



Saving Noah

Author: *T.S. McKinney*

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Description: Noah tries to do the right thing—protect the innocent and make the evil pay for their sins. But instead of saving the world, he loses himself. After testifying against one of the biggest crime bosses in the country, Noah's fear of retribution leads to a serious case of agoraphobia. There isn't much in Noah's safe zone that calms his nerves... well, except for his short interactions with his surly but hot new neighbor.

Life crushed Dr. Zachary Meadows's rose-colored glasses years ago. He makes amends for the deeds of others—and for his failure to protect those in need—by saving as many lives as he can as an ER physician. After early betrayals, he purposefully keeps his circle small. Until he meets his odd new neighbor and unwanted desires cause him to act like a jerk. When two survivors collide—one desperate for love and one afraid of it—sparks fly. But just as Zachary and Noah begin to heal one another, the past returns...with a vengeance.

One. Two. I've decided to come for you. Three. Four. It won't help Scaredy Cat to lock his door. Five. Six. You committed a sin you can't fix. Seven. Eight. I've picked the date. Nine. Ten. No one will ever see you again.

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Chapter 1

The dull thump of music crept through the thick walls of his neighbor's penthouse apartment, irritating him to the point he punched in the incorrect code to open his door. He'd only lived in this tower for three months, but he'd already learned the curious and annoying schedule of the only other top floor resident. Loud music, erotic costumes, and a different group of lovers every second and last Friday of the month.

When the electronic lock buzzed a warning to indicate he'd entered the incorrect code, his best friend barked out a laugh. Connor being there to laugh at him didn't help the situation one damned bit. The bastard knew how much his younger neighbor pissed him off and was clearly enjoying witnessing it firsthand.

Zach had lived in his new apartment for exactly ninety-three days and had complained to Connor all ninety-three days about Neighbor Boy. Hell, the thing was, Connor hadn't heard the half of it. He'd only complained about the loud music and irritating way the kid was always at home. He'd yet to mention the fact that he was fairly certain the guy was a prostitute of some sort.

Neighbor Boy rocked the kind of sexy appearance that could make a straight man untuck his wallet and smack down some of his hard-earned cash to see those plump lips wrapped around his cock.

"Fuck!" He hissed in frustration as the image of those lips wrapped around his own cock caused him to fumble with the code yet again. "Damned music," he muttered, unsure if the lie was for Connor's benefit or his. No, the lie was solely for Connor's benefit. As far as his friend understood, Zachary hated his new neighbor because of

the wild parties...not because just looking at the guy made him forget his ABCs and 123s. If Connor had any hint of the beauty residing on the other side of the heavy iron door, he would know exactly why Zachary bitched from daylight to dark to anybody who would listen to him as he complained about the one and only offensive thing about his new penthouse suite. Yeah, his lifelong goal was to never allow Connor to meet John face-to-face.

The guy told him his name was John. Mr. Hottie Hot Pants didn't look like a John, but Zachary assumed the kid knew his own name, even if he didn't know turning tricks was against the law and extremely dangerous.

"Problems, Doctor?" Connor asked with one of his annoying smirks. "Here, let me hold the pizza so you can focus all your intellect on punching in the seven-digit code you're struggling so diligently with. I hope to fuck you aren't the doctor on duty at the hospital if I'm ever injured in the line of duty." He leaned against the wall. "I mean, seriously, Zach, the music isn't that loud. To hear you tell it, I would've estimated having to have you fitted for a hearing aid sometime in the next two weeks. Jeezus, man; I used to answer 911 calls where pictures on the walls were rattling six doors down in a neighborhood instead of a top floor uppity penthouse suite." He shook his head. "I think somebody is just old and crotchety."

Connor tugged the delicious-smelling pizza out of his hands about the same time the bane of Zach's existence started unbolting the locking mechanism on his door. Shit. Shit. Shit. He didn't want Connor seeing what he was about to see. Connor was about to learn exactly why Zachary did indeed feel old and crotchety since moving in, and it didn't have one damned thing to do with loud music or sex parties...that Zach had never once been invited to.

His finger trembled with nervous embarrassment as he hit the last digit and heard the blessed sound of the locking mechanism indicating he'd finally entered the proper code. He grabbed Connor's upper arm and tried to push him through the door at the

same time he was shoving it open.

But, of course, he wouldn't dare get so lucky. Not him. No sirree. Luck wasn't his friend tonight.

The music's clarity increased then became muffled again, warning him his neighbor's door had opened and closed. Hell, who was he fooling? He hadn't needed the musical warning to alert him that John had stepped out into the hallway. Every fucking nerve in his traitorous body went on high alert, especially the really big one between his legs.

Defeated, he dropped his head and tried to wish himself somewhere far, far away, but Connor's soft whistle told him he remained stuck straight in I-lust-after-my-hot-prostitute-neighbor land. Party for fucking three since Connor was right there with him. One glance in his friend's direction told him he was fucked seven ways to Sunday. He absolutely refused to look in John's way.

"Hey, neighbor." John's sexy voice filled the hallway.

That was what John called him since Zachary refused to tell him his name, even though John had politely tried to pry the information from him. The low, sexy voice tickled Zachary in places that hadn't been tickled in...well, forever. He hadn't encountered another person who got under his skin like this kid did. To top it off, they couldn't have exchanged more than twenty words to each other. He also had to admit he'd been horrifically rude with every word, one through twenty. Stopping the rudeness seemed implausible as well. It infuriated Zachary to see someone so young and beautiful live their life so dangerously. He was a prostitute; Zachary was convinced of it.

"Hey, John," he mumbled without even looking over his shoulder. All it would take would be one glance and he'd be lost in those bright blue eyes and pouty lips. Eyes

straight ahead. He could do this. “Get inside, Connor. The pizza’s getting cold.” He tried muscling Connor through the door, but his friend stood strong, feet glued to the floor and eyes glued to the man standing across the hallway.

A knowing smile curved Connor’s lips. “The pizza may get cold, but it sure as hell is hot out here.” He stepped away from Zachary’s door and straight toward John. “Well, hello, there,” Connor’s voice teased playfully. “I can’t believe Zachary has never once mentioned that his neighbor modeled. Aren’t you a pretty little thing?”

Zachary rolled his eyes, counted to ten, and then slowly turned around to face what he lusted and longed for at night in his lonely bedroom, knowing the object of his desire was on the other side of the wall...fucking a different man, or men, every other fucking Friday. Fucking Fridays. That was what he’d labeled them in his warped mind. He should’ve known better than to let Connor invite himself over tonight of all nights.

Don’t look into his eyes. Just walk into your apartment, close the door, and leave Connor to flirt his fool head off. Ha! Wouldn’t it be hilarious if John propositioned Connor, a cop, for sex? Yeah, that’d serve them both right.

Regardless of the warnings blaring inside his head, Zachary allowed his eyes to stray in John’s direction. He shouldn’t have done it. It was even worse than he could’ve ever imagined, and he’d imagined a lot of bad things where his younger neighbor was concerned. Connor was positioned on the other side of John and was propped up against the wall, eye-fucking John one minute and laughing at Zachary the next. Zach’s beloved pizza was tucked beneath Connor’s armpit.

All the times he’d accidentally run into his neighbor the past three months, John had been wearing workout clothes, because he’d been in the building’s gym, coming home from the gym, or going to the gym. John, even in slouchy gym clothes that looked at least one size too big, was almost too much for Zachary to handle. John

wearing one of the erotic costumes Zach had seen many of the frequent guests dressed in was damned well going to be more than his thirty-year-old heart could handle. He stood there, mouth wide open, and gawked at John.

Tonight, on Fucking Friday, John wore a pair of skin-tight black leather pants cut low enough to perfectly frame the most fucking sexy V and washboard abs Zachary's eyes had ever lusted after. He was a doctor; he'd seen a lot of nakedness. Nothing came close to what this kid looked like without a shirt on. His torso was lean yet defined with lithe muscles that could only be described as a work of art. Sheer perfection. His pale skin was flawless except for the tattoo of a strand of rosary beads that dipped almost as low as the leather pants—something pure decorating something so obviously impure. Zachary couldn't help himself; the dark tattoo on the pale skin literally made his mouth water and his cock leak. John's inky black hair looked mussed, like he'd already engaged in at least one bout of reckless fucking. Zachary's fingers itched to test the silkiness, to prove that it couldn't possibly feel as soft as it looked. Heavy black eyeliner highlighted John's azure blue eyes, making him appear seductively haunted. To top off the magnificence of six feet of perfection, a thick diamond collar wrapped snugly around his slim neck.

Connor's hearty laugh snapped him from his blatant ogling, and Zachary's cheeks burned with embarrassment. More than he wanted his next breath of air, he wished he still held that damned pizza box so he could hide the bulge growing in his pants. But Connor had it trapped under his arm and turned on its side, clearly forgotten as he focused on Zach's neighbor.

"Stop acting like a fool, Connor," he finally snapped. "He's a child." Oh, good Lord, what a ridiculous statement. John wasn't a child; if he were being honest with himself, he'd have to admit he didn't like Connor looking at or flirting with John.

John's blue eyes narrowed following Zachary's comment, the first real burst of emotion Zachary had seen from him. John was always polite and had shyly tried to

engage him in conversation a couple of times, but in most of their encounters, John kept his head down and he focused on the floor in front of him. It was a strange trait for a hooker, but from all the men he saw going in and out of that apartment, people bought what John was selling.

After another flash of annoyance directed toward Zachary, John turned away and gave Connor his full attention. “Hey. I’m John. Twenty-two-year-old adult extraordinaire,” he said as he offered Connor his hand to shake.

Connor’s eyes twinkled with mischief as he eagerly shook John’s hand. “Connor Vanderwall. Thirty-year-old pretender of adulthood.”

Connor didn’t let go of John’s hand at anywhere near the appropriate hand-shaking time limit...in Zachary’s opinion. Then again, from the looks of the two men in front of him, neither of them gave a fuck about his opinion. With John’s back turned to him as his hand stayed imprisoned in Connor’s grasp, Zachary had an unrestricted view of his neighbor’s bare back. Like his chest, it was perfectly proportioned with just the right amount of lean muscle. A pair of black angel wings, with delicate feathers appearing so real Zachary longed to touch them, covered his slim back.

Lust burned through Zachary, making him want things he had no business wanting. John was a fucking prostitute, not potential dating material for a doctor. Hell, maybe he should just purchase a night of mischief and be done with it. Once he’d gotten a taste of what was sold on Fucking Fridays, he’d be finished with his ridiculous infatuation with his neighbor. Yeah, that was it; he’d ask what he charged for a ‘trick,’ tally up the funds, fuck him silly, and be finished. Zachary’s eyes strayed to the luscious curve of John’s bubble ass that was barely tucked into the black leather. No, it might take more than one hit before he could quit.

What. The. Fuck. He wasn’t going to proposition a hooker, for fuck’s sake. Frustrated anger rolled through him. The fact that Connor still gripped John’s hand did nothing

to soothe the dangerous mood threatening to overtake him.

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As well as he could remember, he and Connor hadn't had a serious argument in their entire twenty-six years of inseparable best-friendship, which started at the ripe old age of four. If Connor didn't take his hands off John, that would change. Zachary wasn't a violent man, but he wasn't having any problems whatsoever picturing his fist connecting with Connor's arrogant smirk. It also didn't take much effort on his part to imagine bending John over the nearest hard surface and fucking him into submission.

He shook his head, forcing the images away. John wasn't his. John belonged to whomever opened their wallet. Zachary had never paid for sex in his entire life and wasn't going to start. In a tone he hoped to be harsh enough to snap Connor out of his lust-fest, he said, "Let's go, Connor. Trust me, you don't want to get mixed up with that."

John's head swung around so fast Zachary feared the kid would need to visit the chiropractor in the morning. Zachary found the shocked expression on John's face comical. What had the kid thought? That nobody would notice the shit going in and out of his apartment? Hell, a blind nun would have caught on to what happened next door.

Connor stared at him like he resembled a zit on somebody's ass. Too bad; his friend could be pissed all he wanted. Zachary would have the last laugh when he finally revealed to Connor what John did to pay his rent.

"What in the hell does that mean?" John asked quietly, his voice low and trembling slightly.

His blue eyes darkened to a color Zachary was certain wasn't in the Crayola crayon box, but needed to be. The only other time he'd seen the shade he'd been in the Caribbean and the normally bright turquoise waters were darker than normal due to an impending storm. The waters had looked so beautiful, yet so deadly. John's eyes appeared the same. Well, except a hint of sadness still lurked there.

As John glared at him, Zachary couldn't let his bleeding heart find sympathy. The kid had made his own decisions about life. It wasn't Zachary's fault if his lifestyle created sadness or shame. He glared back and answered. "My friend Connor is a cop, John. Do you really want me to explain what I meant?"

John's high cheekbones turned a faint pink even as his eyes sparkled with outrage. If Zachary considered him hot before, when he was all shy and flirting with the floorboards, outraged John blew that hotness right off the fucking charts. The tattooed rosary beads practically vibrated with fury as John's heart thundered in his chest. His hands were on his hips, and Zachary tried not to note how long and graceful his fingers looked. He should be a musician instead of a whore.

"You're being an ass, Zachary," Connor said with an irritated frown.

All Connor's playfulness had disappeared, but instead of going into full cop mode as Zachary would've expected after his comment, his friend had a look about him that closely resembled a mama bear about to protect her cub. What in the hell? Connor didn't know the first damned thing about his neighbor, but he was willing to step right up and protect his honor. Yeah, as if John had any of that left.

Zachary suddenly felt outnumbered and that pissed him off even more. He responded to Connor's comment. "Better to be one than sell it."

The faint pink blossomed into a full-blown fire-engine red as John took one tiny step in his direction...before pulling himself up short and then moving in the other way

until his back pressed flat against his door. A myriad of emotions flashed across his face—shock, anger, outrage. All of those, but mostly, there was pain. The other emotions vanished quickly, but the pain remained lodged in his blue eyes as he stared at Zach.

After a few seconds, he said, “I just wanted to let you know your dog was barking a lot today. Really loud. I called the desk to see if there was a number where you could be reached, but there wasn’t one on file.”

Zachary couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Seriously? The hot neighbor from hell dared to complain about noise from his apartment? Zachary closed the distance between the two of them. When they stood only inches apart, he hissed, “Are you seriously complaining about my dog barking too loud when I’m forced to listen to this bullshit music coming from your apartment every damned time you decide to entertain guests?” He loved his dog a hell of a lot more than he loved looking at John’s ass.

John met his glare for glare. They stood so close Zachary could feel the other man’s breath tickle his face. He smelled so fucking good that Zachary kept reminding himself he was pissed. Part of him wanted to punch John’s pretty face but another part wanted to lean closer and see if he tasted as good as he smelled.

“I was worried about your dog,” John answered softly. “She’s always very quiet, so I was afraid something might be wrong with her.” He took a deep breath and added, “I’ll worry about her even more now that I realize she lives with an asshole.”

Zachary’s anger wilted when John told him he’d been worried about Denala. Well, shit. Now he felt like a prick. An apology died on his lips when John’s words really registered in his head. Denala didn’t bark just to hear herself bark. While she might have been rejected by the police academy for not being aggressive enough, she was the best damned dog he’d ever had in his life. She was also very pregnant with her

first litter of puppies.

Shit. She always waited on him at the door, but he'd been so caught up in Connor's cockiness and John's nakedness he hadn't even noticed she wasn't there. She was always there. He left John and Connor in the hallway, terror sweeping through him as he dashed inside.

An hour later, with the bloody mess cleaned up, Connor and Zachary were exhausted but wiped clean, and Denala was the proud mommy of eight squirming puppies. They hadn't lost a one, but the last baby had been touch and go. Without Zachary's medical experience, Denala or the runt might not have survived the birthing. From the looks of the spare bedroom and Denala's exhausted expression, she'd labored all day with her delivery. He didn't know how long the last baby had been turned sideways in her birthing canal, but his dog had been near death when he'd gotten to her.

With a broad smile, he tapped his beer bottle against Connor's and said, "Good job, Uncle Connor." He eased back on the couch and shoved a piece of cold pizza into his mouth. He beamed with pride. Not even the dull thud of the music next door could squash his good mood. Denala would make a good mommy dog...even if she'd been a slut that had apparently gotten herself knocked up the first time he'd looked the other way. Hell, as far as he knew, the delinquent dad was probably a Chihuahua. Denala was a German shepherd. Right now, the puppies resembled rats, so it was too early to tell if she'd been selective in her partying.

"That was disgusting, man. Please don't ever make me do shit like that again," Connor said as he studied his hands carefully, no doubt trying to assure himself he'd gotten off all the dog goo before he touched the pizza. Zachary saw no reason to tell him about the smear of blood on his chin.

"Your hands are clean, idiot. Eat the pizza while there's still some left. I'm starved, so it won't be around long." To prove his point, he dove into the box to steal his

second piece. The thing about pizza was that it was as good cold as it was hot. Add ice cold beer to the mix and Zachary skated on the outskirts of heaven.

Connor studied his hands another second and finally shrugged in defeat. Once he started eating, he didn't stop until his half of the pizza was nothing more than a sweet memory.

After licking his fingers clean, he turned to Zachary and said, "You really were a jackass earlier, Zach. That's not like you. What's your deal with Hot Stuff?" His grin stretched across his face. "I'll tell you this much, if he was my neighbor, I would've already nailed that ass at least ten times." He whistled through his teeth. "Seriously, Doc, did you see his ass? Those ab muscles. Sad eyes and pouty lips. He wassweet." Connor lazily sipped the remainder of his beer, brown eyes alert and daring Zach to deny the obvious.

Connor propped his socked feet on the coffee table, almost knocking a vase off in the process. Zach shook his head. His best friend had grown up in a family loaded with both money and love—hell, there'd even been enough leftover love for the poor kid whose family had so little to give and even fewer morals—but being born with money, Connor didn't value material items quite as much as Zachary. And he'd let that jackass comment go because he loved the big oaf. John wasn't Connor's type anyway. Connor liked them big and brawny, someone he could get rough with and not accidentally break. No, Connor was antagonizing him because John was exactly the type Zachary normally went for.

"Yep, he's a real Georgia peach," Zachary answered with a laugh he hoped sounded like he didn't give a fuck about his hot neighbor. Even to his own ears, he sounded fake...and desperate. "Want another beer?"

"Nope. Beer distraction—epic fail," Connor answered. "Although you almost got me with the Georgia peach comment. My mind immediately pictured his bubble ass and

started comparing it to a firm but ripe peach, all juicy and dripping with a sweet taste I could suck on all damned night long.”

Zachary’s jaw clenched in what felt like jealousy, but that couldn’t be right. No way would he be jealous where John was concerned...or of all the men who had tasted John’s juicy peach while Zachary was fucking starving for a sample. Nope, he wasn’t jealous. Couldn’t be.

