on the hit list.” Christ, for all he knew, any of the teaching staff could be booted for crazy reasons. He was gay and Michael was in a band—who knew what the other teachers were doing in their free time. But according to Steve, Dex could help on the legal front. He bit back a groan. He’d thought coming out had been hard. Having a relationship in public might be even harder.

“I’ve got the rest of the summer to decide if I want to retire Bandit and stick to teaching or if I want to keep rolling the dice with the music business.” Michael met Niall’s gaze. “I’m not sure which one I want to do, but I do know I’m happiest when I’m with you.”

Desire swept over Niall. He wanted to be the man by Michael’s side. He liked knowing he meant something to Michael, especially since Michael was so important to him.

“Think you can stick with me? Not Bandit, but Michael?” Michael asked. “I want a guy who likes me—the dorky, geeky guy obsessed with music and creative writing, not the guy in the eyeliner and fake tattoos. I’m both people, but I need to be sure you’re with me.”

Niall shook his head and a chuckle ripped from his throat. He didn’t have to think about what he wanted. He knew. “I can’t tell you what to do or who to be, but I can tell you I fell for Michael. The guy in the classroom who always seems to be running

late and has perpetually perfect hair. The man with the icy blue eyes and the sexiest smile. It'll take some getting used to with the bald look, but it's still you and no matter what, I'm your friend. I can't guarantee we'll stay together forever as boyfriends, but I'm not giving up." Admitting those truths felt so good.

"You're not?" Michael raked his nails down Niall's inner thigh. His groan echoed in the quiet vehicle.

"Nope." Niall turned to look Michael in the eye. "I'm crazy, but I'm here for the long haul."

"That's the best thing I've ever heard." Michael pressed a button on the console beside him. "Have I mentioned the limo is fully stocked?" The lights dimmed and twinkle lights shimmered on the ceiling. A drawer popped open on the side of the console. A box of condoms tumbled to the floor.

"Guess we'd better try it out." Niall met Michael for a kiss. Part of him wondered if the driver would hear them if they got out of hand. The rest of him didn't care. He wanted to be with Michael and wanted to feel his lover in his soul.

Michael smoothed his palm over Niall's chest, caressing him. Niall moaned into Michael's mouth. The man knew how to be so sensual. Michael pinched Niall's nipple then moved his hand over Niall's belly. Even though the cotton of his shirt kept Niall covered, Michael's touch seared him. While he massaged Niall's chest, he sucked on Niall's tongue. The onslaught of sensation—tension and pressure—knocked him for a loop.

Michael broke the kiss first and moved his hand down to the hem of Niall's shirt. "Don't want to mess this up." He hiked the shirt up over Niall's head, freeing Niall of the garment. "But I can replace it if something happens." He winked then cupped the growing bulge in Niall's pants.

“Damn.” Niall rested his head against Michael’s shoulder. Heat prickled him from within. He couldn’t seem to catch his breath.

“It’s only going to get better.” Michael resumed kissing him and sucking Niall’s tongue then released, simulating a blow job.

Niall wrestled free of the kiss. He needed to breathe. He cupped the back of Michael’s head. He still liked Michael with hair, but he could get used to the silky hairlessness. Another groan ripped from his throat when Michael pressed kisses to his chest.

Niall guided Michael to his nipples. Electricity zapped him from within and he groaned. Each scrape of Michael’s teeth and sweet caress of his lover’s mouth on his skin sent him closer to coming apart. He’d forgotten the beauty and fun of foreplay.

Michael licked a path of fire down Niall’s torso. He paused at Niall’s waistband then glanced up. Without saying a word, he scooted onto the floor and settled between Niall’s knees. He kept his gaze fixed on Niall’s as he dragged his nose along Niall’s crotch. Marking himself with Niall’s scent? Or imprinting himself on Niall? Either way, Niall was hooked.

“Like that?” Michael popped the button on Niall’s jeans then eased the zipper down. He licked his lips, taking extra time to wet his mouth. The move spurred Niall on. The orgasm wasn’t far off.

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“Thought you might.” Michael tugged Niall’s cock from behind his boxer shorts. “Damn. You’re rock-hard.” He curled his fingers around Niall’s shaft and flattened his tongue over the blunt head of Niall’s erection.

A shiver ran the length of Niall’s spine and he sagged in his seat. “Sweet Jesus.” He palmed the back of Michael’s head. “Suck it. Goddamn it, that’s good.”

Michael grinned then flicked his tongue across the tip of Niall’s cock. “What? You look tense. Let go and enjoy this.”

“I am.” He wasn’t sure how he was able to form rational sentences. Each lick and nibble scrambled his brain. Niall caressed the back of Michael’s head and set the pace. Up and down, in and out of Michael’s warm mouth. Michael twisted his wrist, moving his hand along Niall’s shaft in time with his head bobbing. The combination of hand and mouth sent shock waves through Niall’s being. He shivered again and shoved his cock to the back of Michael’s throat. The warmth in his belly spread to his limbs then centered in his groin.

He groaned. “Oh, oh, man.”

Michael withdrew. He smiled up at Niall. “Don’t you dare come. I want to go for a ride.”

Niall paused. Ride? He must’ve meant he wanted Niall to ride him. Niall grasped the waistband of his jeans and boxers and pressed his shoulders into the seat back long enough to yank the garments down his legs.

Michael slid the vest from his shoulders. The garment landed on the floor without a sound. He tugged his shirt up over his head, then tossed it onto the vest. His chest heaved, and his nipples beaded. He leaned forward and picked up one of the condoms.

“You’ll need this.” Michael tossed the rubber onto Niall’s lap.

Niall nodded. He was supposed to sheath Michael? Fine. He tore the wrapper open. “Come here and I’ll put this on you. You’ll have to drop your pants first.”

Michael winked then rose to his knees. He opened the fly of his jeans. When he shoved the denim down his legs, he displayed his lack of undergarments.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Niall asked.

“Commando?” Michael shrugged and wriggled out of his pants. He sat on the floor long enough to kick out of his shoes and work the jeans the rest of the way off his body. Once fully nude, he rose onto his knees again. “I hoped you’d want me and this would happen.” He took the condom from Niall and rolled the rubber over Niall’s erection. “Don’t need any prepping, just some lube. I’m so ready for this, I might blow a gasket.”

“You’re not a bottom.”

Michael popped the top on the bottle of lube. He dribbled the clear liquid over Niall’s cock, then poured some into his hand. He crawled onto Niall’s lap.

Niall reached for the lube, but Michael kept it in his free hand. “How am I supposed to ride you when you’re on my lap?” Niall asked.

“I’m riding you.” Michael leaned forward and smashed his mouth down on Niall’s.

Michael lined Niall's cock up with his ass. He broke the connection and scooted forward. His lips parted and his brow furrowed when he filled his ass with Niall's cock.

"Fuck, you're tight." Niall palmed Michael's hips. "It's been so long since I've done this. Might not remember how." He stared into Michael's eyes and saw straight through to his lover's soul. He curled his fingers under Michael's chin and kissed him. He should've bounced Michael on his lap or moved in some way, but the tenderness of the moment caught him. He wrapped his arms around Michael's neck and rested his forehead against Michael's.

"This is how it's supposed to be." Michael kissed Niall. "Us together."

Niall couldn't speak. He nodded and bit Michael's bottom lip.

Michael braced his knees on the couch and rode Niall's cock. Niall groaned and sucked on Michael's tongue. Balls-deep in Michael, he felt everything within his lover. Each time Michael flexed his ass, he squeezed Niall and sent delicious tingles through Niall's body.

Michael tipped his head back and gasped. "Jesus God, this won't last long." He grasped Niall's shoulders. His fingers bit into Niall's skin. "Fuck."

Niall met Michael's gaze. He pinched one of Michael's nipples while he pumped Michael's cock in his other hand. Michael curled forward and gritted his teeth. The slap of skin on skin echoed in the car. Michael's skin glittered with perspiration.

Deep within Niall, the orgasm grew. His limbs failed to cooperate as the gooey feeling washed over him. Everything focused on Michael and the molten excitement in Niall's body.

“Right there?” Niall whispered. “Come for me.”

Michael clamped his legs down on Niall’s thighs and grunted. He pressed his face to Niall’s shoulder. “Fuck me, I’m coming.” He pumped his hips a couple more times. “Fuck.”

Warm cum spurted onto Niall’s chest. Having Michael orgasm on his lap was all he needed to push him over the edge. He moaned and tugged Michael down onto his cock. He emptied his seed deep in the condom in Michael’s ass. His skin prickled and he dragged air into his lungs.

Niall closed his eyes and clung to Michael. He wasn’t sure what the future held for them, but he knew his heart. He’d never find another man like Michael and he’d probably never fall as hard for anyone else as he had for Michael.

He wasn’t sure how much time passed before either of them spoke. Michael broke the silence first.

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“I won’t be able to walk out of here once we get to Cedarwood.” Michael’s laugh boomed in the limo. “But it was worth it.”

“I didn’t hurt you?” Niall let go of Michael, allowing his lover to sit up. “I haven’t fucked anyone in a long time. I’m always the bottom.”

“You’re a good top, when you want to be.” Michael rubbed his palm over his head. He sighed and eased Niall’s cock out of his ass. He flopped onto the couch beside Niall and stretched out. Cum shimmered on his belly. “I like being on top, but I’ll bottom for you any day.”

Niall removed the condom. “Garbage?”

“There’s a bag in the console.” Michael turned his head. “Over there. Give it here and I’ll toss it.”

He tied off the end and offered up the spent condom. “Thanks,” Niall muttered. When Michael stretched out beside him again, he slapped his palm on Michael’s thigh. “So where do we go from here? Home?”

“We go home and fuck each other’s brains out tonight. Tomorrow, when I have to leave, you come along.” Michael sighed and rested his head on Niall’s shoulder. “This is where I belong. Doesn’t matter who I am as long as I’m with you. Both sides of me now belong to you.”

Niall closed his eyes. “I agree.” He never would’ve thought his musical hero would end up being the guy across the hallway at the school, but he didn’t care. He loved

Michael—both sides of him—and soon he'd be able to admit his truths. First, he wanted to wear out the springs in his bed, allowing Michael to fuck him. He'd found his other half when he'd wandered into the staff meeting and caught Michael's glance. No matter how many sides there were, they'd be able to forge a future together.

Chapter Eleven

Michael embraced his time with Niall. He had his boyfriend there. There weren't any secrets between them. Every night, he performed for his man. The crowd was there, but Niall was the only one who mattered. The words took on a new meaning, the songs were louder and the band gelled more.

After the show that night, he headed to the dressing room. Niall strode in front of him. Dale, one of the members of Michael's security team, nudged Michael aside. Dex stopped with them.

"Yes?" Michael ensured Niall had gone into the dressing room with the band before stopping for Dale and Dex. "What's up?"

"You've got mail." Dale held up three letters and a tablet. "Might want to look at them. Dex, you, too."