Connor leaned toward Zachary and asked in a fake whisper, “Be honest, Doc. You’ve hit that, right?”

“You know that I haven’t, Connor. Quit acting like an idiot. If you knew what I know, you wouldn’t be so quick to sing his praises, whether physical or anything else. He’s not the angel the wings on his back would have you believe.” How had he missed those angel wings? Sure, the kid always had on a tank top, but sometimes it was white, and Zach’s eagle eyes should have noticed something so incredibly sexy. Somehow, he’d missed it.

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Clearly getting excited about what he hoped to be some naughty details coming his way, Connor moved his feet from the coffee table and placed them on the couch and said, “You keep hinting at something illicit, Zach. It’s just us girls now. Go ahead and say what you’ve been dancing around ever since that slice of hotness joined us in the hall. I damned well hope there’s a reason for treating him like shit, because that’s exactly what you did.”

“For fuck’s sake, Connor,” Zachary exploded. “I thought cops were supposed to notice details, look for crimes, or be able to determine a criminal from a law-abiding citizen. Didn’t you receive any training at the academy?”

Zachary wasn’t having any luck getting Connor riled up. Instead, his friend grinned slowly and said, “Nah, I must’ve skipped the be-mean-to-hot-neighbor day during my training. What’s up? Go ahead, spill it. Reveal his deep, dark secrets, so I’ll have something really wicked to jack off to tonight.”

“He’s a prostitute, Connor! Surely you could see that. Anybody could see that. I knew it right away,” Zachary bragged and then his mood darkened again as he imagined beautiful John selling his body to the highest bidder.

Connor stared at him for a few seconds and then leaned over to set his empty beer bottle on the edge of the coffee table—right next to the tile coaster. “A prostitute, eh? What makes you think that?”

Zachary rolled his eyes, but as his evidence rolled around in his head, he didn’t have many cold, hard facts to back up his beliefs. What he did have was all circumstantial shit, but he was in too deep to keep his beliefs to himself.

“Well, let me see,” he said in his most sarcastic voice. “There’s the fact that he entertains a different group of men every other Friday of the month. His guests always wear trashy costumes, a lot like what John wore tonight. The only repeat visitor always carries a huge duffel bag that he probably hauls sex toys in. That’s probably his pimp. Yeah, I bet he sets the dates up and then sticks around to make sure he gets his cut of the earnings.”

“You’ve got it all figured out, don’t you, Doc? Maybe you took some police training yourself? Is that what you were doing when I thought you were studying anatomy in med school? Taking Spotting a Prostitute 101?”

“Now who’s being the asshole?” Zachary asked as he got up to grab himself another beer. Connor might not need the extra suds to make him forget how fucking hot John looked in that rhinestone dog collar, but Zachary sure the fuck did. He went ahead and grabbed two bottles while he was up. There wasn’t enough alcohol in the world to help him forget how wickedly delicious John had looked tonight. Anything short of brainwashing would result in failure. He dropped back down on the couch and waited for Connor to explain how John couldn’t possibly be a hooker. Oh, it was coming. He’d seen that look on Connor’s face many times.

“Okay, maybe he’s a prostitute,” Connor said thoughtfully. “I doubt it, but maybe. I guess.” He shrugged.

“Go ahead, asshole. Tell me why you think I’m wrong. I mean, you were around him for all of five minutes at the most, but you’re clearly the John expert between the two of us.”

“Okay, first of all, he doesn’t have the look of a person forced to sell his body for survival...or drugs.” He frowned at Zachary. “It’s usually for drugs. Trust me on this one, Doc, that body is not on street drugs, recreational drugs, or any other kind of illegal drug up for sale these days. Well, not unless he’s in the very early stages of

drug abuse. Twink-boy looked damn fine from where I stood.”

“Just stop it, Connor. We both know John isn’t the type of man you go for. He’s more of what I usually find attractive.”

Connor laughed. “I know. I just needed to make sure you remembered. For some unknown reason, you seem to have forgotten what gets you all hot and bothered.” His grin was playful and antagonizing at the same time. “Okay, back to Hookersville. Secondly, hookers don’t usually bring tricks to their apartment. That’s just not how it works.” He shook his head at Zachary. “And their pimps don’t carry a goodie bag for them. No, I think you’re off base.”

Zachary rolled his eyes. “Then what was he doing? Did you see how he dressed? He had a rhinestone dog collar around his neck, for fuck’s sake!”

“I know, and it looked fucking hot, Doc. People do shit like that and there’s nothing wrong with it. Stop being such a Republican. It isn’t attractive on you.”

“Is it time for you to go home yet?” Zachary asked. “I’m ready for you to go home.”

“Nah, I’m good. I’ve got all night to torment you about the infatuation you’ve got for your neighbor.” Connor reached over and grabbed Zachary’s extra beer off the coffee table. “It’s been driving me nuts, actually. The neighbor’s the very reason I suggested pizza at your place tonight. I’ve listened to you bitch and bitch about things you wouldn’t normally bitch about. He plays music too loud. He doesn’t stretch before getting on the treadmill. People come and go from his apartment. He’s always home. Why doesn’t he have a real job? He doesn’t talk to anybody when he’s working out in the gym. He always tries to pet my dog. Blah. Blah. Blah. It’s nonsense, Zachary. He got under your skin and I needed to see for myself why.” A feral grin turned his face wicked. “And now I know.”

Zachary dropped his head to the back of the sofa, completely defeated and wishing he'd at least licked the top of the beer bottle to keep Connor from stealing it. There was no point arguing with Connor anymore, especially when his friend was dead-on concerning John. He wanted his neighbor and he wasn't going to have a smidgen of peace in his life until he had him.

"It's weird, though," Connor murmured. "He looks really familiar." A frown knitted his brow as he glanced away and then shook his head.

"I doubt it, Conn. We've only lived in Georgia for four months, and I'd bet everything I own that he hasn't left this apartment building one time since I moved in. You haven't been here, so I don't think he's somebody you know." Zachary grinned. "Oh, wait. Maybe you've seen him on the Most Wanted Prostitute list you guys have at work."

Connor was right. He'd been stupid for thinking John was a hooker. He still wasn't sure what John was or what he was doing every other Friday—and whatever it was, he sure as hell didn't like it—but he could...grudgingly...admit he no longer thought he turned tricks.

"Nah, it's not that, but I've seen him somewhere." Connor shook his head, obviously tucking thoughts of John away for another time. "I've got to run. You're boring." He stood, stretched, and belched. "You got a shift at the hospital tomorrow or are you available for a fun night of bar hopping?"

"Shift at the hospital...then bar hopping," Zachary answered with a beer bottle salute, not getting up to show Connor out.

Chapter 2

Noah leaned his head against the damp wall of the gym sauna and closed his eyes. One, two, three, four. If he counted slowly and focused only on the next number, he could forget he'd left the safety of his apartment. Five, six, seven, eight. If anyone happened to look in his direction, they wouldn't know he was a certified nut case as long as he kept his focus on the numbers. Nine, ten, eleven, twelve. He could pretend his life wasn't a PowerPoint presentation of one mistake after another. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. If he focused on the numbers, he wouldn't focus on the fact he suffered from a serious case of the lusts for his incredibly hot asshole neighbor. The neighbor who clearly thought he engaged in some sort of illegal activity and, if every past encounter they'd had was any indication, hated him.

He stopped counting, banged the back of his head against the wall, and tried to fantasize that he was a normal person instead of a walking, talking disaster. His mental shape that morning wasn't anywhere in the vicinity of good; it never was after a work night. He hated himself for what he did to earn money—what he let them do to him for money—but his illness didn't allow for a lot of job opportunities, so he sucked it up and did what had to be done. The following day always left a bad taste in his mouth and an ache in his heart, but this Saturday had been exceptionally bad. He'd made a fool of himself in front of his neighbor last night and ended up making the man dislike him even more.

For about the millionth time in the past four years, he asked himself what his life would've been like if only he'd minded his own business and kept his fucking mouth shut. Would he be normal?

He'd wanted to be a veterinarian since he was six years old, and if he'd kept on the path he'd planned, he would be close to opening his own clinic by now. Would his parents finally be proud of him? Would he know the kiss of the sun against his skin while he swam in the ocean or walked on a beach? Would he have a lover? Thanks to online classes, he possessed several degrees and could speak six languages. Thanks to his illness, he couldn't use his degrees and didn't have anybody to talk to, regardless of what language they spoke.

He opened his eyes and looked around the steamy room, assuring himself he remained alone. Most folks avoided him like the plague. It didn't take long for people to realize he was...different.

Odd.

Strange.

Pathetic.

He made people just as uncomfortable as they made him, so when people saw him enter the sauna, they suddenly decided a prostate exam would be more enjoyable than a relaxing date with the steam room. Sure, he could be stretching the reality or just having himself a grand ole pity party, but facts were facts. He walked in; people walked out.

His ability to clear a room hadn't really bothered him all that much until his new neighbor moved in. Zachary. Last night might have been a colossal fuck-up of epic proportions, but he'd at least finally learned his neighbor's name. He liked it. Zachary. It fit. Zachary was hotter than fuck and managed to wake up a part of him he'd feared had deserted his body without planning on returning. His sex drive had been virtually dormant since the attack and his ensuing illness, and the meds he required to keep a weak grip on his sanity didn't help. Zachary woke his defunct sex

drive the fuck up. The lust was dormant no longer!

Okay, so his body whispered that sex might be back on the menu. Why, oh why, did he have to be attracted to someone who disliked him so damned much? An even better question was why the man found him so...repulsive. Yeah, that was the best word he could come up with to describe the look in Zachary's eyes on the few occasions where they'd made eye contact. Sure, every other person in the apartment complex avoided him, but they didn't have revulsion dancing around in their eyes. It usually resembled something closer to pity. They knew something was wrong with him, but they couldn't quite figure out what it was, so maybe they just felt sorry for him. Oh, and avoided him.

He shook his head and tried to make his mind focus on some sort of plan for his future instead of worrying about all the shit that was wrong with him because of his past. Zachary. How could he make the man look past all the red flags surrounding him and see that beneath all of it, he was...

Shit. The word okay didn't fit. Hell, he wasn't even sure a nice guy would work. There wasn't anybody to practice his nice-guy skills on, so as far as he knew, he was a complete douche. He had Cameron—his one and only friend. Cameron took care of him and made sure he got what he needed to survive. Then again, Cameron worked for the district attorney's office and FBI, so a heavy chance existed he wasn't really Noah's friend at all. They probably paid Cameron to keep their ex-star witness on a tight leash in case Donovan Moretti ever decided to show his face again.

Noah shook his head and frowned. No, Cameron was actually nice to him, appeared to worry about him, and made sure Noah found a way to make money without ever leaving his apartment building. Hell, the man bought his groceries. He loaded him down with delicious chocolates and all those naughty goodies that were bad for a body. Surely that was true friendship love, right?

Cameron didn't like Zachary. No, he didn't care for Noah's obsession with Zachary. After Noah had spent a good thirty minutes trying to guess what his neighbor did for a living—anything from an MMA fighter to a porn star to a former Navy SEAL—Cameron sat him down and calmly explained why dwelling on the man who lived next door wouldn't be healthy for someone with no future and a past he couldn't forget.

Hell, Cameron was probably right to be worried. Noah possessed an unhealthy infatuation, and he suspected, with now one hundred percent certainty after their run-in last night, that the muscle-god who lived next door disliked him immensely. Where exactly could this boy-crush raging through him lead? No-the-fuck-where. Zachary, with all his bulging muscles and hot tattoos, wasn't interested. End of story.

That might be the end of the story, but clearly not the end of his fantasizing. For ninety-four days, he'd thought of nothing except how fucking hot the guy looked every time he saw him. Every. Damn. Time. How did somebody look good all the time? Even when he left in the mornings to go to work, wherever he worked. Noah knew this because he watched him through the peephole in his door. He looked good when he came home from work, tired but fucking good. When he worked out in the gym? Holy motherfucking son of all that was holy. Intimidating didn't cover it. Muscular. Dominant. Confident. Powerful. He was the opposite of everything Noah was...and Noah wanted to taste it.

Just once.

Maybe more than once.

Definitely more than once.

The first time he'd watched Zachary work out in their gym, Noah's cock had shown some signs of life all by itself. No Viagra needed to wake that bad boy up when

Zachary, hot neighbor, was around. Being twenty-two and getting a hard-on shouldn't be that big of a deal, right? Being twenty-two and on six antidepressants made getting an erection about as easy as winning the lottery.

But Zachary somehow overrode all those pharmaceutical impediments.

Mysterious vibe? Check.

Enough muscles and tattoos to make Noah's mouth water? Check.

Gray eyes that smoldered when he looked at anybody except Noah? Check.

Sexy voice? Check.

He checked all the get-Noah-hot boxes, but then when you added the dog into the mix, Noah's lust level soared off the charts. He loved animals—all animals. Though there were quite a few he'd rather not cuddle up to or watch take down prey in the wild, they all pulled at his heartstrings. He wanted to cuddle them, squeeze them, hug them, and pet them.

But he couldn't want those things. Not when he was afraid of his own shadow and couldn't leave the apartment building. He pushed the damp hair off his face as he considered what pet might be a good fit for him. He'd considered a cat. Since they used litterboxes, he wouldn't have to take it outside to use the bathroom. But all animals needed sunshine, even if only from a window. He wouldn't be able to share that with them thanks to the thick black curtains that covered every single damned window. And what about medical attention on a regular basis? Yeah, he couldn't add an extra job onto Cameron's already long list of babysitting duties. The extra burden wasn't fair. So, he'd decided long ago he'd have no pets until he finally learned to put on his big boy britches and step back out into the big, bad world.

So...no pets for Noah. Period.

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He'd gotten to pet Zachary's German shepherd a grand total of four times. She had soft fur and friendly eyes. Her owner? Nothing soft about his hot body, and definitely no friendly eyes when he looked in Noah's direction.

At least the dog was all right, not that Zachary or his friend had dropped by to let him know his worries had been for nothing. No, he'd been lucky enough to see Zachary taking her out for her evening bathroom break in between sessions last night. Through the peephole, of course. It would be a cold day in hell before he made the mistake of stepping out into the hallway when Zachary was out there. Contrary to what one would think when reviewing his history, he wasn't really a glutton for punishment. He just made dumbass decisions that led to punishing experiences.

He needed to count instead of rehash shit that had been hashed over millions of times inside his head. Counting calmed him. Rehashing the hash produced the opposite result. He'd count his breaths—that was always a safe way to clear his mind. It was also an excellent way to remind him that he wasn't normal and that he didn't need to be dreaming girlie dreams about living a normal life. He tried to take a deep breath, but it ended in a strangled cough instead. Frowning, he opened his eyes and checked the clock on the wall.

Holy shit! He'd been in the sauna for over an hour. It was no wonder he couldn't drag in a breath of air. What in the hell was he thinking? He quickly stood to make his escape, but grabbed the wall for support. Way too long. He tried to suck in a deep breath, but his lungs felt heavy. Not only had he stayed in too long, he'd forgotten to drink from his bottled water. He was dehydrated and already feeling sluggish. With slow but steady movements, he made his way to the door, paused, counted, gathered his courage, and then turned the door latch. He'd done this hundreds of times since

the illness took over his life, but opening a door and forcing himself to step out, simply moving from one room into another, caused his heart to momentarily stop beating every single time. Somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind, he could remember a time when he'd not been afraid of anything. But that Noah didn't exist anymore. Now everything scared him, including, but not limited to, walking through doorways.

Somebody started down the hall toward the sauna, saw him, and immediately remembered something they needed to do. They quickly turned and went back in the direction they'd been coming from. As he took a tentative step across the threshold, he shook his head; if it weren't so sad, it would be funny.

No, there wasn't one damned funny thing about his life.

On weak legs and with burning lungs, he walked down the short hall that led to the locker room. His eyes remained glued to the floor in front of him, and he counted each and every step—always exactly seventeen steps, but he counted anyway. With every step and with every number he ticked off in his head, he tried to stop himself from acknowledging how long he'd been away from the safety of his apartment. Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

Almost five hours. Shit. That wasn't good. Five hours. Bad. Very bad.

Finally reaching his locker, he forced his fingers to stop trembling long enough to unlatch the attached lock. A shower was out of the question. No time. Because of his nervous fumbling, it took much too long to slide into baggy sweats, a T-shirt, and flip-flops. He pushed his wallet into his pocket, slammed then locked his locker, and headed toward the door. He could do this. No biggie. Forty-seven steps to the lobby area. Seventy-six steps through the lobby to get to the elevator. Four steps to the corner of the elevator where he stood every time he rode it. Four steps off. Fourteen steps to his door.

There was no need to panic. He wouldn't have a panic attack. They hurt. They scared him. He was stronger than that.

He made it to the elevator. Things were good. Four steps to his corner. The doors slid closed and he worked on counting his breaths as the floors whisked by. When the doors opened, he placed his right hand over his chest to assure himself his heart still beat at a regular pace. Fourteen steps later, he felt like he could conquer the world.

Five hours.

He'd been out of his apartment for five hours and the world hadn't ended. His heart hadn't exploded. No one had tried to kill him. Hell, no one had even noticed him as he'd moved through the busy lobby of his apartment complex.

Five hours.

He laughed out loud, feeling like a total badass. First, his dick got hard without Viagra and then he kicked life right in its fat ass. Five fucking hours. Cameron would shit when he heard about this record-setting success.

As he punched in the code to unlock his door, he knew the security guard responsible for monitoring the cameras would surely notice the dumbass smile on his face. He didn't give a care. Badasses were allowed to smile at whatever they wanted to.

A strange noise caused his badass smile to vanish. A beep...declining his entry code.

His fingers trembled when he entered the numbers again. A declining beep.

The panic attack hit with lightning speed. One second, he could breathe; the next second, there wasn't any oxygen available.

Dizziness.

Tunnel vision.

His heart seized, and in his mind, he could see it stop beating. Pain gripped every portion of his body. He needed air, but there wasn't any. His finger found the panic button on the bracelet he always wore. A voice immediately asked if he needed assistance, but he couldn't talk. He couldn't breathe. His heart wouldn't beat. Even though there was no escape, he tried to force his feet to move in the direction of the elevator. The urge to escape kept him moving, even when there was nowhere to run.

Before he could push the button to open the doors, a new pain, something he hadn't experienced in any of his other panic attacks, exploded inside his head when he crashed to the floor.

Chapter 3

Thank goodness it'd been a slow day in the ER at Atlanta General Hospital. All that remained was the tedious paperwork required at the end of every shift and he'd almost completed that task. Zachary's head throbbed as if he had a hangover, but a puppy-over would be closer to the truth. Last night, one of the longest nights of his life, led to him learning a valuable life lesson—no matter how tiny the animal was, they could still make a hell of a lot of noise. He'd probably slept a total of one hour, in scattered fifteen minute intervals. If lying awake and listening to puppies' whimpers and whines were his only problem, he could probably have bounced into his day without much trouble. It was more than that, though.