"Why? It's not bad mail, is it?" Michael folded his arms. "Is there something in there I should know about? No powder or anything?"

"There aren't any chemicals in them, no, but one of them is from a group called the coalition," Dale said. "The emails refer to your other job...the one in Cedarwood."

"Wonderful," Dex muttered.

Jesus. "Okay." Fucking coalition. They would have to get into his business. Things had been going too well... "What do they have to say?"

“Among other things, they want you out of Cedarwood. Out of town then out of the school. I’m pretty sure they mean that the other way around, but whatever.” Dale shook his head. “But really, they want you gone. They don’t want a gay musician and, in their words, devil worshipper, teaching their children.”

“We’ve been through this,” Dex said. “But it took ’em long enough to find an issue.”

“I don’t worship the devil.” Michael groaned. He’d never worshipped the devil. Never wrote about it or sang anything along those lines. “They’re over-exaggerating.”

“I know, but this group isn’t letting up. All three of these letters—and there are more—are from them. They’re threatening to go to the school board,” Dale said.

“Of course.” Michael massaged his forehead. He’d lost control of the narrative. “What about the emails?”

“Dex hasn’t seen them yet, but they’re requests from the media for interviews.” Dale offered up the tablet. “Just came through.”

Dex took the device. “They work fast. Damn. You’re not going to like this.”

“What do they have to say?” Michael asked.

“They want to know about your coming out. It’s big news.” Dex sighed. “Our favorite gossip shared your business.”

“Leif.” He should’ve guessed.

“He went public.” Dex paled. “I thought I knew him better than that.”

“I know,” Michael said. “He fooled everyone.”

Dale leveled his gaze. “Be advised. The band, the team...we all don’t care that you’re gay or a teacher. We love Niall. Hell, we want to protect him and you.”

“Agreed,” Dex said.

“But?” Michael asked. There had to be more to the story.

“You have to address this sooner than later,” Dex said. “The press sees Niall and you together. Leif makes an issue and that coalition is being a pain in the ass.” He crinkled his brows. “What do you want to do? This won’t blow over.”

“No, it won’t, but the story involves Niall. Let me talk to him, then I’ll get back to you.” He and Niall were equals. They needed to act like it. Niall should be included.

“Understood and agreed.” Dale offered up the letters to Dex then spoke to Michael again. “You played well tonight. More energy than I’ve seen in forever and you looked like you enjoyed yourself.”

“I did.” Michael opened the dressing room door. “Give me a few.” He stepped in where the band were already relaxing. He mingled, but he’d rather have Niall alone. “Good show, everyone.”

Niall stayed at the perimeter. He’d been accepted by the band, but sometimes he seemed afraid to join in the fun. Michael headed over to him at the edge of the room.

“Tired?” Michael asked. He’d forgotten how long the hours could be, especially for someone new to touring and his hectic schedule.

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“A little.” Niall snuggled against Michael. “You were fantastic.”

“I had a great audience.” He kissed Niall. “I play for the guys, my amusement, but mostly you.”

“Thanks,” Niall murmured.

“Want to go? I’m tired and have had a long day,” Michael said. “Plus, we need to talk.”

Niall tensed.

“Nothing bad,” Michael said. “I’m telling the truth.”

“Uh-huh.” Niall held Michael’s hand. “We can go.”

Good. “Guys, I’m out. We’ll regroup in the morning for practice. Yes?” His question was met with nods. Fine. “Night.” He left the arena with Niall in tow. Fans waited outside and screamed as he and Niall climbed into the car. Michael normally posed for photos and signed autographs, but not tonight. He wasn’t in the mood. A reporter climbed into the back of the car with them.

“Hi,” she said. “I heard you’d be here.”

“Nancy.” Shit. Dex hadn’t mentioned him doing any interviews and he wasn’t ready to expose Niall to this crap. “Dex allowed you in here?” He knew better than to argue with her, but fuck, he wanted her to go.

“He said I could talk to you, but he put me off, so I found you instead.” Nancy whipped out her phone. “I’m taking photos.”

“Two and that’s it. Any more and you won’t appreciate my response,” Michael said. “Play nice. You know you’re only supposed to be in here with permission and as of right now, you don’t have it.”

“Okay...smile.” She snapped two shots, but probably more. Once she put the phone down, she pulled out a notepad and pen. “So, who is this? The teacher you’re rumored to be with?”

“Yes.” He placed his hand on Niall’s thigh. “First, you’re getting the exclusive—Bandit is gay.”

“Despite all the videos of you with women?” she asked. “You’ve been lying?”

“I can’t have female friends? And women can’t work better for certain songs? You know better than that.” Michael patted Niall’s thigh. “I’m gay and always have been. As Bandit, I’ve played a role. As for my boyfriend, this is Niall Grayson. He’s a teacher and shy. He’s the love of my life.”

She swept her gaze over Niall. “A teacher? That wasn’t a bullshit line?”

Niall hesitated. “Yes, I teach second grade in Cedarwood, Ohio. I’ve been there for six years.”

“Very good.” Nancy flipped the page. “This question is for both of you—how does working at the school gel with fame? Niall, do you like sharing Bandit? Michael, how do you balance both sides of your life?”

Michael shifted in his seat. “I balance it by keeping the different sides separate. The

band knows about my day job and when I'm in the classroom, I do that job. Niall's the link, but it's very separate."

"Niall?" She continued writing and didn't look up.

"I don't mind sharing Bandit with the audience. The music is his life. He's good at it and I like seeing him succeed." Niall tensed. "As for the fame, that's all Bandit's. I don't want any of it."

"So you call him by his stage name." Nancy nodded. "I see."