While wide awake, his mind had conjured images John: John in the sexy getup he'd been wearing last night; John sending him one of his shy smiles as they shared the same elevator—shy smiles he always promptly ignored, of course; John looking totally lost and alone at the gym, surrounded by other people who never spoke to him; John's blue eyes lighting up with pure happiness when he would ignore Zach's glares and pet Denala.

John opening his apartment door to the countless men.

Fuck, now he was not only exhausted, but the way his head ached and his face hurt led him to suspect his blood pressure had shot off the charts. He got pissed every time he thought about those men being anywhere near John. Connor was right; they weren't fucking him for money, but they sure as hell weren't over there playing innocent board games. No, there was sex involved. Wicked sex. Naughty sex. Dirty sex. Sex requiring costumes.

Now, he could add horny to the fuck-up-Zach's-day list. The idea of bar-hopping with Connor had a groan rising in his chest, even if that was exactly what he needed—to get laid. A dirty fuck where the only thing he worried about was busting a nut. That would get John out of his head.

He signed his name to the last of the paperwork and silently reprimanded himself for being such an idiot. He wasn't fooling anybody; he couldn't get John out of his head. He could either move or learn to live his life sporting a hard-on for someone who could never be his.

Why can't he be yours? Why in the hell not?

He gave the annoying and impatient voice inside his head the age-old answer all parents used. Because.

With more effort than it should have taken, he plastered on a fake smile and handed the paperwork over to the nurse manning the ER's nursing station. "That's it for me, Lydia. I'll see you guys in two weeks." Thank goodness his name was only on the ER rotation for every other Saturday. He worked the hospital daily, but managed to dodge the hustle and bustle of the ER for the most part.

Lydia glanced up at the clock and winced. "Wow. This shift has flown by. We hit the floor running this morning, and it never slowed down, did it?" She smiled at him. "I'm pulling a double. Pray for me." She took his paperwork and started going over it immediately. It was her responsibility to disseminate the physician's orders to the nurses on duty. "Have a good one, Dr. Meadows."

Just as he turned to leave, the man next to Lydia hung up the phone and called his name. Zach struggled to remember the man's name. Thomas! That was it. Thomas Banks. Give Zach a prize, being practically brain dead didn't hamper his memory.

“Yes, Thomas? What can I do for you?” He looked at Thomas with what he hoped was a friendly face, because what he’d wanted to ask was ‘what in the fuck do you need.’ Exhaustion made him grouchy.

The guy’s eyes flickered down and then back up to him. “Oh, it’s Trey, Sir.” Then he shook his head and added, “That’s not important, though. I shouldn’t have corrected you. I’m sorry.”

Shit. Was he that big of an asshole? He didn’t think so. If he was, he needed to have his ass handed to him in a pretty pink bag. “Yes, you should have, Trey. I’m tired but that’s no excuse to call somebody by the wrong name. I’m the one who needs to apologize. Sorry about that. Now, what can I do for you?” This time he meant it, because he felt like an ass.

“Uh...okay...yeah.”

Zach waited and then nodded for him to continue.

“Oh! Right,” Trey said quickly. “Didn’t you move into the Peachtree Heights apartment complex a few months back?”

He paused, wondering where this was going. “Yes. Why?”

“The EMTs are bringing somebody in from your building. I wasn’t sure if you wanted to stay.” He blushed and shrugged. “You know, in case you know them.” Suddenly nervous again, Trey looked down at his notes and started studying them like they held the cure for cancer and recipe for world peace. “He must not be carrying any identification. All they gave me was a twenty-two-year-old male with the name listed as John Doe.” He gave another shrug. “Weird. They know his age but not his name.”

The ground shifted beneath Zach. It couldn't be. His name couldn't be John Doe. That would be beyond ridiculous. It didn't matter, though. In his head, alarms bells rang loud enough to wake the dead.

His apartment complex.

John.

Twenty-two years old.

Zach wasn't taking a chance. He'd see for himself. "What's the injury, Trey?"

"Head wound." He shifted through the paperwork. "It doesn't really say what type of head wound—just heavy bleeding and patient is unconscious."

It didn't make one bit of sense given their relationship...or lack of relationship, but he couldn't deny the fear causing his heart to seize. Of course, none of his feelings about John contained one shred of logic. He disliked him for no good reason whatsoever, but also liked him a hell of a lot more than he should. Could you dislike and like someone at the same time? Never in his life had he been so physically attracted to another man. Ever.

"I think I'll wait around," he told Lydia and Trey. "I'm sure Dr. Stevens won't mind the help." They were always short-staffed, and though he'd been exhausted moments before, the unwarranted adrenaline rush of hearing his John might be injured gave him new energy.

Fuck, when did John become his?

He was being ridiculous anyway. There was no way it was his neighbor. They had the best security in Atlanta, and since John never seemed to leave the building, he had to

be perfectly safe...doing whatever in the hell he did every damned day. No, Zach was wasting his time. He could already be in his car and weaving his way through the parking garage.

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Would he look like an ass if he went ahead and left? Even after he'd told them he would stay? Yeah, that would be almost as bad as forgetting Trey's name. He had to work on that shit. The last thing he wanted was to be like the majority of the doctors he worked with on a daily basis. They all seemed to suffer from an acute case of I'm-a-god syndrome, which led to their reputation as arrogant pricks. He didn't have a problem with arrogance, but he hated the whole prick thing. More often than not, he wanted to punch most of them right in their faces. He refrained, but he damned well wanted to.

The double doors of the emergency room slid open and the EMTs came bursting through, pushing the gurney while applying pressure to stem the blood still flowing from an open wound on the patient's forehead. From the amount of blood on the sterile white sheets, they weren't having a lot of success. Head wounds often bled heavily; he didn't feel a need to panic. With a cool confidence, he strode toward an open cubicle and motioned for them to wheel the patient inside.

"Right here, Wayne. I'm staying over to help Dr. Stevens." He liked Wayne. The burly guy was not only hot, but a damned good EMT. He took his job seriously, and from everything Zach had seen, he treated everybody with respect. "Tell me what we've got."

He glanced down at the patient and went from cool professional to terrified onlooker in zero point one seconds. John. His beautiful neighbor lay on the gurney with a deathly pale face coated in crimson blood, completely oblivious to the chaos of the hospital or to the thundering of Zach's heart. Long black lashes rested peacefully against his cheeks. His usually pink lips were just as plump as ever, but they'd lost most of their coloring.

“You still with us, Doc?” Wayne asked gruffly, interrupting Zach’s stage one nervous breakdown and snapping him back to reality—a reality where it was his responsibility to bring all life back to John’s face.

“Of course,” he snapped, mad at himself but letting his voice take it out on Wayne. “Tell me everything you know.” He pulled on gloves and inspected John’s wound while he listened to what Wayne said, which wasn’t much since it appeared to be nothing more than a gash to the forehead. After relaying his orders to the nurses waiting close by, he asked Wayne, “John Doe? Didn’t he have any identification on him?” He continued to work on the injury, thankful the gash was small. He could close it with stitches so tiny the flesh would be almost perfect once it healed. “Wasn’t there anybody at the complex able to give you his name?” It wasn’t important...except to Zach. His annoyingly gorgeous neighbor deserved to be nicknamed something other than John Doe.

“Yeah...that’s his name. John Doe,” Wayne answered with a confused frown. When Zach looked at him like he was crazy, he continued, “This was called in by a private security firm. He has an alert bracelet he activated before he fell. They identified their client as John Doe.” Wayne shook his head. “I didn’t believe it, but when we checked his license for his age, it was right there in black and white. John Doe. That’s a horrible name. If your last name was Doe, why in this world would you name your kid John? In my world, that’s just cruel.”

John Doe? Seriously? An alert bracelet? What the fuck?

So many things didn’t add up about the man who’d captured his attention and, from the way Zach’s body responded, had no intentions of letting it go. While he gently swabbed the damaged area with a numbing agent, questions shot around his mind like a pinball machine. “He hasn’t woken up at all?” he asked Wayne, who was surprisingly still hanging around as Zach started his tiny stitches. Perfect stitches for a perfect face.

“Unconscious when we got there, and other than a few moans of discomfort, he hasn’t shown any signs of regaining consciousness. I checked his eyes, and he’s responding properly, but with a wound no more serious than he’s got, he should already be showing some signs of life.”

Wayne was right. Zach was about to go into panic mode again when he noticed John’s long lashes flutter. Ah, Sleeping Beauty finally decided to join them. Zach felt incredibly unprofessional, but every inch of him couldn’t wait to see those beautiful blue eyes. Suddenly, it was necessary it be his face John saw when he first opened his eyes. Zach had noticed John’s skittishness around people, so he wanted to ensure his patient didn’t feel threatened. Yeah, that was the only reason he gestured for everyone else to stay back as he leaned over John.

“Hey, John. Think you can open those eyes long enough to look at me? Come on.” He urged his patient’s compliance, hoping his smile came through with his words. If the others weren’t blind, and they weren’t, they saw him stroke John’s cheek with the tip of his finger. At the moment, he didn’t give a fuck what they thought about his bedside manner. He’d worry about it later, after he knew John was okay.

More fluttering of the eyelashes and then those gorgeous eyes opened with a lazy movement. Zach smiled a welcome to him and said, “There he is. You had me worried.” He could see the confusion in John’s eyes and then, with a switch which went straight to Zach’s cock, those eyes turned warm and happy as he focused on Zach. If he thought his cock’s reaction to John’s gaze was strong, it was nothing compared to what his heart did when John returned his smile. Not one of his shy smiles. He gave him a full-blown I’m-happy-to-see-you smile. The pitter pat of Zach’s heart switched to a gallop.

“Hey, Zachary,” he murmured and then licked his lips. “I know your name now. Your friend outed you last night.” John appeared to be trying to blink away the cloudiness and confusion inside his head. Zach doubted John remembered much at all about

what happened or why he was at the hospital. “You fell and hit your head. It took a few stitches, but nothing major. You’ll be good as new in a few weeks.”

“Hit my head. Okay.” He frowned and took a deep breath before murmuring, “I think I have a crush on you.”

Zach blushed and grinned at the same time. John’s mind was still a bit foggy, but Zach told himself the foggiess caused by the loss of blood merely resulted in John dropping his guard and saying things he wouldn’t normally admit to.

John tried to reach up to touch the damaged spot.

“Easy, sweetheart,” Melia, the nurse assisting Zach, said with a smile while easing his hand back down to the gurney. “You’ve got an IV in your arm, and we don’t want to accidentally yank it out. How are you feeling?”

One second, Zach stood over John, basking in the crush comment. The next second, the entire situation went straight to shit. John’s blue eyes looked up at him with all sorts of sweet promises shining brightly, and then, when John heard the nurse’s voice, those sweet promises morphed into sheer terror. His head whipped around in the direction of Melia, and when his gaze landed on her face, John’s entire body trembled, and it wasn’t a tiny nervous tremble. He gave a full-blown, shake-the-entire-gurney tremble. His eyes scanned around him, growing wide and pupils dilating at an alarming rate.

Zach recognized the beginning stages of a serious panic attack. He had no idea what caused it, but it was coming. Fast. When John gasped for air and started struggling wildly, Zach knew it would be bad.

“Easy, John,” he coaxed while trying to keep his patient lying on the gurney. “You’re safe. I’m right here.”

John flailed wildly. Gasping. Begging for help with his eyes because no words could squeeze through his frozen airways. When he managed to rip his hand from Melia's tight grasp, he grabbed for Zach and wrapped their hands together. Zach didn't understand why panic attacks happened or all the logistics of one, but he recognized sheer terror when faced with it, and the wild look locked on John's face was certainly terror.

Thank goodness Wayne had hung around because it took all his muscled bulk to keep John on the gurney. From having witnessed John's gym workout, Zach knew his wiry patient was all lean muscle.

"Come on, John," Zach urged as he held their hands together. "You're safe. I'm right here. Nothing's going to happen to you. I need you to breathe for me, okay? Focus on breathing."

John shook his head wildly in an effort to let Zach know he couldn't breathe. Tears streaked his face. Tremors shook his body. John gripped Zach's hand tightly, and Zach could feel the wild thumping of his pulse beneath his fingertips. The vein at the base of his neck quivered and quaked.

"John! John! I'm looking for John Doe. An ambulance should have brought him in minutes ago. John Doe. Is he here?" The yelling voice drew Zach's attention.

The hospital staff wouldn't allow the man back there, so he told Melia to go get him. Jumping over protocol would be worth it if it helped calm his patient. He wasn't leaving John for any reason. To the other nurse, he ordered a sedative for the IV. He didn't want to sedate John but it might be his only option.

"You've got to do it, Doc," Wayne said, answering Zach's silent battle. "He's going to hurt himself if you don't calm him down." To John, he said, "You're good, little man. Everything's going to be okay. Can you count for me? Do you count to help you

calm down?”

How in the hell is Wayne an expert on panic attacks? More importantly, why didn't I think of that?

John's eyes glazed over. Zach wasn't even sure he heard what Wayne said to him. The terror coursing through him appeared to be consuming every inch of his brain. The nurse returned with the sedative, Melia and the mystery man right behind her. Zach's inner caveman roared with fury when he realized the man searching for John turned out to be John's pimp. What is that bastard doing here? When the man tried to move to John's side, Zach barked, "Get back!"

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With Zach's nod, Melia took the ordered syringe from the other nurse and injected the sedative into John's IV port and then stepped out of the way. Wayne struggled to keep John as immobile as possible and needed all the room he could get. Zach made a mental note to thank Wayne for sticking around and helping to keep John safe.

"He's agoraphobic," the man Zach tried to ignore said. "What did you give him? He's already on medication. You damned well better not have given him something that might cause a negative interaction with his other medicine." To Wayne, he said, "You shouldn't have brought him to the hospital without permission. This is going to be devastating to John."

Wayne glared and answered, "Not your call, buddy. He needed emergency medical attention and wasn't conscious to say otherwise."

Agoraphobic? Zach's mind searched for everything he knew about the mental illness. Did they even refer to it as a mental illness? He knew it meant someone feared leaving their home. That didn't make sense; John left his apartment all the time. They'd shared an elevator at least a half a dozen times. He'd seen him in the gym. Argued in the hallway. If John never left his apartment, Zach would have never seen him, and he wouldn't be spending about eighty-five percent of his time lusting after him.

John's body started to relax, and a few seconds later, he sucked in a giant gulp of air. The sedative worked its magic on John's nervous system.

"It's okay, baby. Just relax and let the medication help you. I'm right here. You're going to be fine," he promised. John's body might be drifting off into sleepy land, but

the grip on Zach's hand remained tight. Zach knew he said words, like baby, which he had no business saying, and he every eye in the room remained on him, some curious and some angry. He hadn't been working with this hospital staff very long and wasn't completely sure they were aware he was gay—he also didn't care if they found out. He doubted they cared one way or the other, but from the hostility rolling off John's friend, he definitely cared. Asshole.

John's eyes finally drifted closed, and the grip on Zach's hand loosened and then fell away completely. Zach missed the connection immediately. He was in some serious trouble where John was concerned. Some crazy alpha protect-what-is-mine reaction kicked in the second he'd recognized his neighbor on the gurney.

“Have you taken care of his injury?” his nemesis demanded. “If you haven't, get it completed so I can get him back to his apartment. I don't want him waking up and facing this shitshow again. I feel quite certain any progress John's made with his issues were clearly tossed out the fucking window today. He's already a scaredy-cat as it is. I don't need this bullshit added to his list of I can't.”

Zach's feelings for the man in front of him went from intense dislike to pure hatred. The bastard might be pretending to be John's friend, but the shit tumbling from his mouth proved otherwise. Zach wanted to literally pulverize him into the ground—somewhere besides the emergency room because he didn't want to risk someone trying to bring him back after Zach destroyed him.

“Remember the time we ran into that huge asshole in the emergency room, Doc?” Wayne asked with a smirk and a shake of his head. “That dude was a real douche. Kinda made me want to kick his scrawny ass.” His eyes lasered in on the man Zach already envisioned being strapped to a medieval torture device.

Zach smiled. “I remember it like it just happened, man. Like it just happened.”

Melia choked back a laugh.

Bad guy didn't seem to find their joke nearly as amusing as the rest of them. Tragic. Zach didn't give a fuck about anything the asshole thought.

"I'm John's court-appointed caregiver. Get him ready to go home. Now."

Zach immediately started caring about what the asshole thought. The bastard might very well have the power to remove John from his life permanently. That wouldn't do. He didn't trust the man, confident he didn't truly have John's best interest at heart, but he recognized playing nice might be necessary for a while—just until he figured out what the hell was really going on. Agoraphobia didn't make sense from everything Zach had seen regarding John. Of course, he wasn't an expert on the subject...but he would be before the end of the day. He vowed to learn everything possible about agoraphobia. Never again did he want to see the terror he'd just witnessed in John's beautiful eyes.

Plastering on a fake smile, Zach asked, "What's your name again? I've seen you around the building, visiting John, but I don't think we've been introduced. I'm Zachary." He stuck out his hand for a friendly handshake.

"Cameron. Cameron Maverick. You're John's neighbor, right?" Cameron's dark eyes studied him closely, but he at least shook the hand Zach offered.

It didn't take a medical degree to see Cameron didn't trust Zach's sudden attitude change. He'd have to try harder. "Yes, I just moved in several months ago," he answered. "John may have a concussion, Cameron. He hit his head hard when he fell and needed several stitches. He really needs continued medical care until we know he's completely safe."

Cameron frowned. Zach couldn't help but notice he hadn't one time looked down at

John, much less reached out to touch him or tried to comfort him when he'd been suffering through his panic attack. The man looked to be around John's age, maybe a year or two older. Men using hair products didn't bother him...except with Cameron. Zach didn't like anything about him. Not the expensive suit tailored to fit his small frame. Not the impeccable hair, every hair in place and held prisoner with some ridiculous-looking gel. Definitely not the cold way he treated John.

"He isn't staying in the hospital. He can't handle being away from his safe zone. I want him back in his apartment before he wakes up. They should've never brought him here without my approval."

Zach ignored Wayne's disgusted snort, even if he agreed wholeheartedly. "I understand your worries. I believe it's safe to say we're all concerned about John's welfare." Zach looked down at a resting John. The gash had been tiny with no other discernable injuries. Zach's mind whirled for a solution best for John. He'd prefer to have a CT scan since John hadn't regained consciousness quickly. But if the original injury were due to a panic attack, it explained so much.

Getting him home before the sedative left his system might stave off another attack, which would be in John's best interest overall. Zach never wanted to see that terror engulf John again. If they weren't able to rule out a concussion, though, someone would need to stay with him to monitor his situation.

With limited options, Zach offered, "Why don't you and I take John back to his apartment, and I'll spend the rest of the evening monitoring his recovery and welfare? My shift was over anyway."

Cameron frowned, but seemed to be pondering Zach's solution. Finally, he said, "I guess that's okay. The main thing is getting him back where he feels safe."

Maybe Cameron wasn't as bad as Zach pegged him for.

“He’s going to be very upset when he wakes up and realizes what happened today.” Cameron grinned like they were buddies. “He prefers to keep his crazy tucked away from prying eyes,” he added with a laugh.

Zach bristled again. No, Cameron was just as bad as Zach suspected—maybe worse. Keep his crazy tucked away? What the fuck kind of comment is that? Agoraphobia didn’t make John crazy; it made him a victim of a situation beyond his control. He was a hostage of his own mind. John needed support, not smartass comments from an asshole pretending to be his friend.

“I’ve got to fly, Doc,” Wayne growled in fury. “You finished with me? I think I’m about to be sick.”

Zach turned to Wayne and tried to send him a silent message with his eyes. “Sure, Wayne. Thanks for all your help. I’ll make sure John knows you treated him with respect and were concerned for him.”

Wayne raised his chin in acknowledgment and then made a hasty exit. The EMT was beyond pissed. Zach understood the sentiment. He was a couple of steps above pissed with Cameron, but he was going to have to keep it tucked away. He needed to use Cameron at the moment, so playing nice with the asshole topped his immediate agenda.

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“Melia, can you make sure John’s paperwork gets taken care of for me? Try to rush things, if you can. Mr. Maverick and I would like to have John back in the safety of his apartment before the sedative wears off.”

When Melia rushed off to take care of the paperwork, Zach began carefully removing John’s IV. To keep Cameron in the loop and Zach on his good side, Zach said, “Agoraphobia? How long?”

Cameron shrugged like it was no big deal at all—as if John wasn’t trapped inside a prison he’d created and probably didn’t have a clue how to get out of.

“Oh, I don’t know. All his shit started about four years back. Things slowly got progressively worse for him, and he stopped leaving the building about three years ago.” He looked down at his watch and spat out a string of curse words. “Listen, how long is this going to take? I can’t spend the rest of my day babysitting Scaredy-Cat over there. I need to be in court in two hours. Jeezus, keeping John out of the nuthouse is a fucking full-time job.” Cameron’s ringing cell phone cut his tirade short. He yanked out the noise-maker, looked at who was calling, and muttered, “I’ve got to take this. Perfect. Fucking perfect. Now I’ve got to answer to him.” He turned and strode away, leaving Zach drowning in hatred.

“Why do you hang out with people like him, sweet John?” he whispered to his patient. “You deserve so much better. You need to be with people who really care about your health...who really care about you.”

Is that me? No, that isn’t possible. What I’m feeling toward John simply has to be connected to my profession—my commitment to offer aid and assistance to those in

need. Oh hell, my infatuation with my neighbor doesn't have one damned thing to do with my physician's oath. It has everything to do with the way my heart speeds up when I see John. Or the way I get angry with him when I see other men going into his apartment. Maybe it's connected the sweet smile John tries to hide when he sees Denala in the hallway or elevator.

After a few minutes, Cameron came barreling back into the cubicle, interrupting Zach's thoughts. "Are we ready yet? I've got to get to the courthouse. Something's come up." Sweat coated Cameron's red face. The ugly vein right next to his left eye throbbed with a nervous twitch. His entire body looked jittery and tense. Obviously, the phone call hadn't gone well.

Good. Zach took a few seconds to enjoy the asshole's discomfort. Seconds before Cameron totally lost it and got pissed with him again, Zach said, "Why don't you go do what you've got to do, and I'll make sure John gets back to his apartment. If it's all right with you, I'd like to sit with him for the rest of the evening—just to monitor him because of the blow to his head." Zach didn't give a fuck if it was all right with Cameron or not; he wasn't leaving John's side, but the noose of playing nice stayed wrapped around his neck for the moment.

Zach could see how torn Cameron was with his offer—it didn't make one bit of sense, but the other man wasn't pleased with the prospect of Zach sitting with John. Were they an item? He sure the fuck hoped not since Cameron stepped right over the asshole line and straight into being a complete motherfucker when it came to John's wellbeing.

"I don't really like people being around John," Cameron mumbled. Then, seeming to catch the questionableness of his comment, he quickly added, "John doesn't really like to be around people. His crazy doesn't sit well with meeting new folks, talking, being social." He laughed out loud. "You know? All the stuff the rest of us call normal."

As Zach ground his teeth down to nubs, his fingers itched to squeeze the life out of Cameron—squeeze until his eyes bugged out and his lips turned blue. He'd show the motherfucker crazy. Crazy meant being a total asshole to someone you called your friend. Hell, Cameron said he had the goddamned ability to make medical decisions for John. Zach hoped to hell the poor kid never got a mild cold—Cameron would want to pull the plug before it was plugged in.

"I'm pretty sure it's referred to as a mental illness instead of crazy," Zach corrected, but did it with a smile he hoped Cameron would interpret as I-get-ya, but the medical profession didn't smile on being politically incorrect so he had to mention it. "Anyway, I see plenty of folks coming and going from his apartment. He must not hate being around people too awfully much." Guilt ran through him for the comment, but he still couldn't get past not knowing what John did with those men. Whatever happened in John's apartment, Zach was jealous. He wanted it to be with him.

Cameron laughed again. "Oh...you noticed that, did you? Hot guys coming and going all the time." His grin grew more evil when he asked, "What do you think is going on, Doctor?"

"Not my business," Zach answered gruffly. The look on Cameron's face made the hair on the back of Zach's neck stand up. "I was only stating the facts. You said John says he doesn't like being around people, but it seems like he may say one thing, but wants something differently."

"I like you, Doc. You're all right. I didn't think I would at first, what with John talking about you all the damned time, but you're okay. John's a model for an adult website. The guys coming and going are just other models he's doing photo shoots with." Cameron wagged his eyebrows and said, "Since he won't leave the building, I needed to find a way to share his prettiness with the rest of the world, right? He may be a pussy, but he's a pretty pussy. He makes a fucking fortune with those photo shoots."

Zach stomach churned with bile. What type of photo shoots did one do for an adult website? Sure, it beat prostitution, but still pissed Zach off. The thoughts of other men jacking off to pictures of John made Zach's blood pressure go through the roof.

Wait...shit...what had Cameron said about John talking about him? Why had John talked about him to Cameron? Was it good? Was it bad? Had John noticed Zach's surreptitious glances when he'd thought John wasn't watching? There was so much Zach didn't understand, but he knew one thing: he wanted Cameron out of his eyesight. Fast.

"I'm sure you're busy, so let me take care of this for you. I was headed home, anyway. John knows me, so when he wakes up, it shouldn't be too scary for him."

"Okay," Cameron finally conceded, glancing down at John still out on the gurney. "I appreciate it, man. I really do need to be in court. I'll call Mack and make sure he helps you get John up to his apartment and then he can override the security code and get you inside Fort Doom and Gloom. I doubt I'll be able to come over and check on him later this evening, but Mack has my number if you guys need me for anything."

Zach frowned. "Who's Mack?"

"Oh, yeah, Mack is head of security at your apartment building. He helps me keep an eye on John. I talked with him earlier about what the hell went on and he told me a computer glitch caused all the locking mechanisms on the doors to malfunction." Cameron laughed again, and for the first time since arriving at the emergency room, he reached down to actually touch John, using the tip of his finger to brush John's hair off his forehead. "Most of us would have muttered 'what the fuck' and used our key to get inside our apartments. John went and had a fucking panic attack."

Zach wanted to yank Cameron's hand away from John and demand he never touch him again. He wanted to punch him in his arrogant face until it was unrecognizable.

He wanted to tell him he didn't deserve a friend like John. All those things would be nice, but, instead, he nodded and smiled.

"Okay, you get going, and if you don't mind, call ahead and make sure Mack is waiting on me." Mimicking Cameron earlier, Zach glanced down at this watch and added, "He won't be out much longer; I'd better get moving. Don't worry about him. I'll make sure he arrives safely back at his apartment and keep an eye on his head wound. Good luck in court," he offered politely. "A lawyer?"

"Yeah, DA's office. Thanks again, Doc. I appreciate this. John sucks a lot of time out of my schedule."

Chapter 4

The fog lifted slowly, luring him back into the land of the living, but Noah kept his eyes closed and tried to block out the real world. He fought it for all he was worth because he didn't want to face what had happened. If he stayed locked inside his drug-induced nap, he wouldn't have to admit to himself he'd succumbed to a panic attack, leading to him being taken to the hospital and away from his safe zone. Locked inside his mind, with his eyes tightly clenched together, he wouldn't have to face the fact he'd woken up with his beautiful neighbor looking down at him, smiling at him for the first time ever, and then the edges of his world had crumbled again. In front of said beautiful neighbor. Panic attack number two. Those lured potential lovers into your bed like cheese led mice to getting their necks snapped. Not.

The smile had disappeared as Zach watched him come undone.

It wasn't like he'd ever really thought there could be anything between him and his hot neighbor, but he'd hoped to at least keep his crazy hidden from the man. Zach normally looked at him like something to be scraped off the bottom of his shoe—he'd take that over pity. He hated pity. Hell, when he looked into the mirror, he saw pity in his own eyes; he didn't need to see it in the eyes of the man he lusted after.

Cameron called him a scaredy-cat. He supposed the nickname, although harsh and borderline cruel, fit better than some of the ones he'd called himself.

He forced those thoughts from his mind; they didn't do any good. Getting mad at himself never helped anything. It didn't make him braver. It didn't make him stronger. Pep talks didn't magically grant him the courage to leave his safe zone.

Cruel lectures on how utterly stupid he acted never resulted in him finding the balls to pass through the front door of his apartment building and step out into the sun. Everybody else who lived in the apartment building did it every day and nothing bad happened to them. They wouldn't even hesitate when they reached the automatic double doors. Never breaking stride, they would be on his side and then the other, leaving him behind. Every. Damned. Day.

Yet, he couldn't do it. Hell, he couldn't even open the heavy black curtains in his apartment and look outside, much less step out onto his balcony. He was terrified of his own shadow. Cameron might be a cruel bastard, but he had Noah pegged.

He didn't have to open his eyes to know he was back in his apartment. The smells were familiar. The mattress beneath him was the same one he rested on every night. Everything was exactly what it was supposed to be. Well, except for the fact he wasn't alone.

It wasn't Cameron. His friend would be bitching at him to wake up and quit wasting his time.

The heavy footsteps and breathing sounded like a man instead of a woman. While he might not have been totally awake, he'd been awake enough to know the man had been there with him since he'd become aware enough to realize he was no longer out of his safe zone, but safely back in his apartment. Sometimes the man moved around in the apartment, but mostly he sat at his bedside. A few times, he'd heard the man opening his kitchen cabinets and refrigerator, but the majority of his time had been spent tapping away on a laptop.

He should be terrified to wake up and find a stranger inside his safest of safe zones. His body should be prepping for panic attack number three. Sweet oxygen shouldn't be flowing through his lungs and his heart shouldn't be beating at a regular thump, thump pace. But none of that happened, which was strange. Well, shit. His heart

fluttered at his next thought.

His neighbor. Zachary. The guy he'd lusted after on a damned regular basis. A doctor. No...thedoctor. Zachary, hot neighbor, object of his lust was the doctor who'd witnessed his mental breakdown.

A doctor? Who would have thought it? He'd pegged his neighbor for a lot of things but the idea he might be a physician hadn't entered his mind. Zach's body, all tattooed and bulging muscles, looked more like that of a MMA fighter or professional athlete. Maybe a porn star. He'd definitely been the star of all the porn scenes Noah's mind had created.

Why was he there? More importantly, why wasn't Noah afraid?

"I know you've been awake for a while now, John," a deep voice said, interrupting his thoughts. "Are you keeping your eyes closed because you're afraid of me? Are you okay with me being inside your apartment? I don't want to make you uncomfortable, John, but more than that, I don't want you being alone right now." The voice, sexier than a voice had the right to be, was so close to him.

Noah knew all he had to do was open his eyes and tilt his head slightly to his left and Zach would be right there. Right. Fucking. There. In his apartment. Really fucking close to his bed. If he were stronger, he could reach out, give Zach a good yank, and tumble him right into bed with him.

He wasn't stronger. Nor, of course, did he have the balls to do something so bold and brave. On the outside looking in, someone might call him a coward. On the inside looking out, Noah felt like a total badass because he wasn't hyperventilating from one of his many unexplained fears. It was that badass feeling that gave him the courage to go ahead and open his eyes. Everything was foggy or blurry for a few brief seconds before he could focus in on Zachary's face. Instead of his usual scowl, he sported a

friendly smile as he looked down at Noah.

Noah took a deep breath...just to prove to himself and Doctor Zach he could, and answered, "I'm not afraid of you."

Noah sounded fragile, which pissed him off. He might be mentally weak, but his body was strong. He didn't have another damned thing to do with his day except to work out in the gym.

"Good. I want you to feel safe with me. Is it okay I'm here?" Zachary leaned forward, elbows on his knees, as he talked with Noah. Everything about his body language screamed, "Easy, easy," like trying to not scare a timid animal.

Noah tried for a shrug. "Sure. Why not? I guess I can't hide my crazy anymore, huh?"

An angry frown marred Zach's beautiful face, and he responded quickly. "Don't talk like that, John. You aren't crazy. Your friend told me you suffer from agoraphobia. That doesn't make you crazy by any means."

"Don't call me that," Noah snapped irritably. When he realized what he'd said, he gasped in surprise. He'd never once even considered telling anyone his real name, not since the day he'd received his new identity. With Zachary, he had to hear the man call him by his real name, not the coward named John Doe.

"Call you what?" Zachary asked, his eyebrows pushing together in apparent confusion.

Noah realized what he was about to say would probably only validate his craziness to Zachary, but it was still something he wanted to do. Hell, Zach probably wouldn't even believe the next words out of his mouth. "John. Don't call me John. It's not my

name.”

Zachary’s lips did a funny little smirk before he said, “Your name really isn’t John Doe? Surely you jest. It’s a common enough name.” He kept grinning as if he were having fun. “You know, I told myself you didn’t look like a John. Was I right or are you just messing with me?”

Telling people his real name wasn’t safe. Well, except, being with Zachary made him feel safe for the first time in four years. Did that make any sense? Hell no, it didn’t. Did he care? Not one damned bit.

Warning bells gonged inside his head, signaling how close he skirted to the edge of making a fool of himself. If he lost his shit in front of Zachary again, he could forget ever seeing his sexy smile directed at him. Why had he brought up the fact John wasn’t his real name? He should’ve known it might trigger a flight or fight response. In his case, it was always flight...never fight. Right then, he needed to fly away, and he knew exactly what would help him accomplish the task.

“I...I need my pills,” he wheezed out to Zachary. “It’s about to happen again. I need my pills.” He tried to sit up, but a wave of dizziness slowed him down, and Zach’s strong hand pushing against his chest stopped him altogether.

“Easy, tiger,” Zach warned softly as he continued to push Noah back onto the bed. “Don’t try to get up. Not yet. You hit your head earlier and had to get a few stitches. That along with the sedative I gave you at the hospital will make you dizzy. I’ll get them for you. Where are they?” Zachary’s muscular build left little doubt as to his ability to manhandle Noah, but the hand against his chest remained gentle. When his other hand reached up to brush some hair out of Noah’s face and tuck it behind his ear, Noah felt tears threaten to fall.

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It seemed like centuries since someone had touched him with an emotion other than anger or for strictly business. The hand against him radiated a warmth and comfort that was almost enough to keep him out of the panic attack zone. Almost.

“In the bathroom, in a basket under the cabinet. You’ll see them. Thanks,” he whispered. The feeling of being weak and pathetic coursed over him again, but the drugs were necessary. Sure, it sucked he had to have some of the strongest drugs on the market in order to merely cope with everyday life, but it was what it was.

He heard Zachary fumbling around in his cabinets and then heard him release a string of curse words that could’ve made a sailor blush. Noah was sure he wasn’t supposed to hear the profanity, but years of being fucking terrified of everything had heightened some of his senses, especially his hearing. An embarrassed blush stained his cheeks when faced with the reality that his stock of drugs had shocked the good doctor. He was so damned tired of being judged by people who couldn’t begin to understand what ate at his soul...taking away the very freedoms of life the vast majority of the world took for granted.

Did anyone honestly think he wanted to be this way? At Cameron’s urging, he’d joined an online chat group for others who suffered with agoraphobia. Seeing the comments and connecting with other people suffering through the same symptoms as he did had been helpful. On the other hand, it was an open chat group and anyone could comment. As it turned out, many people either didn’t understand their struggles or weren’t tolerant of what they perceived as a weakness. He got to witness with his own eyes the comments people made about his illness and the people who suffered from agoraphobia. It wasn’t pretty.

Just go outside, for fuck's sake. Stop being such a coward and join the rest of the world—we'll give you something to be scared over. Face your fears. Stay where you are; nobody wants crazy people like you out in the world, fucking everything up for us sane people.

The comments went on and on, mostly negative but with a few positives sprinkled in for good measure. It was strange how easily one could forget the positive comments and only focus on the negative shit. There could be one hundred positive, uplifting remarks and one negative. Noah would always focus on the negative.

Noah shook his head to refocus. He needed those damn pills. He had an en suite bathroom. How long could it take Zach to bring him the drugs? His chest started tightening up. Sweat coated his upper lip. He still sucked air in through his mouth, but the gasps were shallow and starting to get worse. Just when he was about to try standing again, Zachary rounded the corner, carrying the small basket, a glass of water, and a huge-ass frown. Noah wanted to ignore the frown, but couldn't.

“Stop judging me, asshole. I don't even know what you're doing here. Give me my pills and get out. If I needed someone to look at me with disgust, I'd look in the mirror.” He eased up on his elbow and reached out, intending to snatch the basket the second Zachary was within reaching distance. “Give me.”

Zachary remained just out of reach. Bastard. His gray eyes shifted between Noah and the basket of drugs. Noah could see the battle taking place inside the good doctor's pretty head. It pissed him off even more.

Zach sighed. “Please tell me you don't take all of these. Not only are these drugs dangerous, but some of them shouldn't be mixed.”

“Hand me my goddamned pills. I have a fucking prescription for all of them, so get off your high horse and make yourself useful. Hand. Them. To. Me.”

“I’m not on my high horse. I’m worried about you falling off yours. Hell, whatever-your-name-is, Goliath from the Bible couldn’t take this many drugs without landing on his ass, and you’re barely above twink size.”

“Give me my medication. Please.” He hated begging for anything, but even more than that, he hated Zachary seeing how weak he was. Taking the drugs prescribed to him messed with his body and mind, but they managed to keep the panic attacks from being an everyday part of his life.

“No.”