"Nancy." Michael bit back his irritation. "No, he doesn't call me Bandit."

"It's a valid question." She put the pen and pad down. "Fair enough, though. But how do you reconcile being gay in Cedarwood? You're a couple and public figures. Don't you mind the threats being volleyed for your resignation?"

"What?" Niall asked. He paled. "Resignation?"

Michael put his hands up. "Enough. The calls for anyone to leave the school district are rumors. We're happy and yes, we are public. As for the interview, it's over. Sorry. We have to be at the hotel in ten minutes and I'm done for the night."

"Do you have a hot date?" Nancy scooted across the seat. "Kidding. Thank you. I'll let you know when this posts."

"Appreciated." Michael ensured Nancy was out of the car and on the curb before he tapped the button alerting the driver to leave. "Well, shit."

"That was intense." Niall sagged in his seat. "You put up with that a lot?"

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“Not with such nosy reporters, but yes. She’s pushier than some. Most of the reporters are cool and I don’t mind speaking with them.” He draped his arm across the seatback. “I’d say you’ll get used to it, but I hope you don’t. I hope they leave you alone.”

“I don’t want to talk to them.” Niall faced him. “What did she mean about the resignations? No one told me I needed to worry about losing my job.”

Michael sighed. Damn reporter. He didn’t hate the press, but also didn’t appreciate when he wasn’t the first to disclose his own news. “I don’t know about the resignations, but the coalition knows about us.”

“That took long enough.”

The car stopped and Michael lurched forward a bit. “We’re at the underground entrance to the hotel. Let’s go. Our stuff is upstairs.”

“Sure.” Niall didn’t say anything until he and Michael reached the penthouse suite. Once in the room, he plopped onto the bed. “You get the best setup. This is crazy luxury.”

“I’m treated well, but we pay for it.” Michael shrugged. “We’re alone. Finally.”

“We are,” Niall said. “But we were in the car, too. I know what you want to do, but I can’t. I’m stuck on the resignation thing. I want to know every detail.”

“There isn’t much to tell.” He sat beside Niall. “Leif, Dex’s ex-boyfriend, told

everyone about us. I don't care because I'm not ashamed, but the school board found out."

"Michael." Niall's eyes widened. "What are they going to do?"

"I'm not sure, but them finding out was bound to happen. I can't hide forever—even if it is in plain sight."

"But..." Niall stood. He paced the length of the bedroom. "What are you going to do? Leif had no right to tell your secrets."

"No, he didn't."

"Michael, what's going on? Why are people who aren't you going to the media about your life?"

"Leif went public because he wanted to be a shit. He did it so the media would ask questions. Once that happened, then the coalition would get wind of us and tell the school board. Everyone wants to know about my private life and about you. The school board can't ask for your resignation because you've done nothing wrong. As for me they know about my being Bandit. So what? Until now, it hasn't been a problem or interfered with my school career."

"But?"

"But the coalition also knows about us. They know I'm a musician and I'm gay. I don't give a shit what they think, but I care about the opinion of my students' parents. I haven't violated my contract—I had Dex investigate it." His hands shook. He hadn't done anything wrong, but hated that Niall was going through this crap.

"But?"

“We know the coalition. They don’t let up. They’ll keep trying until they ruin my life and run us out of town,” Michael said.

“I’m not leaving,” Niall said. “Fuck them.”

“I’d rather fuck you, but I agree. I’m not letting them push me out.”

“You’re staying once you’re done touring for the summer?”

Michael sighed. “Yes. I don’t go without a fight. I earned that job.”

“You did.”

“I said no lies, but the problem is I’ve tried to keep my mouth shut and my lives separate. It’s falling apart.”

“What can I do?” Niall asked.

“What do you want to do?”

“I’m beside you.” Niall sat on the bed and held Michael’s hand. “I can live without the fame and double life, but not without you. Don’t resign. Make them find a reason to get rid of you. They won’t find one.”

“Unless the coalition gets involved,” Michael said.

“They already have.”

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“More than I wanted,” Michael said. “I’m just pissed.” He rested his head on Niall’s shoulder. “I had control of this. I had the story in hand...not now.”

“Nope.”

“It’s a fucking mess,” Michael murmured.

“You still have control. The narrative is yours. I don’t see how you can be fired or forced to resign because you’re in a band or because you’re gay,” Niall said. “That’s discrimination.”

“I know.” But he couldn’t hide his hopelessness.

“Don’t sweat it.” Niall rubbed Michael’s shoulder. “The coalition wants you—us—to crack. If we give, then they win. Screw that. I’ll stay strong and you should, too. Let the district decide what they will, but don’t give in.”

“I’ve got you beside me and that’s enough.” He’d handle whatever was thrown at him because he wasn’t on his own any longer.

Niall continued to caress Michael’s shoulder. If he never had to deal with another reporter, he’d be happy. A knock at the door startled him. Dex entered the bedroom and a blush swept across his cheeks.

“Hi,” Michael said. He sat up. “What’s wrong?”

“We have some new fan reactions,” Dex said. “It’s interesting.”

“How?” Michael pinched the bridge of his nose. “About the album?”

Niall tensed. He’d read up on the band. There were discussion boards concerning everything from Michael coming out as Bandit, his coming out, what the set lists would be for each concert, what the band would be wearing, which woman Michael would marry because being gay was just a front, who’d been with Michael and when the next song would drop.

At first, he’d read the posts and largely ignored the content. The fans had things to say and he didn’t have to pay attention. But two of the threads annoyed him more than he wanted to admit. One thread involved women and some men who wanted to be with Bandit. Some didn’t care if Michael was Bandit. They just wanted to fuck the celebrity. Some disliked Michael being gay. What did it matter?