Noah couldn’t believe what he heard. No? Was Zach fucking kidding him? It was his medication. He wanted them. That should be the end of the story. Apparently, it wasn’t. He plopped his head back on the pillow, surprised Zachary, a doctor, would withhold his meds and somehow Noah was still breathing instead of hyperventilating. “Why not? You’ve seen me in action. You have to know how badly I need them.”

Zachary looked back down into the small basket holding his lifeline. Frowned. “What are all these for?” He frowned again. “What is your name? You were about to tell me. It’s weird not knowing what to call you. Help a guy out here.”

“You help a guy out and give me my medication,” he countered.

Zachary set the basket on the dresser, well out of Noah’s reach, and crossed his arms over his chest. “If you don’t tell me your name, I’m going to come up with some stupid pet name like kitten or pup. I’m going to make it as silly as possible. Save yourself and tell me your name.” Zachary used it as a threat, but Noah was afraid he might actually enjoy having someone call him a cute endearment. Nobody’d ever given him a pet name. More than that, he wanted to hear Zachary call him by his real name. John wasn’t real. He liked to pretend John was the weak one, the coward afraid to leave his apartment building. Noah was strong.

That, of course, equaled bullshit. John and Noah were weak. “Noah St. Clair. Nobody’s supposed to know it, so keep it to yourself. Can I have my medication now?”

“Noah. I like it much better than John Doe. Do you still need your meds? You seem to be breathing and cussing just fine.” Zachary looked quite smug with himself.

Dammit, the bastard was right. The panic attack had passed. Maybe being pissed acted as an anti-panic-attack weapon. Nah. He stayed pissed with himself pretty much around the clock, and the panic attacks still happened. “Yes, I need my medication. This isn’t a joke, Zachary. I’m sick. I don’t take antidepressants for the hell of it. I need them.”

“Have you tried any other methods of treatment? Psychotherapy? Meditation? Relaxation?” He moved closer to Noah and sat on the edge of the bed, leaving the basket of pills well out of Noah’s reach.

“The meds work fine. I don’t need anything else.” He would love for there to be another solution. He hated the drugs. He hated how they made him feel. He was a twenty-two-year-old who couldn’t get an erection without the help of Viagra. Well, Viagra or Zachary. Visions of Zachary in the gym had managed to get him hard on several occasions. “What’s your problem, anyway? You’re a doctor, for crying out loud. What kind of doctor is against prescription medication?” Noah got more and more irritated as his conversation with the hot doctor progressed but, oddly enough, it didn’t seem to be triggering any of his normal reactions: panic attack, fight or flight, piss himself.

Okay, he hadn’t done the last one yet, but Cameron laughed about the possibility of it happening all the time. Noah couldn’t begin to understand why his neighbor brought out this side of him, but he liked it. He liked it a lot. He almost felt normal.

Right. As if normal people fought over a basket of antidepressants. Normal people fought over money, television rights, and sex.

Actually, the entire interaction with his neighbor made absolutely no sense whatsoever, crazy or sane. Zachary had lived next to him for three months and barely spoken to him. When they shared an elevator, Zachary would station himself on the far side of the small box, hugging the corner as though he were the coward instead of Noah. When Noah caught Zachary looking at him out of the corner of his eye, Zachary's expression held a mixture of disdain and confusion. It'd been that way from the very beginning, as if Zachary hated him on sight. Noah was weird, but it usually took people a little longer to notice there was something different about him. Watching them trying to figure out what was off about him would have been comical if it weren't so sad. His neighbor didn't even try to figure it out; he'd hated him from the get-go.

Yet, here he sat, in Noah's apartment, arguing with him over something that wasn't his business. Noah had been floating on the outskirts of reality while in the hospital, but he could have sworn he'd heard Zachary's voice speaking softly to him. He'd called him sweet names and sounded as if he really cared. Which didn't make one damned bit of sense. Even now, he sent out an I care vibe Noah desperately wanted to believe. Of course, that was a big part of Noah's problem; he was always desperate. At one time in his life, he'd been desperate for attention. Craved it more than one might consider healthy. Now, he was desperate to be invisible.

"I'm not against prescription medications, Noah. I'm against the abuse of prescription medications," Zachary said, still lounging on the edge of Noah's bed like he owned the fucking place...and Noah.

Warm waves of delight washed over Noah when Zachary said his name. It'd been so long since he'd heard it. For a while, when he'd still been trying to hold onto his old life, he'd looked in the mirror every morning and every night and said his name out

loud. It'd been his attempt at keeping a part of him alive. He'd failed. Eventually, Noah had disappeared and there was nothing left but John. The pathetic man who depended on someone else for fucking toilet paper.

He'd thought Noah was lost forever until Zachary appeared in his life. Little by little, day by day, Noah struggled to come out and play.

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Well, except Zach didn't want to play with Noah. There'd been that.

Shit, wait. Had Zach just accused him of drug abuse? That was what the bastard had said. How did he think he knew anything about Noah? Fury bounced around inside him and it felt good. He preferred anything over the cloud of terror that normally resided in his head.

"I don't abuse drugs, asshole. I follow the directions for every medication I take. Who do you think you are? Get out. You don't have any right being here, anyway." Noah prayed Zach didn't go. They might be arguing, but at least he had someone with him.

"I didn't mean you were abusing the drugs. The physician who prescribed the medication is the one responsible for the abuse," Zach clarified, making Noah feel better. Only a little, because he really needed those medications.

"Doctor jealousy?" Noah quipped. "If it makes you feel better, I'll let you write me a prescription, too." Shit, that isn't funny. He'd been trying to be funny. The flare on Zach's face told him he hadn't hit his mark.

After a few uncomfortable seconds, Zach answered, "Okay, I'll prescribe something for you, something I think might help better than anything in this basket. Are you willing to try it? You can't have both. It's either what I give you or what those pills give you." Zach leaned closer. "Are you willing to take a chance? I'll be right here with you, Noah. I won't let you fall."

Something that will help better than my antidepressants? Please let it be sex. Please

let it be sex. I haven't wanted sex in four fucking years, but I want it with hot neighbor Zach. Would a doctor actually prescribe sex? In my fantasy world, they do. In my fantasy world, they not only prescribe it, they hand out the necessary tools to fulfill it.

"You can't stop me from falling, Zach. When it happens, the best damned thing for you to do is get out of my way. Trust me, it's ugly." It wasn't going to be sex. He could see it in his eyes. No sex for Noah.

"I've got strong arms. Let me decide what I can or can't handle." Zach smiled. "Now, I'm going to get something and I need to know you are going to be okay while I'm gone. Two minutes at the longest. Will you be all right?"

No, he probably wouldn't be okay, but Noah saw no reason to burst Zach's bubble. And there was always the tiniest chance Zach intended to go after condoms and lube. "Sure. Take your time." Nothing like sarcasm to woo a man into his bed.

"Smartass," Zach quipped and then pulled out his phone. He tapped away for a few seconds and then handed it to Noah. "Play that game while I'm gone. It'll help you focus on something else, and maybe, just maybe, you can get me past the level. I've been stuck so long I'm about to get the charity fuck and that's just embarrassing."

Taking the phone, Noah asked, "What's a charity fuck?" Then, as a blush burned his cheeks, because if the truth be known, he would be a charity fuck for Zach, he quickly amended, "What's a charity fuck have to do with this game?" He looked down at the game to hopefully keep Zach from noticing his discomfort and then nearly laughed out loud when he noticed the level Zach was stuck on. The good doctor must be very bad at gaming. He immediately sobered when the devil on his shoulder reminded him the good doctor had a life. There were more things to do with his time than visit the gym, surf the internet, get online degrees, and play electronic games.

“You know...when the little elf inside the game finally feels sorry for you and lets the colors fall into place all by themselves. It’s like the little bastard knows I’m never go to get it, so he lets the shit fall into the magic slots.”

Noah laughed softly and tried to focus on the game as Zach left the room. He played games like this all the time to keep his mind focused on something other than how miserable he was. Oddly, Zach somehow knew the gaming would distract him for a few minutes. Of course, he was a doctor and probably had some inside knowledge on how to handle the crazies. Nut Cases 101 was more than likely on the pre-med syllabus.

He finished the level and moved on to the next one. Had it been two minutes? Had it been ten minutes? Was Zach coming back? Had he locked the door when he’d left? How would he get back in if he’d locked the door? How had he gotten in to begin with? Nobody should know his code. How did Zach know his code? How many other people knew the code? Was his safe zone no longer safe? What if...

“Hey, Noah. Here I am.” Zach’s voice suddenly interrupted his terrifying thoughts. “Look at me, okay,” he ordered. “Focus on me.”

Noah tried; he really tried. He could hear Zach’s voice—close—but couldn’t seem to find him. Everything to his left and right looked inky black. The spot in front of his eyes grew dimmer. Somewhere in the back of his mind, a voice told him it was tunnel vision. Don’t panic. This isn’t real.

Except it was real to him. He couldn’t find his way out. He’d slid straight down the rabbit hole, and he might not be able to find his way out this time.

A wet tongue swiped the side of his face and then a large furry...something...bumped against him. There was a soft whine and then another wet trail across his face. The room started to brighten again as the darkness faded. He

blinked and then blinked again when he found himself face-to-face with amber-colored eyes. Zach's German shepherd lay next to him on the bed, about as close as possible without climbing onto his lap. She gave another worried whine and used her tongue on his face again.

"Denala! Down, girl," Zach ordered as he reached for the dog's collar and started to tug her off the bed.

Noah wrapped his arms around the dog and held her against him. "No. Please," he begged. "Can't she stay a few more minutes?"

Zach eased onto the side of the bed, crowding Noah just enough...but not too much. "Are you sure? From what I've noticed, you seem to like animals, but I wasn't sure how you felt about one being on your bed." He shrugged. "Some folks frown on that. If you want her off, that's cool."

"Nuh-uh," Noah answered quickly. "I love dogs. Other than swiping a few strokes to the top of their heads when the owners aren't watching close enough, I haven't had a chance to play with one in a while." His hands loved every spot on the dog's body, oohing and aahing, and then complimenting her in doggie talk. "What did you say her name was?"

"Denala. It means noble protector," Zach answered as he reached out to tweak one of her ears. "The police academy rejected her—not aggressive enough and her tracking skills weren't worth shit. Connor told me about her, and I fell in love after only one meeting." He leaned in to kiss the tip of her nose. "She's a total slut, though. I turned my back on her for a few minutes at the dog park, and the next thing I know, she's pregnant. She wouldn't give the daddy up, though. For all I know, she got down and dirty with one of those wiener dogs. I've probably got an apartment full of German wieners," he grumbled.

Noah widened his eyes in excitement. “She had puppies? When?” Realization dawned on him. “Is that what happened yesterday? That’s why she barked so much? I knew something had to be wrong. She’s always so quiet.”

Zach dropped his gaze, shook his head, and then looked back up at Noah and Denala. “I’m really sorry about last night, Noah. I was an ass to you for absolutely no reason. I don’t know what got into me.”

Noah snorted. “Apparently, it’s the same thing that gets into you every time I’m around. You’ve made it clear I’m not your favorite person. It’s okay. I’m used to it. No biggie.”

Denala picked that moment to collapse against Noah’s side. She snuggled against him like she was settling in for a long winter’s nap. “Is she okay to be away from the puppies for a while? It looks like she’s ready for a nap.”

“I’m sure she would love a break from the puppies. It shouldn’t hurt for her to be gone for a little while if you don’t mind the company.”

“I would love the company,” Noah gushed. His day had started for shit, but turned out pretty damned good. Denala’s eyes fought a losing battle to keep them open.

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Noah felt Zach's finger beneath his chin, lifting his face to make him meet Zach's gaze. Frowning, he asked, "What?"

"Listen, Noah. How I treated you last night and, hell, all the other times we've bumped into each other, is a biggie. I've acted like a total asshole and I'm sorry. You...you scared me. That's no excuse for me to act like I did, but it's all I've got."

Noah squinted as he tried to understand where in the hell Zach was going with this conversation, what game he was playing.

"Scared of me?" Noah asked with a soft laugh. But if Noah had learned anything in that online body language class he'd taken, it appeared Zach was contrite and embarrassed. That would make sense if he really was sorry for acting like such an asshole in the past. Noah shook his head. "Not likely, big guy. Try again. Honesty usually works; give it a try."

"Coming from the man with a fake name," Zach countered.

Noah swallowed back a gasp. "Ouch," he finally answered. "I'm not sure that was fair, Zach. There's a reason for my dishonesty, and it has a hell of a lot to do with my safety. You know? As in I could die if I didn't lie." His anger rose with every word. "And yet, the very first time you dangle an olive branch in front of me, I tell you my real name. I haven't said that name in nearly three years, but I blurted it out to you within minutes." He turned away from Zach and started stroking Denala's soft fur. The beautiful animal possessed the ability to calm his soul. With a frown, Noah realized both the beautiful animals in his room affected him in ways nothing else ever had. "You're so much better at being an asshole, Zach. Maybe you should just stick

with that. From what I'm seeing, being nice is too big of a stretch for your pay grade."

Zach barked out a laugh and shook his head. "Damn, Noah, you're a mystery. I certainly can't claim to be an expert on agoraphobia since I've only had about an hour's worth of internet research to create the small list of what I do know, but you're a contradiction to most of what I've read. Yes, your mind has created a phobia of leaving areas you deem to be safe, but along with fear, you've got this sass about you that keeps coming out to play. Everything about you is a contradiction to me, and it has scared the fuck out of me since the first day I saw you standing in your doorway, letting one of your friends inside." He smiled at Noah's frown and kept going with his story. "When I looked into your eyes, I saw fear, wariness, and a heavy dose of innocence. Then I looked at what your friend wore and it was"—he chuckled—"it was everything except innocent."

"Some sort of black leather harness thing decorated his chest. Black bootie shorts barely covered his ass. Combat boots, unlaced. The man you were letting into your apartment appeared to be a poster child for wicked sex." His hand reached up and tucked some hair behind Noah's ear. "But you...you looked innocent. I'd see you out and about in the apartment building, going to the gym or eating in our in-house restaurant, and you never spoke to or smiled at anyone. You smiled at me, though. And tried to talk to me before you finally gave up and started treating me like you treated everyone else." Zach took another deep breath before continuing, "I tried so hard not to like you, because I didn't understand your signals. I've never wanted to dislike someone so damned much in my life."

Noah searched Zach's face and couldn't find any signs of dishonesty. He looked and sounded sincere. Hope started to blossom in his chest, and he needed to stamp that shit down, stop it before it took root and ended up breaking his heart. He couldn't do it though. Zach was like a drug. He'd end up being bad for him, maybe even destroy him, but the buzz he got from being around the man was too enjoyable to quit.

“I don’t understand, Zach. Why would you want to dislike me? I tried to be nice.”

“I’m a man who always needs to be in control, Noah.” Zach drew in a deep breath and paused so long Noah worried he wouldn’t continue. “My childhood was tough, and it made my desire to have things in order very...overpowering. Everything needs to fit into its appropriate box. Things that don’t make sense or don’t follow the rules usually turn me off. I simply find a way to expel them from my life. With you, it was different. You didn’t fit into any of my boxes.” He laughed again. “I would try to shove you into one, but then you’d do something that didn’t fit, and I’d have to pull you back out again. Normally, I would’ve been able to just ignore you and make sure you weren’t around to annoy me.”

“You did ignore me. Trust me, you did.”

“No, Noah. I didn’t. I tried. It should’ve been simple enough, but I couldn’t get you out of my mind. That’s never happened to me before and it scared me.”

Noah’s heart raced, but not in a bad way. Hell, if his body wasn’t pumped so full of drugs, his cock would probably be getting hard. “But you’re not scared of me now?” he asked.

“I’m scared fucking half to death, Noah. I’m terrified, and I’m excited, more excited than I’ve ever been about anything in my life. I’m tired, too. I’m tired of fighting what I’m feeling.” He smiled, but it was a nervous smile. “I’m definitely tired of being an asshole. It’s hard work.”

“You’re really good at it,” Noah answered. Zach had made a joke about it, so the proper response would be a witty comeback. That was what he’d watched on television. Inside his head, though, he wanted to be serious. No, he wanted to pretend to be normal, forget everything else and convince himself a chance of something happening between him and Zach was really a possibility.

“Yeah, Connor’s been my role model for years, so I wouldn’t be surprised if I have a talent for it. He’s taught me everything I know about assholery.”

“That’s not a word,” Noah said. “Connor...your friend from last night? He seemed nice enough.” Smiling, Noah added, “He wasveryfriendly.”

“Yes, he was,” Zach agreed with a frown. “He started to piss me off with his flirting. There was no doubt Connor thought you were totally hot, but he tried to push my buttons. We’ve been friends forever, and he knows me too damned well. Connor had already determined there was something going on with me and my neighbor.”

“Ha! He missed that one, didn’t he?” Noah countered with a snort. “Did you tell him I was crazy?”

“You aren’t crazy, Noah,” Zach reprimanded. “Stop saying that. It pisses me off.” Then, with a shameful look, he added, “I told him you were a prostitute.”

Noah stared at him in disbelief and then burst out laughing. “A prostitute? Me? Why in the hell would you think I was a prostitute, for fuck’s sake? It’s not like I can work a street corner, and I don’t get many drive-by customers since I’m locked up here in my apartment.” A prostitute? Medication-induced limp dick would make me the worst trick-turner on the face of the earth. A sudden thought struck Noah and he snapped his gaze up to Zach. “Shit! Does he still think I’m a prostitute? Didn’t you say he was a cop?”

“Nah, don’t worry about getting arrested. He told me I was an idiot,” Zach admitted.

“That was pretty stupid, man,” Noah answered with a cold laugh. “I mean, to be perfectly honest, a prostitute is on one end of the spectrum and I’m sitting lonely at the other end.” Noah figured he probably needed to get his sexual handicap out in the open since Zach had been alluding to them hooking up. He was fine with Zach

fucking him—no, he was tickled fucking pink with the thought of Zach fucking him. It wouldn't be fair, though, if he didn't let Zach know what he was up against.

Zach studied him for a few seconds, a curious expression on his face, and then curiosity morphed into the ugly truth. Noah knew the exact second Zach figured out what he'd hinted at. Of course, with Zach being a doctor, he probably understood better than most.

“Because of the meds?” Zach finally asked.

It surprised Noah. He'd expected Zach to be disappointed, disgusted, discouraged...any of those reactions wouldn't have surprised him. Zach's matter-of-fact attitude caught him off guard. Shit, maybe he'd read him all wrong. That had to be it. Why would someone like Zach even consider fucking someone like him? Now, he felt like a total idiot.

When Noah didn't answer fast enough, Zach prodded him along with, “I couldn't help but notice a bottle of Viagra in your basket of baddies. You must be getting some action, right?”

That comment put a frown on Zach's face and the heat of a blush on Noah's. He wasn't sure why Zach had gotten pissed, but Noah damned well knew why he'd blushed. How pathetic was it that a man his age had to take Viagra for a photo shoot?