Niall wasn’t jealous of Michael or his alter ego. He also doubted the folks on the message board would turn Michael’s head enough for him to leave the relationship. But the posters on the board weren’t thrilled Michael was with Niall. The comments on that thread and another remained fresh in Niall’s mind. The second set of posts were a conversation revolving around removing Niall from the picture. Fans were split on Niall. Half liked him, but the other half hated his guts. What unnerved Niall the most was how angry the anti-Niall group was. They didn’t seem to care who was with Bandit—anyone who wasn’t them would be bad—but they particularly disliked Niall. He was too plain for their fearless musician.

He tried to contain his worry, but the niggling concern that the fan reactions weren’t isolated kept coming to the surface in his mind. He focused on Dex and Michael.

“Well, the news from the fans could be better, but not about the album. Preorders are through the roof and the two songs already available are selling better than the last record.” Dex sat on the armchair opposite the bed. “I love the new album and the fans agree.”

“But not on...what?” Michael palmed Niall’s thigh. “Tell me. I hate suspense.” He met Niall’s gaze. “Don’t be tense. We’ll get through this.”

“I know the answer. They want me gone,” Niall murmured. “Gone, gone.”

“What?” Michael frowned. “When we were at the meet-n-greet, they embraced you.”

“Some did.” Niall picked at the hem of his shirt. “Most of the fans don’t like me.”

“Do they matter or do I?” Michael asked. “Be honest.”

“You do.” A dull ache formed behind Niall’s eyes.

“Then there you go,” Michael said.

“But Niall’s right.” Dex rested his elbows on his knees. “Quite a few of the fans are enamored with Niall. They love that you’re out and in the role of champion for the gay community. They think you two are adorable together.”

“But?” Niall’s stomach churned. “Just say it.” He knew what was coming.

“Wait.” Michael shifted in his seat. “Niall? Babe?”

“I’ve seen the message boards. I read the blogs. You have a huge following.” Niall left the bed and resumed pacing. “Jesus. Those people watch every move Bandit makes.”

“Yeah,” Michael said. “Bandit. Not Michael Jepsen.”

“But they don’t see the difference.” The ache increased. Niall wanted to hide.

“He’s right.” Dex sighed. “I hate sighing, but I seem to be doing it more often. The thing is, there are plenty of official, administered boards with lots of threads, posts and whatnot. But for every message board we have control over, there are plenty more that we don’t. Most of the posts involve love for you and the band. They follow what you do, wear and play. Hell, there are whole sites of fan fiction written about Bandit and the band. Most of those stories involve you riding into the sunset with the writer of the fiction.”

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Michael's lips parted, but he said nothing.

"It's true." Niall massaged his temples. "I've read them. Some of the stories are great, but some are freaking scary."

"I'm sorry you've been exposed to it," Dex said. "Don't take it seriously, Niall."

"Don't?" Niall laughed without mirth. "Jesus. They want me dead. I'm preventing them from getting what they want—Bandit." He sank onto the coffee table. "I don't like being such a target." He paused. "It's part and parcel of what comes with being with you, Michael."

"You shouldn't be tangled up in this." Michael cracked his knuckles. "I'm sorry. I've been so selfish."

Niall shrugged, despite his worry. "I should've expected the backlash."

"Me too, but fuck." Michael slapped his thighs. "Fuck me."

"We can't stop them," Dex said. "It's not nice, but until they act on the stories, they can write what they want. I've got a team who monitors as many of those blogs, posts, sites and so forth as we can."

Knowing that fact relieved Niall a bit. "Thank you."

"Of course." Dex nodded. "You're one of us and we protect our own as much as possible."

“Hell yes, we do.” Michael reached for Niall. “I finally have you and everything I need. I won’t let fan fiction get in the way.”

Good to know. He scrubbed his hands over his face. Something still wasn’t right. “Dex, there’s more, isn’t there?”

“Are you shitting me?” Michael snarled. “I’m popular, but not that much. Come on. Now who is pissed?”

“The coalition has petitioned for you to be removed from the school,” Dex said. “Those rumors about resignation aren’t just idle talk. We’ve lost control of the story. Leif leaked it and the coalition is running with it. I’ve gone through your contract again. They can’t fire you without just cause. Being gay isn’t a just cause—especially since they proved it wasn’t enough reason to fire Steve. He resigned. But you being a musician isn’t either—that said, the coalition is made up of tax payers. They can apply a lot of pressure.”

“They shout the loudest,” Niall said. “You know that. They’ve tried to have Colin, Farin, Jordan and the others removed from town. I have a longer contract, so I’m untouchable right now, but that means nothing if someone gets a wild hair and decides I need to go.”

“I’m on a brand-new two-year contract.” Michael groaned. “God damn it.”

“They want you to choose,” Dex said. “Live a wild life with Niall and the band or be a teacher and conform. I hate to say it, but you brought this on yourself by living a big secret. Doesn’t mean the coalition should be butting in.”

“I’m not one person,” Michael said. He scrubbed his palm over the top of his shaved head. “I’m not misbehaving either. No drugs, booze, crazy relationships...I’m stable.”

“I know.” Dex folded his arms. “What do you want to do?”

Niall held his breath and awaited Michael’s answer.

“Jesus. This is fucked up.” Michael left the bed. “I need to think.”

Niall exhaled. Michael’s declaration wasn’t the answer he wanted, but he’d deal. “I’ll go.” He’d give Michael as much space as needed.