“Yeah...uh...no. No action. I do some modeling for an adult website, and oddly enough, a limp dick doesn't seem to turn anybody on. I take them before we have a photo shoot.” Shit, admitting he did the adult website was almost as difficult as admitting to the Viagra. It wasn't something he was proud of, but his opportunities to make money were very limited. Cameron told him he should be lucky he'd found the website gig for him.

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“Porn?” Zach asked carefully. “You make porn videos?”

“No,” Noah snapped. “I pose for photos. Erotic photos.” He shrugged and tried to act like it was no big deal. “Give me a break, Mr. Pope. It isn’t like I have a lot of job opportunities inside this apartment. I tried some work-from-home shit, but it was never the financial opportunity they presented it to be.” His eyes pleaded with Zach to understand. “You know how expensive it is to live here, Zach. I have some money, but at the rate the money is going out of the account, it won’t last long. If...if I had to leave here, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Zach didn’t need to know Noah had nightmares about that situation becoming a reality. He would probably end up locked away in some psych ward where they conducted experimental medical tests on him if he got kicked out of his safety zone.

“Erotic photos, eh?” Zach asked softly. “Do you enjoy doing it? Posing for those photos?” He smiled and added, “Because I think I would enjoy looking at some of those photos.” His smile vanished. “I would enjoy seeing you, but I’m going to be honest and tell you it kinda pisses me off to think about other people seeing you. Those photo shoots were one of the things that kept me frustrated with you. I didn’t know what you were doing inside this apartment, but I wasn’t a part of it and it pissed me off. Oh, and I hated each and every man I saw coming and going through your door.” Zach’s possessive comment shouldn’t have made Noah so happy, but it did.

His insides glowed with some unknown warmth. He tried not to smile, but couldn’t stop himself. Zach wanted to see his naughty pics. That’s good, right?

“No, I don’t enjoy it, but like I said, my options for earning money are limited. I hate

posing for those photos because most of them are meant to be degrading to me. I don't like those other men touching me during the photo shoot, and I sure as shit don't like strangers in my apartment. This is my safe place. They shouldn't be here." Realizing what he'd just said, he quickly added, "You aren't a stranger, though. It's good you're here."

Wow. Maybe I should just politely request Zach give me a charity fuck? I'm making a fool of myself with my not-so-subtle comments.

"I'm glad you feel that way, Noah, because I'm really interested in exploring this crazy chemistry between us," Zach answered with a smile.

Zach reached for him and cupped the side of his face. Noah couldn't have stopped himself from leaning into the touch if his very life depended on it. He'd known he had a serious case of the lusts where his neighbor was concerned, but the peace and contentment caused by being near Zach shocked him. The daily dose of drugs and what they'd given him at the hospital for his panic attack still hummed through his veins, leaving him less than alert, but his body and mind felt more alive than they had in years. Excitement bubbled inside him and the foreign feeling was...very nice.

"I'd, uh, I'd like that, Zach," he finally answered. He really needed to stop having conversations inside his head; he was sure there were huge pauses in their conversation because of him, but those internal conversations were what he was used to. They would be tough to set aside. He definitely couldn't quit cold turkey. He smiled nervously and added, "I'm a pretty cheap date. You don't have to take me anywhere."

"Not funny, Noah," Zach countered quickly. "Those negative comments need to go, even the ones where you're making a joke but at your own expense." His frown deepened. "I have no idea who your psychiatrist is, but I wish you'd consider letting me find you a better one. You shouldn't be so focused on the negative things. Calling

yourself crazy? Unacceptable, babe. Totally unacceptable.” His fingertips kept stroking Noah’s cheek while he talked. “I assume your doctor makes house calls?”

Noah looked around the room until Zach’s hand stopped him. Confused, he asked, “Why do you think I have a psychiatrist? One minute you are telling me I’m not crazy, and then next minute, you are assuming I see a crazy doctor? Which is it going to be, Zach?”

The look on Zach’s face told Noah something was seriously wrong with his statement. He had no idea what it could be, but his life before his illness remained cloudy. Noah suspected the forgetfulness was how his mind tried to protect him from those horrific events. Since then, he’d really only had the television for guidance on social interactions, so he wasn’t a good judge of what people considered proper or improper talk. Finally, he asked, “What did I say wrong?”

“I’m concerned about what method of treatment you’re receiving, Noah. A psychiatrist is not a crazy doctor nor are you crazy. They help people deal with issues that have become too big for them to handle on their own. Hell, we all need to see one at some point in our messed-up lives,” he said earnestly. “I assumed you were seeing a psychiatrist because you have a social phobia you need help with and because you have a basket full of antidepressants and narcotics normally prescribed by a psychiatrist. If you aren’t seeing one, which I don’t agree with by the way, who is your attending physician? Maybe it’s someone I know.”

Noah shrugged. “I don’t remember his name, but it’s probably on the bottles. It’s been forever since I saw him. He was nice, though. The medicines he prescribed pretty much saved my life.”

Zach’s expression darkened. “When did you see him last, Noah?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe three years ago?” Noah couldn’t remember. He got his

meds every month like clockwork—that was what mattered.

“Three years,” Zach mumbled in disbelief. “Three fucking years? Are you sure?” His voice grew louder with each word.

Noah smiled...not because of Zach’s almost irate tone, but because of Noah’s response to it. He wasn’t getting at all nervous or panicky. He could one hundred percent of the time count on someone getting angry and loud to shut him down mentally.

“I’m pretty sure,” he answered. “I don’t think it’s been longer than that. Quieten your voice; Denala is trying to rest. She’s exhausted from her puppies, I’m sure.”

Zach looked like he was about to argue, but then just closed his mouth. Noah could tell he was mad about something, but that anger wasn’t directed toward him...so he was good. He lay back down on the pillows and snuggled against the warm dog. His body was tired, but content.

“All right, we’ll table this discussion for another time,” Zach said. “So...are you feeling okay? Denala seems to be able to help keep you calm. I hoped that would be the case.”

Noah popped back up again, alarm bells going off in his head. Zach was leaving him. That morning, alone equaled good. Now, alone equaled bad. “Are you leaving? Do you have to?” Shit, he sounded desperate and tried to tone it down. Zach had a life, and it didn’t involve babysitting him. “I mean, it’s okay if you need to go. Thanks for helping me out.” Please don’t go. Please don’t go. Please don’t go.

“Yeah, I need to run,” Zach said, popping Noah’s mental chant bubble. “I’ve got some things I need to take care of, but it shouldn’t take me more than an hour. Will you be okay until I can get back?”

He isn't leaving. Noah bit back a smile as his stomach did a happy dance appropriate only for a six-year-old boy. "Sure. I need a nap anyway," he answered. "You must have hit me with some strong shit. My head has cobwebs in it." A laugh bubbled up and he added, "More cobwebs than usual."

"That's because of the drugs, Noah," Zach clipped.

"Leave my drugs alone, Zach. I don't like how you're looking at them. They're mine. All mine. No touches."

"Fine," Zach muttered and then reached for something on Noah's nightstand. "I'm going to program my cell number into your phone, if that's okay." When Noah nodded, he continued, "If you start to feel nervous about anything, call me and I'll be right here. Understand? Try not to take the medication. Call me first."

Calling Zach was good. Noah could live with that. "Okay." He took the phone when Zach finished entering his number. That made three contacts in his phone: Cameron, Mack in security, and Zach. Hell, at this rate, he would have to get more gigabytes, or whatever the hell they were called. Okay, maybe not.

"Do you trust me to take your key? You couldn't get into your apartment earlier because of some stupid computer glitch. I don't really trust them right now, and I need to know I can get to you if something happens. I'll hand it over the minute I get back." He held up his hand and said, "Scout's honor."

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“From some reason, I doubt you were a Boy Scout,” Noah answered with a laugh. “Sure, take my key. I trust you.” Wow, he hadn’t truly trusted anyone in years, but he trusted Zach. He wasn’t an idiot; it was a trust based on nothing but mere faith on his part, but he went with it.

Zach stood. “Call me if you feel even the slightest twinge of nervousness. Denala will stay with you while I’m next door.” When Noah frowned, Zach explained, “I need to make some calls, check on the puppies, and then I’m going to scrape together some food to bring over and cook for us. Do you like steak, baked potatoes, and salad?”

Noah rolled his eyes. “Of course I like steak. I may be crazy—” He caught himself midsentence and stopped. “Yes, I like steak, baked potatoes, and salad, but I have plenty of food in the kitchen. Let me fix us something.” He started to get up, realized he was completely naked, and tucked the blanket back over his lap. How did I get naked? More importantly, how in the hell didn’t I notice?

“There’s nothing but junk food and frozen dinners in your kitchen. There’s caffeine and sugar everywhere, and neither of them are good for helping you overcome your phobia. Caffeine is a no-no for agoraphobia. You should know this. Your doctor should’ve told you this, and whoever is bringing you this shit should know better, as well. I’m cooking your supper and then, together, we are going to clean out your cabinets. No arguments, hot stuff. I’m going to help you get better.”

Uh-oh. That comment made Noah sad. Zach thought he could make him better—fix him. Noah knew it was too late. Zach would figure it out on his own before too long, so Noah vowed to enjoy his time with his hot neighbor for as long as Zach would allow it. “So, what happened to my clothes? I can’t help but notice I’m buck-ass

naked.” Noah liked Zach’s blush when he brought up the state of his undress.

“You had blood all over your clothes. I ditched them. Is that a problem?” Zach asked.

Flirt! You know how to flirt. You can do this. His mind cheered him on. “I don’t know, Zach. I guess how I feel about you seeing me without my clothes on has to do with whether you were impressed.” He shrugged like his words were no big deal, but his teeth were busy tugging at his bottom lip, giving testimony to just how out-of-practice he was with the whole flirt thing. “I don’t have another damned thing to do with my time except work out in the gym, so I’m really hoping you were impressed.”

He couldn’t believe he’d just said that. Zach had treated him with nothing but contempt in every previous encounter, and Noah acted like they already had a fuck-date set. His teeth tugged at the skin on his bottom lip again until Zach reached up and tugged his lip away from the attack of his teeth. He hated the nervous gesture, but hadn’t made any progress in overcoming it. But, then again, he hadn’t made progress in overcoming any of his phobias or weaknesses, so he shouldn’t be surprised.

“Let’s leave the biting of your lips to me, okay?” Zach whispered in a voice that made Noah’s entire body feel warm. When Noah nodded, Zach continued, “I was impressed, Noah. I’ve been impressed with your body from day one. Now, you asked me where your clothing went and I answered. Tell me, where did your tattoos go?”

“Oh...those...yeah, they aren’t real. Cameron sends somebody in to paint me up before a photo shoot. Disappointed?”

“Nope,” Zach answered. “They were sexier than fuck, but the pale perfection you have going on right now works even better.” He stood and said, “Be a good boy while I’m gone. No pills. Rest. If you start getting nervous, call me immediately.”

“Yes, sir,” Noah answered.

Zach's eyes widened and then darkened. Noah's cock twitched at the hot gaze. Just a twitch, but a twitch to a man who'd been without twitch for a long time was good. Really good.

Chapter 5

Zach checked his watch again. It'd only been about forty minutes, but he already felt nervous about leaving Noah for so long. His feelings didn't make a bit of sense, but they were what they were. As soon as he'd noticed how infatuated he'd been with his neighbor, he'd erected walls to protect himself. Noah knocked those fuckers down when he'd reached for him at the hospital—when he'd looked up at him like he'd believed Zach could save his life.

NoahneededZach.

ZachwantedNoah.

If there was ever a wrong path to travel when trying to dip one's toe in the dating game, he and Noah were taking that path. Everything was wrong with the groundwork laid between the two of them. They'd cleared up a few things, but so many lies and misunderstandings still existed between them...on both sides. Zach possessed some weird desire to fix the unfixable—it was one of the reasons he'd become a doctor.

Noah appeared to be pretty much alone in this world, addicted to prescription medication, suffering from at least one phobia, and didn't have many other potential boyfriend/lover candidates because of his inability to leave his safe areas. Any of those issues could easily be the reason he'd shown interest in Zach. No doubt about it—they were reaching for each other for all the wrong reasons, but Zach couldn't step away from Noah if his very life depended on it. Some unexplainable bond had formed at the hospital, and Zach had no interest in trying to sever it.

Just as he grabbed the basket of food he'd packed to carry to Noah's apartment, his cell phone started to ring. Thinking it might be Dr. Nichols calling him back with psychiatrist recommendations, he set the basket down and answered, "Zachary Meadows."

"Ha! Don't you sound all professional," Connor responded with a laugh. "Clearly you didn't check to see who called."

Zach rolled his eyes; he didn't have time for Connor's nonsense. He almost groaned when he remembered his clubbing date with Connor tonight. Yeah, that wasn't happening. "Ha. Ha. Very funny. What do you need, Connor? I'm kind of busy right now." He checked his watch again. Shit. He hadn't meant to take this long. He frowned as he looked at the food basket and wondered if Noah had a grill on his outside balcony. Since there'd been one included with his apartment, he could only assume Noah had one too. He was also certain Noah's had never been used. Double shit. He would need come back to grill the steaks.

"Okay, okay; I'll make it fast, but there are some things I need to get off my chest...about what happened last night."

Perfect. His future held a lecture. "Say it, but be quick about it," he told Connor. "I want to go on the record before you start and let you know I know I acted like an asshole and I'm sorry about that. It won't happen again. I'm over my dislike for my neighbor." Yeah, understatement of the year.

Connor huffed into the phone. "Well, that wasn't very fair. An apology takes the wind out of my sails."

"Are we finished, then?" Zach asked hopefully. At this rate, the steaks would rot before he could get them on a grill.

“Okay, here goes. There’s room for only one asshole in our relationship, and I’ve kinda had the monopoly on that spot since I met you at the playground. To be honest, my title has gone uncontested, and it kinda sucks you’ve decided to give me a run for my money. Stop. It isn’t cool. Me the asshole; you the good guy. End of story.” Then in a much more serious tone, he said, “I know what you’re doing with your neighbor, Zach. It’s how you do things...how you keep everybody at arm’s length. Over the years, I’ve noticed you doing it over and over again. The very second you think someone might be capable of meaning more than a fun fuck, you jack up all these walls around your heart, shutting them out before they even have a chance to step a toe inside. I get it; I know why you do it. You’ve had a shit life. Everybody that should’ve loved you and protected you didn’t. Other than me and my family, every other person has disappointed you. To avoid disappointment, you simply stopped letting anybody in.” He paused and then, in typical Connor fashion, he tried to add a bit of humor to the medicine and added, “Doing shit like that, Zach, kind of makes you a pussy. Don’t be afraid of giving your heart to somebody. I’m never going to get rid of you at this rate.”

Connor had him pegged perfectly. Zach shut people out, especially those who could be capable of worming their way into his heart, like Noah. He’d intentionally treated him like shit and tried to pick out every flaw he could find as a way to convince himself Noah wasn’t right for him. Zach hated being so transparent.

He hated admitting when he was wrong too; it always left a bad taste in his mouth. Twice in one phone call was unacceptable...but necessary. “You’re right, Connor. I’m not even sure I realized I did that until today. I can’t promise miracles, but I’m going to try to do better.”

“Uh-oh. That was too easy,” Connor murmured into the phone. “Was that some kind of code that you need help? You never admit you’re wrong without a four-hour battle and a PowerPoint presentation proving it to you. What gives?”

Now he sounded worried. Perfect.

“I was wrong about my neighbor, Connor. I acted like an ass, and I did it for all the wrong reasons. I see that now.”

Connor coughed into the phone. “Oh, yeah, about that,” he started slowly. “That’s the other reason I called. I know I just gave you the speech about opening your heart and not shutting people out as a way to protect yourself, but I want you to stay away from the hot neighbor boy. Keep doing what you’re doing with him. He smiles; you look the other way. Maybe even growl. Do whatever it takes to make him understand you aren’t interested.” After a few soft curse words, Connor added, “Hell, we may have to have your eyes removed until he moves out. He is a hot motherfucker.”

“What the hell, Connor? You were practically all over him last night, but then today, I need to steer clear of him? Stop shutting people out in one breath and then shut my neighbor out in the next? You need to make sense really fast or I’m hanging up.”

“I told you I thought he looked familiar last night,” Connor said. “Well, it kept driving me crazy after I got home. I knew I’d seen him somewhere and I spent all fucking night digging around to find out what it was about him causing the ding-ding to go off in my head. Around four this morning, I found what I was looking for. His name isn’t John; it’s Noah St. Claire. He’s trouble, Zach. I don’t want you involved with him.” Connor puffed out a frustrated breath. “Hell, Zach, I may even want you to move out of the apartment complex.”

What. The. Fuck.

Noah was trouble? Zach shook his head. How much trouble could he cause locked inside his apartment, a prisoner of his own mind?

He proceeded with caution. “Yeah, he told me his real name a little earlier. I assumed

he was hiding from somebody,” Zach answered. “That’s it, isn’t it? I mean, what else could it be? He’s a nice guy.”

“Oh, he’s hiding from somebody, all right,” Connor barked into the phone. “More important, though, is why are you talking to him and why did he give you his real name? What’s going on, Zach? Please tell me you didn’t fuck him.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but, no, we didn’t have sex.” Fucking didn’t even begin to describe what Zach wanted to do with Noah, and that scared him. “They brought him into the emergency room today, and I learned some things about him that made me see things differently.” Like when Noah reached for him, his heart melted. “Whatever it is you think you know about him, Connor, you’re wrong. Noah isn’t the bad guy.” Imagining Noah being anything but innocently beautiful was impossible.

“I didn’t say he was a bad guy. I said he was trouble and I want you to stay away from him—for your own protection, Zach. I dug through my old crime DVDs and found the clusterfuck I remembered him from. Listen to me. Noah helped bring down one of the biggest crime bosses in Las Vegas. As in, knee deep in kill-people-for-looking-at-you-wrong shit. His evidence and testimony put Donovan Moretti in jail. Donovan Moretti, Zach. Nobody messes with the Moretti family and lives to tell about it. Nobody.”

Chills of ice-cold fear raced through Zach, nearly bringing him to his knees. Crime bosses? Somebody wanted Noah dead? Connor could be guilty of being overly dramatic at times, and Zach wanted this to be one of those times.

“You still with me, Zach? Did you hear what I said? The Moretti family. I’ve changed my mind; I want you out of that apartment building. Moretti only got a slap on the wrist for the money laundering Noah nailed him on, so I’m sure he’s still calling shots from his prison cell. There’s no way in hell Daddy Moretti doesn’t have

an entire team of private investigators looking for the boy who did him in, and when he finds him, he won't care what friendly neighbor might try to get in his way. Noah will be dead and so will you if you're anywhere near the explosion. Pack your shit; you're moving out."