“Niall.” Michael didn’t reach for him.

“It’s okay.” Niall put his shoes back on. “I’m going to make some phone calls.” He had no idea who he’d call at this hour, but whatever. “I’ll be back.”

“Don’t take too long.” Michael turned his back on Niall and huddled up with Dex.

“Same to you.” Niall ducked out of the suite. He checked for his key card then headed to the elevator. Part of him expected Michael to chase him and choose him right away. To choose teaching. But the rest of him knew better. Michael loved the band and his music.

He rode the elevator to the ground floor bar. Once inside the bar, he settled in a private booth.

“What can I get you?” the waitress asked. She smiled. Lines formed around her eyes and her shoulders slumped a bit. Still, she struck him as attractive.

“Rum and cola.” He fiddled with his phone. “Thank you.”

She returned a moment later and offered up the glass. “Anything else?”

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“I’m good. Thank you.” He stared at the drink. Booze wasn’t the answer but he had little else to do.

A group joined the large round booth behind him. He could barely hear himself over the giggling, clunking and talking. Niall chuckled. He hadn’t enjoyed a rowdy night out in years. Then again, he didn’t miss those nights.

“That show rocked,” a female voice said. “Bandit was on tonight.”

“I could watch him in those leathers forever and not get tired,” another woman said.

Niall nodded. The leather pants did add to Michael’s appeal.

“Did you see his boyfriend?” the first female voice said. “A teacher. The message boards claim Bandit’s a teacher, too. I mean, come on. He’s not that boring.”

“I’d let him educate me.” A male laughed. “Wouldn’t you, Sam?”

“I’d get in the middle of the man sandwich,” another male voice said. “But I’d rather have Bandit alone. The boyfriend can watch or go fuck himself.”

“The boyfriend is mousy and timid,” one of the women said. Glasses clinked. “Here’s to Bandit coming to his senses and dumping the teacher.”

Niall’s heart sank. Christ, the group was rough on him. They didn’t know him.

“Oh, I don’t know. They’re cute together,” the second woman said. “Maybe it’s a

case of opposites attract?”

“Yeah...no,” one of the men said.

Niall’s stomach churned. They had no idea he was there, but still. They weren’t holding back.

“He could be fucking me,” the first man said. “I’d take that dick anywhere he expected me to and do whatever he wanted. But I’ve wanted him for years.”

Someone laughed, then the first woman spoke. “We know.” She sighed. “The boyfriend won’t last. The fans will eat him alive. We’d rather have Bandit single and grouchy so he writes good songs rather than happy and domestic.”

Niall downed his drink in one burning gulp. He needed to get out of there. He flagged down the waitress. “Check, please?”

The waitress sat down opposite him. “I put the drink on your room bill.”

“How’d you know my room number?”

She flattened her hands on the table and lowered her voice. “I was at the concert and I know who you are.”

He sagged in his seat. He needed another drink.

“I worked the cocktail lounge in the balcony during the concert.” She smiled. No pandering or meanness, but rather she exuded warmth and concern. “I saw how Bandit looked at you. He loves you.”

He toyed with the empty glass. “It was that obvious?”

She nodded. “It’s cute, too. It’s the kind of love we all want because it’s strong.”

“I know.” He loved Michael so much.

“Don’t let the jerks behind you sway how you feel. If you and Bandit are happy, then be that way. They’re jealous. They’d say the same things about each other if one of them were in your place. No one will ever be good enough—even themselves.”

He hesitated before answering. He leaned back in his seat and scanned the bar. The place wasn’t as busy as he’d expected and he appreciated the extra attention. “Thanks.”

“I see a lot of people and stories come through here. You’d be surprised by how much goes on. I’ve seen love happen, fall apart, denial and jealousy. Just keep your head up,” she said. “You’ll be okay.”

“Thanks for being concerned.” He left the booth and swept his gaze over the group at the booth behind him. None looked much over twenty-five and all wore some sort of leather and thick makeup combination. They weren’t Michael’s style. He turned his attention back to the waitress. “I owe you a tip.”

“No. I got to serve Niall Grayson—teacher, boyfriend of Bandit and nice guy. That’s enough.” She patted his arm. “Go get your man.”

“I will.” He plunked a twenty-dollar bill in her hand, then left the bar. Time to do what she’d said. He rushed across the foyer to the bank of elevators. He pressed the button. Being upstairs beat sitting at the bar any day. When the doors opened, he surged forward into the car, but instead of continuing forward, he collided with Michael.

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“Hey.” Michael tugged Niall into the solace of the elevator car and closed the doors. “Funny to see you here.”

“Yeah.” He stood along the wall and kept space between him and Michael. “What are you doing?”

“I went looking for you.” Michael tapped the keypad. “I didn’t like how you’d left.”

“You needed to think and I was in the way.” He stayed on the opposite wall from his boyfriend. “I understand. You needed space.” He didn’t really comprehend what was happening, but he didn’t want to push.

The bell pinged before Michael could say anything else. He held the door for Niall.

Although he still wasn’t sure what to do, Niall stood in the corridor until Michael exited the car. “It’s easier to think when you’re not being watched,” Niall said. He followed Michael into the penthouse. He didn’t see Dex or anyone else. The silence unnerved him. “Where’s the circus?”

“I wanted everyone gone when we did this.” Michael shrugged out of his leather coat. He focused on Niall. “I’ve made mistakes. Lots of them.”

“Me too.” A lump formed in his throat. His stomach grumbled. “It happens.”

“But those mistakes were because I wanted something too much,” Michael said. “I pushed and dragged you along without ever considering what would happen. All I saw was needing you with me.”

“Love makes us crazy.” Niall shrugged to hide his concern. He seemed to be doing that too much—hiding how he felt. “I should’ve told you what I’d learned.”

“No.”

The terse tone stopped Niall short. “No?”

“I knew what I was doing. I wanted all my loves at the same time. I need music and the rush of the crowd, but I thrive in my classroom. I love my kids.”

“They’re great.”

“Agreed.” Michael inched closer to Niall. “I knew I was juggling a lot. One slip and I can lose everything. The fans are split on me being gay and having a boyfriend, but I will always have the band. I won’t always have my teaching job. I’ve been given an ultimatum. Either quit the band or quit my job. The school board doesn’t like my choice to have a double life.”

Niall sank onto the arm of the overstuffed chair. “Michael.” How could he choose?

“The thing is, I love my life in Cedarwood. Until Leif exposed everything, I had the whole situation balanced. My life is good,” Michael said.

“But where is your life?” Niall asked.

“With you.”

He wasn’t sure what to say. So many things were in flux.

“I’ve enjoyed our week together. Having you here is better than I could’ve ever have imagined. I’m happy, settled and in love. But I’m pulling you from what you want. I

made you choose between me and your life. That's not fair."

"It's give and take," Niall said. His heart broke and he had a bad feeling he was looking at goodbyes with Michael. He loved his boyfriend so much, but it sure felt like Michael was pulling away.

"I've been thinking about this for a long time. I can't make you choose me. I can't force you to abandon what you love because I'm needy." Michael scrubbed the top of his head again. "I'm sorry."

"Michael." Niall's knees buckled.

"Dex called the school. I'm a huge deal." He met Niall's gaze. "They want me to make a decision, but I'm not going to be fired. I'm not a bad enough influence to warrant removal, but they don't like my double life." His voice, normally strong, cracked. "But I'm pursuing both dreams and if I'm willing to work with the high school students by doing the musicals and a rock concert series or something, they're willing to give me the freedom to have both lives. Step out of line and I'm toast."

Niall took a moment to process what he'd heard, but he was thrilled. "Michael, that's wonderful. You've got everything you want."

"Not you."

Niall frowned. "Huh?"

"Everything I have already means nothing without you." Michael dropped to his knees at Niall's feet. "Once the summer tour is over, I'm heading back to Cedarwood. There won't be a tour next summer so we can do some recording. I love my life in Cedarwood. I love my job at the school and I want a lot of things, but I'm begging for you to keep space for me in your life. I love you the most."

Tears burned at the corners of Niall's eyes. "Michael."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:14 am

“Think about it. I’m expecting everything. My job is fun and the band won’t last forever, but what I feel for you will.”

The weight of Michael’s words hit him hard. He couldn’t help but cry. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He wanted to throw himself into Michael’s arms but held back.

“What do we do now?” Michael asked. “I’m not leaving Cedarwood. Do you have a place in your life for me?” This time, tears slipped down Michael’s cheeks. “Niall?”

His voice caught, but Niall managed to speak. “I’ll always have room for you.” He draped his arms around Michael’s shoulders and clung to him. “I love you.”

“Niall?” The muscle in Michael’s jaw tensed. “You’re sure?”

He nodded. “I can handle sharing you with the world as long as I’m sure I have your entire heart.”

“You do.” Michael cupped Niall’s cheek.

“Will you help me fix my house, argue over lesson plans, listen to my grumbling when I’m stressed and be my rock?” Niall rested his forehead against Michael’s. “You hold my heart.”

“Yes. All of it. I’m not me without you.” He kissed Niall hard. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.” Life would never be boring. Music and teaching would override

everything, but he didn't mind. He wouldn't change anything about his time with Michael and now they had a lifetime to be together. Screw the negativity. He had his man. Love had won out.

Chapter Twelve

One week before the start of school

Michael stood on the porch and watched the traffic sail up and down the main drag of Cedarwood. He rubbed the top of his head. The couple of weeks between the end of the tour season and the start of the school year meant time to grow his hair back out. His head itched as he touched the spiky strands of hair.

While he sipped his coffee, the tart brew burned his tongue, but he didn't care. He had too much on his mind. Bandit and the Blackhearts had had a fantastic year, but he hadn't wanted to write new music until the night he'd almost lost Niall. The drive to create hadn't been as strong until he stared down the possibility of his world crumbling if Niall left. He'd poured his heart into fifteen songs for the upcoming album. Recording wouldn't start until the spring and he welcomed the break.

For the first time since he'd started the band, he wasn't looking forward to the next tour and since the band had decided to take a year off...he had time to regroup. Of course, having Niall with him as the band traveled from town to town certainly helped. The hours weren't as long and the miles of road not nearly so boring. They'd fucked after every gig and in nearly every state in the lower forty-eight. He was stronger because he'd shown both sides of himself to Niall and had been accepted.

Behind him, the door creaked. He didn't have to look to know Niall had strode onto the porch. He turned enough to drape his arm around Niall's shoulders.

"Thought I'd find you out here." Niall kissed Michael's neck. "Deep in thought about

the school year or about the band?”

He should've known Niall would figure him out. Over the last three months, they'd forged a deep connection. Between the weekends together on the road and the stolen days here and there during the course of the tour, they'd become closer than Michael would've thought possible. Niall meant more to him than life itself. He could live without Niall, but he didn't want to. Funny since Niall was about the only person or thing that affected him that way.

“So?” Niall eased away from Michael and sat on the railing to face him. “What's on your mind?”