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“Overprotective, much?” Zach squeaked into the phone. A mixture of emotions tumbled around in Zach’s head, but none of them were fear for his own safety. All of them were focused on keeping Noah safe...making Noah feel safe. No wonder Noah was afraid of his own shadow. “I’m not moving.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that,” Connor answered. “I knew it was too late. I knew it the second I saw you look at him last night. You’ve already tumbled head over ass for this kid, haven’t you?”

Zach leaned against the counter because there was a good chance his legs were about to give out on him. “The tumbling motion may already be in progress,” he answered honestly. “Just for the record, he isn’t a kid. It makes me sound creepy when you call him that, like I’m a pedophile or something. He’s only eight years younger than us.” Fuck, eight years sounds like a lifetime when I say it out loud.

“No, more like a cradle robber,” Connor answered with a laugh. “Okay, we’ve got to move on to Plan B, then. If you aren’t going to move, then we’ve got to make sure you and Noah stay safe while I work on another plan to make Moretti disappear for more than six fun-filled years in his local penitentiary. I’m going to meet with the head of security for your complex tomorrow. Do you think Noah would talk to me? I need to know everything he knows about Moretti. I’m sure he’s in some kind of witness protection program, so talking to me would break all kinds of rules. Of course, telling you his real name broke the cardinal rule, so I’m assuming he’s a rule-breaker by nature. Does he even know how serious this situation is? Hell, Zach, if he’s being an idiot about his safety, then we’re going to have a serious problem. I’m not going to let his stupidity put you in danger. Regardless of how bubbly his ass is.”

Zach rolled his eyes heavenward and answered, “Oh, trust me, I think Noah understands how serious the situation is. I can assure you he isn’t taking any unnecessary risks with his life.”

Connor went from run for your life to kick ass mode in a manner of seconds. Best. Friend. Ever.

“How nervous should we be over this Moretti family?”

“I have two answers for that question,” he said slowly. “First answer: very nervous.”

Zach waited a couple seconds before asking, “Second answer?”

“Fuck the Moretti family. They don’t mess with what’s mine.”

Laughter bubbled from Zach. “What’s yours? You and Noah seemed to hit it off last night, but I would hardly call him yours.”

“No, you’re mine; he’s yours. We’re family, Zach. You know this. If you’ve finally decided to take a chance with your heart, I’m not going to complain just because you picked the worst possible candidate as your choice. I mean, seriously, Zach? The Moretti family? You had to pick somebody who fucked over the Moretti family?”

“Fuck the Moretti family,” Zach said with a laugh, throwing Connor’s words back at him. “What’s your Plan B?”

“Don’t have one yet. I’ll be working on it while you’re working on sexing up your neighbor. Why do you always get all the easy jobs?” Connor started clicking away on his computer, the sound of the keys reverberating through the phone line. “See if Noah will talk to me, okay? That’ll be the first step. I’ve got to get a feel for the situation.”

“I’ll try. Needless to say, he’s pretty guarded around people.” Another thought occurred to Zach. “Hey, can you run some names for me?” He wanted to learn more about Cameron and the idiot doctor prescribing all those meds to Noah.

“Run some names? That is not correct police jargon, Zach,” Connor corrected while the clicking of the keyboard continued. “Yes, I’ll do a background check for you. Give me the names. I assume they’re connected to Noah?”

“Yep. See what you can find out about Cameron Maverick and a Dr. Robert Jones, definitely connected to Noah, and I don’t think in a good way. I don’t trust that either of them have his best interests as a priority.” Zach rubbed his eyes and struggled with how much to tell Connor about Noah’s problems. Connor was his best friend, and Zach trusted him with his life, but he still didn’t want to violate Noah’s privacy in any way. While he couldn’t share anything that happened during the hospital visit, he could talk with Connor about what he’d learned while performing his neighborly duties. Connor wouldn’t betray him or Noah.

“It’s bad, Conn. Really bad. He needs help...more help than I’m qualified to give him. He’s on a shit-load of meds that shouldn’t be mixed, and though I’m not an expert on his struggles, I do know some of these medications would have the absolute opposite effect of what he needs to make progress. There’s a basket of drugs, all with current prescriptions, but he says he hasn’t seen a doctor in three years. Cameron brings everything to him.” Zach’s anger escalated as he remembered the shit Cameron said about Noah in the ER. “I have no idea what that relationship is, but Cameron said he’d been appointed by the courts to make Noah’s medical decisions for him. That’s bullshit, Conn. He may have some problems, but his mental capacities are all intact.” “They are, aren’t they? I’d know if they weren’t. “His apartment has the same setup as mine, but...but...hell, Conn, you wouldn’t believe how it looks.”

“He’s a single guy, Zach. A young single guy. Shit gets messy. I don’t think you need to base any judgments on his housekeeping skills,” Connor said quietly. “Do you

think maybe your attraction to him is causing you to see things too critically?”

Zach rolled his eyes in frustration. “It isn’t his housekeeping skills. The place is spotless, organized, and coldly sterile. No pictures. No color. Thick black curtains cover every window in the place. It’s dark—like a dungeon. Hell, Conn, it isn’t a healthy environment for somebody his age.” It wasn’t a healthy environment for anyone, regardless of age. Zach had been shocked when he’d first entered the apartment. There hadn’t been a streak of sunlight to be seen.

“Set up a time for me to meet Noah. Tomorrow. At the latest, Zach.” Connor paused a second and then added, “I don’t think it would be good for him to come to the station—don’t need anybody else around here recognizing him. Could we just meet at your apartment?”

Zach smiled sadly. “Yeah, that would probably be for the best. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Maybe I should sleep over tonight? I can do my research from wherever. You’ve got an extra bedroom”

“I don’t need a babysitter, Conn. Stay home and research. Security here is excellent; it’s one of the reasons I picked this complex.”

“Maybe, but...”

“I’ll call you in the morning,” Zach cut him off before Conn found a way to wrangle an invitation out of him. “See what you can find, and I’ll talk with Noah about our meeting.” He hung up before Connor could argue. Sixty-two minutes. Zach groaned. He hadn’t meant to leave Noah alone that long. Grabbing his basket of healthier food, Zach headed next door.

He tried to enter the apartment as quietly as possible so he wouldn't disturb Noah's rest. Between the drugs he took on a daily basis and what they'd given him at the hospital, he had to be about sixty-two minutes deep into a drug-induced sleep. Add the toll panic attacks had on one's body, and Zach wasn't sure he'd be able to wake Noah in order to get some food down his throat. That was why he nearly screamed out loud in shock after he eased the door shut and turned around toward the living area. Noah and Denala were involved in a slow-paced—because of Denala's epic battle with birthing last night—game of fetch with what appeared to be one of Noah's socks. Neither of them noticed him, so he took the time to admire his neighbor while Noah's guard was down. When he'd been sleeping earlier, Zach stared at him practically the entire time, memorizing his perfect features, but also noticing that even when Noah slept, worried lines creased his brow. Playing with Denala put a look on Noah's face that took Zach's breath away. He was having fun...and looked fucking beautiful doing it. If Zach allowed it, he could fall in love with Noah.

He wouldn't allow it, though. He couldn't.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the metal door. Hell, he wasn't going to be able to stop it. Something about Noah called to Zach's heart.

Admitting defeat, he walked closer to them, making noise as he moved. He didn't want to startle Noah too badly.

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“Hey, Noah,” he said quietly as he set the basket on the bar connecting the living room and kitchen areas. “Why aren’t you resting?” He reached down and stroked Denala’s soft fur, making her whine happily and her ears lie back. His gaze moved to Noah’s face and his breath caught in his throat. He was in so much trouble—looking at Noah made him want to whine happily too.

“We took a power nap, but that was it,” Noah answered as he tossed the sock across the room and watched Denala gingerly cross the room to retrieve it. “Denala kept telling me her daddy never played sock with her, so I took pity and decided to show her a good time.”

Noah’s blue eyes crinkled when he smiled up at Zach; they also promised Zach a good time, if he was interested. “And I knew the minute you slid the key into the lock, you know. You didn’t have to walk across the floor like a herd of warthogs on the run from a pursuing lion.” His grin widened. “When you’re afraid of your own shadow, you tend to hear everything.”

“Sorry,” Zach answered, feeling like an idiot. “You’ve been through enough today, Noah. I didn’t want to do anything that might mess with your comfort zone.”

“Don’t worry about it, Zach,” he said as he threw the sock for Denala again. “And don’t treat me like I’m a freak, okay? I get that from everybody else. It’s covered. I’d like for somebody to treat me like I’m a normal man, not a wimp.” He shrugged and looked away, an embarrassed blush shading his cheeks. “I mean, I know I’m not normal, but maybe we could just pretend.”

“You are normal, Noah. Stop saying that,” he ordered. “How many times am I going

to have to warn you before making you stand in the corner until you learn your lesson?”

“Stand in the corner?” Noah said with a huge frown on his face. “Trust me, it won’t work with me. I like corners—me, myself, and I—it’s cozy. I’ve always been a fan of corporal punishment.” Blue eyes flashed an invitation Zach couldn’t miss if he were an inexperienced virgin, which he wasn’t. “Maybe you should spank me,” Noah suggested playfully.

Zach’s cock tried to come to life, but he imagined tossing Denala’s puppies over the balcony in order to get that bad boy settled back down. What he wanted to give Noah and what Noah needed were two very different things. There was no point in denying his desire to fuck Noah in every position known to man and the gods, but Noah needed someone to take care of him and protect him from whatever the shit was going on behind the scenes with his life. Zach was good at fucking but even better at protecting.

“Maybe I will,” he countered softly. “One day.”

Noah’s smile turned downward so fast Zach almost laughed at loud. Pretty boy had the skills to take pouting to an entirely different level than Zach was accustomed to dealing with. With the same stealth Zach imagined a large cat would use to stalk its prey, Noah stood and moved in his direction. Zach tried to keep his eyes on Noah’s face but failed miserably. Regardless of how much of a hypocrite it made him out to be, Zach couldn’t stop his gaze from straying downward.

Noah hadn’t bothered with a shirt, and Zach really wished he would have. There was no way he could think about anything other than manhandling his gorgeous body into fucking position and slamming into him until the only thing scaring Noah would be whether he would be able to sit down the next day. His pale, hairless chest consisted of lean muscles that formed sculpted shoulders, perfect pecs, a nice six-pack, and a

sexy V that highlighted his hip bones. Baggy sweatpants hanging lower than Zach was comfortable with did very little to hide Noah's trophy body. They were standing face-to-face, but Zach didn't need him to turn around in order to determine if his ass was as perfect as the rest of him. Zach had eyeballed it enough in the gym. It was firm and had a nice bubble shape that succeeded in causing every gym-goer, male or female, to stumble on the treadmill at one time or another.

Only inches separated them before Noah finally stopped. "One day...as in tomorrow? One day...as in next week?" He grinned because he damned well could see how uncomfortable he made Zach and apparently found it quite enjoyable. "One day...as in one minute after midnight tonight?"

Zach took a step back. He was determined not to take advantage of Noah's situation. "You don't know anything about me, Noah. Let's work on building a solid foundation of friendship before we consider putting sex on the table, okay?"

"Not okay," Noah answered quickly. "Absolutely nothing about that statement is okay with me. I'm a grown man, Zach. You're a grown man. I'm gay. You're gay. I'm not in a relationship. You're not in a relationship. If I remember correctly, I really like to be fucked." He reclaimed the step Zach put between them. "And I have a feeling you really like to fuck. I'm not seeing the vast array of problems you are."

"How do you know I'm not in a relationship?" Zach asked.

Noah's eyes darkened. "Are you?"

The way Noah's eyes changed colors mesmerized him. They reminded him of a turbulent ocean right before a storm. Darker rings of blue edged the bright blue of the inside. Noah's eyes spoke volumes to Zach.

"I've watched you, Zach. I don't have another goddamned thing to do, so I've

watched you. If you're in a relationship, you're treating the other person poorly." His tongue toyed with his bottom lip for a few seconds. "Are you?"

"No."

Noah smiled. "Good. Wanna fuck now?"

Zach gasped and stepped back again. The storm in Noah's eyes settled in an instant and the usual sadness he'd grown accustomed to seeing in those blue orbs returned, making Zach feel like scum. Noah laughed softly...sadly.

"Just kidding, Doc. If you're determined to try the stupid friend thing, then I'll stop messing with you." He shrugged. "I've gone this long without getting laid. I can surely make it a little longer, right?"

Noah turned and walked back toward Denala and started the tug-of-war game again. He smiled and laughed at Zach's dog. He'd seemingly blocked Zach out altogether. Zach could see the hurt all over Noah's face, even if the other man appeared to have tried, failed, and moved on. But why would he be hurt because Zach wanted to be his friend...or at least start their relationship with friendship and hope it might move on to something better?

"What do you have against my friendship, Noah? I'm not understanding what's happening here. I'm trying to be the good guy and you're making me out to be Dr. Evil." That comment got a soft chuckle from Noah's pouty lips.

"Nah, you aren't Dr. Evil, Zach. You're the good guy." Noah tossed the sock a little too close to the French doors and cringed when Denala tugged the curtain back when she lunged for her prize. When the black fabric fell back against the door, his body relaxed. "You're a doctor. You're hot. You're smart and funny. There isn't a spot on your body that isn't covered with bulging muscles and hot tattoos." He frowned and

turned his attention on Zach for a second and said, “Tattoos, Zach? Never ever would I guess you to be a doctor with all that hotness decorating your body.”

“My rebellious days,” Zach answered. The truth was, everybody in his father’s motorcycle gang was tatted up, so he had started early on. Up until the moment Noah called his tattoos hot, Zach had hated seeing them on his body. They were a horrible reminder of where he would be if Connor and his family hadn’t intervened and helped him escape the shitty life planned for him.

Then, realizing Noah purposely tried to lead him astray from their conversation, he circled right back around. “Why don’t you want us to be friends?”

“Just forget I said anything, okay, Doc? I was just being an idiot—my social skills are a bit rusty. The drugs killed my sex drive, remember? It’s no biggie. If you wanna be pals, we’ll be pals.” A sad smile tugged at his full lips when he added, “You know—as long as you enjoy hanging out at my place...all the time.”

Zach frowned as he tried to understand when and where things had gotten so far off track. Had it been so long since he’d been in a relationship with a person other than Connor that he’d forgotten proper dating etiquette? Better yet, did modern gay guys have adatingetiquette? Maybe people Noah’s age weren’t looking for anything other than a good time in the sack? Shit, Zach was just thirty; it wasn’t like he’d come from the stone ages. Maybe the flame he’d thought was burning between him and Noah was really only a flicker and it had already fizzled out on Noah’s end?

“You’re overthinking it, Doc,” Noah said, interrupting Zach’s clumsy attempts of getting a grasp on the situation. “Move on; it’s over. I won’t hit on you again. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

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Noah threw the sock again, but instead of retrieving it, Denala walked to the door and whined. Uh-oh. Puppy time. Momma just remembered she had responsibilities other than sock retrieving and tug-of-war-ing.

Noah's voice sounded different. His face looked different, as if he'd slipped away right in front of Zach's eyes. It didn't appear to be a panic attack, more like a total shutdown. Denala whined again, dragging Zach's attention back to her. He had to handle her, but he wasn't leaving until he and Noah were back on the right track.

"Let me take care of Denala, and I'll be right back, okay? It must be feeding time for the puppies."

"Sure. No problem." Noah popped up and walked over to Zach's dog. He fluffed her ears and said, "Thanks for the visit, noble protector. I don't give a damn what the police academy said. My vote says you're a total badass."

"I'll be right back," Zach promised as he opened the door. Denala shot across the hall and waited for him to punch in his code. He stood inside Noah's apartment, holding the door open and wishing he knew what to say to fix what he'd screwed up. Since he wasn't sure what he'd done, he didn't have a clue what to say.

"I'll be right here," Noah said with another one of his sad smiles.

"Okay. I shouldn't be longer than five minutes."

"Take your time," Noah said as he wandered over to the food basket and started exploring what was inside.

Shit, everything felt wrong. “Five minutes,” Zach promised as he stepped outside into the hallway. Noah’s door closed quietly, but to Zach, the noise echoed through his head.

“Come on, Denala,” he said as he punched in his code. “I’ll get you settled and then Daddy needs to take care of your new friend. I messed something up back there, and I’m not quitting until I know what it was.” Zach got her settled onto her dog bed with all the puppies surrounding her, made sure she had fresh food and water, and then headed back to Noah’s apartment. He was nervous—terrified he wouldn’t be able to fix what he’d broken. It would be easy to blame Noah’s shutdown on his phobia, but blaming him would be total bullshit. He’d done something wrong and he needed to make it right.

Zach felt both determined and optimistic when he opened the door of his apartment and stepped out into the hallway. That, of course, came crashing down when he noticed the basket of food sitting right outside Noah’s door.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he muttered in frustration as he crossed the hallway, digging into his pocket for Noah’s house key as he walked. “Double fuck!” He’d laid the key on Noah’s kitchen counter next to the food basket.

A smart person would take the hint and leave things alone; Noah had made it crystal clear their night was over. Hell, probably more than their night. Zach didn’t feel very smart at the moment, though, so he pounded on Noah’s apartment door. “Open the door, Noah.”

Silence.

“Come on, Noah,” he urged through the door. “Let me in.” He knocked again. More silence. “Noah! Please, open the door.”

Silence.

Chapter 6

Noah sat on the floor with his back leaned against the door of his apartment and listened to Zach yell at him from the hallway. The heavy metal door offered the highest level of security to the residents of the apartment building, but Noah still felt it moving under Zach's insistent pounding. Since living there, Noah often referred to the thick door as the lid to his coffin or the door to his tomb. Yes, it offered protection, keeping the people who wanted to hurt him on the outside. But it also served as a barrier, keeping him locked inside...politely hidden away from the rest of the world.

He closed his eyes and started counting inside his head. Slowly. Calmly. Normally he'd grab a pill and do some pushups or sit-ups until the meds worked their magic on his crazy. If he was having an okay day, he'd start feeling some relief somewhere between the three hundred and four hundred mark. If things had gone badly, it could take until eight or nine hundred before the cloudy fog slowly started creeping into his head, smothering his fears. Once the medication wore off, the cycle of torment would start all over again. Zach didn't want him to take the pills. He didn't know why he was doing anything Zach said, but for some unknown reason, he wanted to do everything Zach said.

Well, except open the door. He wasn't doing that. Zach kept knocking, begging him to open up and let him fix whatever he'd done wrong.

Right...like it was Zach who'd made a mistake. Between the two of them, it would always be Noah doing shit wrong. He was the Olympic gold medalist in fuckups. He still couldn't believe how he'd acted with Zach. What a complete idiot; he'd thrown

himself at Zach...as if a man like him would be interested in someone like Noah. Well, except maybe for some medical research.

In his defense, Noah could blame a huge part of his stupidity on his lack of social skills. Maybe if he were around other people on a regular basis, he would've known Zach was only being nice to him, not pledging his undying love. Zach wanted to explore a friendship with him, and Noah had interpreted his words as 'let's fuck like cats in heat.' The exact same way he'd interpreted Zach's concern about his health and wellbeing.