Michael widened his stance and folded his arms. “I've been thinking about this summer, the band and my job at the school and your offer.”

“I figured as much.” Niall crossed his ankles and rested his hands on the railing. “You've been talking in your sleep.”

“I have?” He didn't know he did such things. Huh. Michael sighed. He needed to get on with his life and his decision. “Sorry about that.”

“No problem. It's amusing, though. You sang in your sleep, too.”

“I did?”

Niall nodded. “I've never heard the song before, so it must be something you're working on without even knowing it.”

“You inspire me.” Michael gazed into Niall's eyes. “Do you really want me to move in with you? For good?”

“I do.”

“You’re sure?” His hands shook. Good thing he had the coffee cup to keep them busy.

“I don’t do anything without having a plan.” Niall drummed his fingers on the railing. “I asked you to move in with me because there’s no point in having two homes when we’re together anyway. Why not have one and make this work? I love you and want you here.”

Michael flexed the muscles in his jaw. “Dex and Blake seem to think I’m smartest to stay with the band. I’ve thought long and hard about this and I’ve considered their points of view. I also thought about you and me.” He rocked on the balls of his feet. “I’m sticking with the school until the contract runs out. Once it does, I’m going to see where my musical career is at. I don’t want to give up either career and I sure as hell don’t want to give you up either, but I want to ride the wave with the band for as long as possible.” Niall made his heart beat and eased his mind. Having Niall beside him helped to level things off for him. He still had the creative spark for his dark, moody music, but he also had a safe place to fall—as long as he had Niall in his life.

“Makes sense.” Niall crooked his eyebrows but didn’t smile. “I can’t blame you. You’re a god when you’re on the stage. Then again, you’re pretty important to those kids.”

Not exactly the rousing endorsement he’d expected from Niall. Fuck it. They’d agreed to be completely honest with each other. Now was his turn to bare his soul. Michael crossed the short expanse to Niall and put the coffee cup on the flat railing. He pinned his lover between his body and the post. “You’re my constant. Whether I’m at the school or in the band, I’m at my best because I’ve got you in my corner and my bed.”

Niall hooked his fingers in Michael’s belt loops. He didn’t say anything right away

and he didn't meet Michael's gaze.

Michael's skin itched. He'd expected Niall to be thrilled with his decisions. His confidence dipped. Maybe his belief that Niall would accept him, no matter what, was off base.

"Niall?" He curled his fingers under Niall's chin. "What do you think?" he whispered.

"I think accepting both sides of you will take time. Whenever I look across the hallway, I'll not only see Michael, but I'll see Bandit." He paused and a slight smile curled his lips. "But I happen to like Bandit."

"Oh." Michael bit back a groan. He hadn't thought the dual sides of his personality were a problem for Niall. Niall claimed he wanted to be with Michael and that Bandit wasn't important, but had that changed? Maybe he was overthinking everything and getting too concerned over nothing? His stomach lurched.

"Stop worrying and look at me," Niall said and grabbed Michael's attention. "The thing is, I like Bandit just fine. He's a fantastic musician. But I fell for Michael. Whether you're in front of a group of fourth graders or holding that guitar, the man beneath the makeup and behind the button-down shirt is the guy who has my heart in his hands. That's why I want you to live with me. I want to see your face in the morning and last thing at night. I want to hold you while we sleep and spend the day fucking after we have an argument. You drive me crazy, but you bring out the best in me, too."

This time Michael paused. He replayed Niall's words in his head. As the importance of what Niall had said washed over him, he grinned and a laugh bubbled in his throat. "You've practically written a song for me."

“Take the words, put them to music and make a fortune with it.” Niall wound his arms around Michael’s waist and tucked his hands into Michael’s back pockets. “I’ve been a little in love with you since we met, but this summer changed my feelings. I got to know the real you—both sides of you. Bandit is good, but Michael is my guy. I love you with all my heart.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:15 am

Heart in his hands...love...my guy. Overwhelming joy filled Michael's brain. He mashed his mouth down on Niall's. He needed to taste his man and show Niall just how much the feeling was mutual. God, he loved Niall too. So much. He sucked on Niall's tongue and grabbed his boyfriend's ass.

Niall broke the kiss first and sagged against Michael. "I suppose you like my admission?"

"I do." Michael rested his forehead against Niall's. "I love you, too, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"Then stay here. I've got plenty of room for all your secrets." Niall grabbed a handful of Michael's shirt. "Share my house, my bed and my life. Yeah?" His lips parted and his breath feathered over Michael's cheeks.

"You're willing to accept me and all my baggage—despite everything?" He brushed his nose along Niall's and breathed in the woodsy scent of his lover. "You bet your ass I'm sticking around. There's nowhere else I'd rather be." His heart leaped and his spirits soared. He couldn't have asked for a better outcome. He had a man who loved him and wanted to be with him.

"Good. I wanted to spend tonight celebrating the end of summer, the end of your tour and the beginning of the school year." Niall wriggled his eyebrows. His eyes flashed and his smile grew. "A little steak, a little wine and a night of hot sex." He bobbed his head. "Okay, I can't guarantee how much food we'll actually eat, but I can guarantee there will be a lot of sex."

“I’m in for all of it—the food, wine and especially you.” He ground his body against Niall’s and suppressed a moan. He didn’t need to tour and work with the band to know where he belonged. He didn’t have to have the teaching job in order to matter to someone. He’d found his heart, his soul and his home all in the same place—with Niall. He’d work out what he wanted to do with his career later. Right now, nothing mattered but being with Niall. Michael laughed and love for his partner filled his heart. Belonging in Cedarwood with Niall never felt so good.