Noah hung his head as his face burned in shame. He'd made a fool of himself in front of the first person he'd wanted to impress in three years. Well, he sure as hell hadn't impressed Zach, but he had certainly made an impression—a bad one. What made him think Zach was interested in more than friendship? Something surely had convinced him it was all right to literally throw himself at a man who'd shown him nothing but disdain straight up until the point when he'd opened his eyes in the emergency room.

Memories tugged and tumbled inside his head. Something had happened in his bedroom with Zach. Not sex. What had Zach said to him? What had he said to Zach? The meds dimmed his memory, but they usually didn't erase it altogether. Of course, he'd had a lot of medication, between his own prescriptions and what they'd given him at the hospital.

Fuck! He didn't have a clue what had happened but suspected he'd probably thrown himself at Zach at the hospital as well. Zach had taken a medical oath to do good and heal the sick. He was the bright light of goodness in Noah's dark world, and Noah had succeeded in screwing up any chance he might have ever had at being friends. Sure, he wanted to be more than friends, had made it pretty damned obvious, but he'd been unrealistic with those expectations. Hell, he couldn't even leave his apartment building. Other than his ass, what did he have to offer another man?

Zach still knocked on his door. He didn't sound upset anymore. No, he sounded more like a person trying to gentle a wild animal. Ha! The good doctor was so close to the truth with that one. Where had Noah gone so wrong with his life? How had he gone from being the most popular person in his high school, with three offers of soccer scholarships from excellent colleges, confident in every aspect of his life and not fucking afraid of anything...to what he was now? Would he have done the same thing if he'd known it would all lead to this? Fuck no, he would've kept his mouth shut. Thanks to his 'do-gooder' personality, he'd lost everything.

It had seemed like such a simple decision at the time. Do the right thing. What could go wrong?

He couldn't remember the words he and Zach had exchanged in his bedroom earlier, but he could remember every detail of the train wreck of events that ended up being the demise of Mr. Popularity Noah St. Claire and the creation of John Doe. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the door, remembering the summer that changed his life forever.

The catalyst for his downfall had been Dante Moretti, and Noah could still remember the first time he'd seen the man. Noah had agreed to work at his dad's firm that summer before he left for college and started down the path of becoming his own man. He'd hated working there, but his father had been adamant, and Noah rarely questioned his dad's decisions; he'd learned early on things went much smoother if he just went along with what his parents wanted. So, he'd worked that summer, doing boring shit like making copies, fixing coffee, shredding, and filing. God, how he'd hated shredding and filing. Friday had been the day he'd set aside to do all the filing for the week. Somehow, having the weekend mere hours away helped him make it through the tedious task.

The first time he'd seen Dante Moretti, it had been filing day. Noah had been lugging stack of files to the records library of the building when he'd noticed a thin man, not

much older than him, sitting quietly in the waiting area. Noah called it the posh spot, because it was where his father sent his ‘special’ clients—special meaning the ones with the most money.

The posh spot had people in it nearly all day, every day, so it shouldn’t have been that big of a deal; it shouldn’t have caught Noah’s attention. It shouldn’t have, but it did. Dante was incredibly tall, standing well over six feet, but had looked so small sitting in one of Noah’s father’s plush leather chairs. His shoulders were hunched in defeat, and Noah could still remember how Dante’s hands looked like they were trembling. That sad man hadn’t fit in the posh spot.

Noah often wondered what would have happened if he’d just kept walking that day, minded his own business and headed on into the archive room and focused on completing the job so he could start his weekend. Had he only stopped to talk to the frail man because he hated filing? Maybe. Did he end up paying the price for that choice? Definitely.

The train wreck started that day. Noah learned the frail man’s name was Dante Moretti, and he’d accompanied his father, Donovan Moretti. Their first couple of conversations seemed innocent enough, though Noah wondered why Dante always seemed so nervous. Taking pity on the misfit, Noah invited him to lunch the third time he’d found him in the posh spot, and surprisingly enough, Dante had agreed.

When bodyguards trailed their every step, Noah got an idea as to why Dante was perpetually jittery. Who needed bodyguards for lunch to the cheap café across the street?

Dante dropped hints regularly. But if Noah asked a question, Dante would dart his gaze toward the bodyguards standing nearby, shake his head slightly, and move on to another subject. Noah thought of the hints as hand grenades. Dante would launch one of those babies in his direction and then run for his life, leaving Noah standing there,

ready to be blown to bits. At first, Noah wanted to tell him not to bring something up if he wasn't going to talk about it. Then, right in the middle of their seventh 'meeting,' Noah realized Dante feared his own father. All the grenades had been about the illegal Moretti business Dante clearly didn't agree with but was too terrified to do something about or even try to get out of it. Sweet Dante must have been adopted, switched at the hospital, or been the milk man's baby, because he was nothing like his father.

After that meeting, Noah had changed his terminology; the grenades turned into bread crumbs. Dante would drop one on the ground for him, and Noah would try to follow it. All the hints eventually led to his boring filing job. Using Dante's crumbs, Noah combed through the files inside the archive and found not the first fucking thing. Nothing. Not one number or note hinted at anything immoral or illegal. The files had been a complete and utter bust—yet Dante had been sure there would be something in there to implicate his father.

Dante had been wrong, but only about the location of the incriminating information. The pile of papers Noah received every week for shredding contained all the evidence. He was supposed to shred the documents as soon as his father gave them to him. Of course, he'd let them pile up with the intention of shredding them all at once. It seemed much more efficient to Noah...plus he'd hated shredding as much as he'd hated filing. So, there it was—all the evidence Dante had hinted at lay innocently in Noah's shred pile.

Donovan Moretti used his father's financial firm as a front for money laundering. He also stole money from Noah's father's clients—old people, young people, rich people, or poor people; Moretti hadn't cared. Apparently, Noah's father hadn't either.

After that day, the shit went downhill and got faster and faster and faster—until it finally rolled right over Noah. While he'd been trying to come to terms with his father's involvement, someone had turned the FBI onto Noah. On a Saturday

evening, just after a jog on his favorite trail, he found two men in suits waiting for him by his vehicle. After listening to them for only about three minutes, he realized they knew most of the facts he'd managed to dig out of the shred pile involving Donovan Moretti and Noah's father. They knew it all but didn't have the cold, hard evidence... Noah did.

He'd tried to blow them off, unsure of how he wanted to handle the situation. An internal battle raged. He couldn't narc on his own dad. But there was also no way he could sit back and allow hard-working people's money to be stolen from them. He'd been fucked with either decision he might have made. The FBI, however, had taken the decision away from him. After only one meeting, they'd agreed to give his father immunity if Noah would agree to hand over the evidence and testify against Moretti. It sounded like a perfect solution.

It had been an imperfect fucking solution.

When all the smoke cleared and the shit settled, a jury found Donovan Moretti guilty of money laundering and sentenced him to six years. Noah and his parents were thrown into WITSEC, a witness protection program, with his parents requesting they be placed in a separate location from their one and only son. Noah could still remember how hurt, shocked, and humiliated he'd been when his father had demanded Noah be sent somewhere other than where he was going. Left with no other choice but to go along with the FBI and his parents, Noah had ended up with a new identity—John Doe. He guessed the FBI thought it was funny—JohnFuckingDoe. What the fuck ever. At least poor Dante had scored a reprieve. He'd gotten six short years without his father who headed one of the biggest crime organizations in Las Vegas.

There'd been times during the trial Noah would steal a glance in Dante's direction, and he'd be floored by the look of appreciation he'd seen in Dante's eyes. Noah could only imagine how shitty it was for such a soft soul to have been surrounded by such

hard evil. A part of him hoped things worked out for Dante Moretti, but the biggest part of him didn't really give a fuck. Dante had undoubtedly tricked Noah into doing what he didn't have the balls to do himself. On good days, he could blame Dante for the loss of his life, but he didn't have many good days, so he mostly blamed himself.

He'd tried to move on and live a normal life as John Doe, but it had turned out to be a virtually impossible task. Alone. Afraid. Paranoid. Absolutely no skills whatsoever. No friends. Moretti was still alive, calling shots from his prison cell, and he'd placed a bounty on Noah's head that could tempt the angels to turn on Christ. He knew this because the FBI told him—yeah, that helped him put his past behind him and start a new life.

During the first six months, things had gotten progressively worse for him. It started with little things—sleeping with his light on, barricading the door to his apartment, always looking down so no one could see his face and recognize him, never ever making friends because either no one could be trusted or they could end up dead because of him. Before he knew it, he couldn't leave his apartment.

There was a name for his pussy-ness: agoraphobia. Nice. At least there were others out there as messed up as he was. The FBI eventually had to bring in a handler to take care of him. Cameron Maverick. Noah called Cameron a friend. Cameron called Noah a job.

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Cameron had brought a doctor in to see him, and Noah started the regimen of pills that turned him into a walking corpse. They had, however, allowed him to leave his apartment, just not the apartment building. Some people might not have classified that as a huge victory, but Noah did.

Cameron found a way for him to make money without leaving his apartment, too. Yes, it was degrading, but it paid the bills. Cameron pretty much did everything to keep him alive—not exactly functioning in society, but alive.

His cell chirped and he nearly jumped out of his skin. Absolutely nobody ever called him. Unfamiliar noises could lead to him pissing himself in fear—yeah, it was that bad. With a frown, he picked the cell up and tried to see what caused the noise. It was a text message from Zach.

“I don’t know what I did wrong, but I’m sorry. I need you to take two of your pills, but steer clear of the Ritalin and Baclofen—they cause paranoia. I know I told you ‘no’ on the pills, but we can’t take you off them cold turkey. It will need to be a slow reduction or the side effects will be hell. I’d like for you to see a doctor friend of mine—he comes highly recommended. I hope you rest well. I’ll be steps away if you need me. Just call.”

Noah read and reread the message from Zach. The tear sliding down his cheek shocked him; it had been months since he’d been able to cry over anything. His entire body normally felt numb, which he attributed to the drugs. Zach, even with the medication, managed to touch a part of him no one and nothing else had. That terrified him.

Zach clearly felt responsible for Noah's health—which was ridiculous after nothing more than an ER visit. Even with Noah's fumbling attempts at luring him into sex, the good doctor seemed determined to stick around and make sure he stepped onto the path of improving his mental health. Noah wasn't sure which one of them was more stupid—the doctor for thinking he could change Noah or Noah for hoping the doctor was right.

He laid his head against the cold hardwood floor and imagined Zach's dog was still with him. No, he imagined Zach and his dog were still with him. Loneliness had become such a natural part of his life he hadn't thought the pain of it could bother him any longer. He'd been wrong. After only a small tease of life around Zach, he hurt in places he'd thought would never hurt again.

Zach told him to take two of his pills, but he didn't have the energy or desire to haul his ass up off the floor, so he stayed right where he was—in a fetal position next to his front door. He snorted out a laugh. He probably couldn't have presented a more pathetic picture if he'd been filming a sad Hallmark television movie.

The elevator's loud ding signaled the doors were about to slide open and caused Zach to slit one eye open and look in the direction of the intruder. His back hurt. His ass hurt. His shoulders hurt. His fucking heart hurt. When Connor stepped off the elevator and stumbled to a stop, staring at Zach where he sat in the hallway in front of Noah's door, even Zach's head started hurting. He would never live this moment down.

Connor, to his credit, didn't burst out laughing when he saw Zach's predicament. Instead, he slowly walked in Zach's direction and stopped right in front of him. "Wow, Meadows, when I suggest you drop your walls and consider letting somebody in, you toss that heart of yours out there like a fucking Frisbee, don't you?" He reached down and offered Zach a hand up off the floor.

“Nah, more like a boomerang,” Zach corrected as he took Connor’s hand and winced at his stiffness as he stood. Apparently, he was too old for stalking. “He tossed that motherfucker right back at me—nearly took my head off in the process.”

Connor frowned, but didn’t say anything as Zach punched in his security code and pushed the door open. His frown deepened when the stench of puppy poop smacked him right in the face. “Holy shit, Zach. Your apartment stinks.”

“Yeah,” Zach answered wearily. He’d convinced himself Noah would slip out as soon as he moved away from the door, so he hadn’t cleaned up after the puppies during the night. He guessed now he and Connor would be paying the price for his late-night decision.

“Okay, you go hit the shower and get some coffee going, and I’ll take care of Denala and the pups. This is the last time, though. I’ve already warned you about my opinion on all things puppies—they are stinky.”

When Zach collapsed on the couch, Connor yanked him back up and pushed him in the direction of his shower.

“Fuck, Zach, how old are you? I remember a time when we could party two nights straight, sleep on the floor, and still make early morning classes on time. Get your shit together.”

Connor was right; Zach needed to snap out of it. He just couldn’t figure out how he’d messed things up so badly with Noah.

Forty-five minutes later, he’d showered, swallowed down two cups of coffee, and then relayed, in detail, what had transpired between him and Noah the night before. Zach waited for the verdict, certain Connor could shed light on his error. But he already knew; what had happened in the bedroom with Noah had violated all sorts of

trust and probably a law somewhere, so whatever Connor was about to say wouldn't be a shock. Hell, he wouldn't even be shocked if Connor arrested him. Could you be arrested for being an opportunistic asshole?

"Well? I know you're about to let me have it," Zach said. "What are you waiting on? Get it over with. Put me in my place. Arrest me, for fuck's sake...just do something other than sitting there and staring at me like I'm some sort of freak of nature. I made a mistake, Conn. I lost control. I know all of this. What I don't know is how to make things right with Noah."

Connor took a gulp of his diet soda, set it down on the small dining table in his kitchenette and asked, "Do you really want my opinion on what you need to do to fix this—to make things right?"

Zach rolled his eyes. "Duh...that's why I texted you all night long, Conn. That's why I just poured my heart out to you when my every instinct is telling me to dig a deep hole and cover myself up. What can I do? No, is there anything I can do or has too much damage already been done?"

"I think you should fuck him. End of story." Connor's eyes glittered with laughter. "That's my professional opinion."

"Oh. My. God. Now is not the time for jokes, Conn. I really need some help here." Zach rubbed his face and added, "I'm not sure, but what I did might be enough for me to lose my medical license."

"For crying out loud, Zach, stop being an idiot. You aren't his doctor; you're his neighbor. There's a big difference between the two." He held up his hand to cut off Zach's argument. "Before you say it, you stopped being his ER doctor the second his guardian signed the release papers and you took him home. Release papers equal you being his neighbor again. Stop being a fucking doctor for once in your life. I honestly

think if you'd take a time-out and be the Zachary Meadows I used to know, all the other shit would work itself out—including Noah St. Claire.”

What in the hell is that supposed to mean?

“Not only do I not have a clue what you're trying to say, I also need to go on the record as stating I am a doctor, a damned good doctor, and I don't see any reason why I would want to stop.” Why had he thought Connor would be able to help? Connor was purely a fuck 'em and leave 'em sort of guy.

“I'm gonna say something I know you don't want to hear, Zach, and I need you to promise to not punch me in the face. Your muscles are ridiculous and my face is pretty.” He grinned. “Tell me you promise.”

“Just get it over with.” Zach growled. “If I haven't punched you yet, I don't guess I will.”

“Zach, after they arrested your dad and you found out everything he was involved in, I had to sit back and watch you change. You slowly turned into this...this”—he waved his hand up and down Zach's length— “different Zachary Meadows than the one I grew up with. The doctor. The man who wears suits when he goes to dinner. The man who will only fuck men he meets in bars because he wouldn't dare let it be more than a fuck. You stopped doing what you loved and started doing what you thought was right. You've tried so damned hard to not be your father you've lost yourself.”

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Zach laughed at Connor's words but wondered if his friend was right. Had he lost himself along the way? Other than the time he spent with Connor, he rarely felt alive...until Noah. What was it about his neighbor that shook the foundation he'd worked so hard to build? More importantly, did he want the foundation shaken? He currently followed a good life-path. Living the way he did, he would never turn into a man like his father. On the other hand, was he really living?

"Why now, Con? Why are you getting so involved now? The last time I checked, it took me six years of medical school to get where I am. You've just now decided to shake up my bag and see where the pieces fall?"

Connor's current enthusiasm over Noah seemed odd; not many hours had passed since Connor had warned him to steer clear of Noah St. Claire.

"Because, dumbass, this kid has brought a spark back to your eyes I feared I'd never see again. Noah did the 'hut, hut' and I'm gonna take the ball and run with it."

Rolling his eyes, Zach countered, "You've only seen us interact one time, Conn. I doubt you're the expert on the Zach/Noah dilemma."

Connor let out a devious laugh. "You're falling in love with him, Zach. You've tried so hard to hate the kid, but he is your kryptonite; your superpower of blocking and deflecting is useless against his sad blue eyes and tight ass."

"That's bullshit," Zach argued, but his cheeks flamed from embarrassment.

"Nope, it's truth-shit. Pretty boy next door brought a spark back to your eyes, and I'm

forever in his debt. He might not have the balls to kick your ass into his bed, but I do. I'm not letting this go."

"First of all, I've already told you to stop calling him a kid. Secondly, he won't even talk to me, so I'm guessing the bed thing is out of the question."

"First of all, stop treating him like a kid and I'll stop calling him one. He's a grown man; open your eyes. Secondly, leave the fucking 'opportunity' to me. I've got a plan." He frowned and added, "You, Mr. Goody-goody, probably won't approve of my plan, but it's all on me. I'm still man enough to pull stunts to get my way, regardless of how unethical the stunts may appear. In my world, the end justifies the means."

"I don't think it is supposed to be that way in a cop's world," Zach teased. His friend toed the line at work, but still Zach didn't want to miss the opportunity to give him shit.

"This isn't cop world, Zach. This is wingman world. I'm going to get you an opportunity to nail Noah's ass." Connor bent over and pulled a stack of files out of his backpack. "An opportunity, Zach; you'll have to get into his bed all on your own. And, Zach, I'm going to give you another bit of advice: when you get into his bed, let it be with the real you, not this clean-cut doctor man you've created to prove you're nothing like your old man." He opened one of the files and said, "Now, let's go over the homework you gave me last night."

Zach looked at the thick pile of files and wondered if Connor had gotten the first wink of sleep. Sure, he looked bright-eyed, but then again, a zombie would look bright-eyed compared to Zach. He felt like somebody had banged his head against a tile floor for six hours straight. Bang. Bang. Bang. Sitting outside Noah's door had been a total waste of his time, but he hadn't been able to make himself walk away. Part of it was the doctor inside him. But his heart made him stay for another reason

entirely.

“Let’s talk about Dr. Robert Jones and Cameron Maverick,” Connor said, his voice switching from playful friend to cop in an instant. “Dr. Robert Jones can be best described as the pantywaist of doctors. He owns several pain clinics in Florida specializing, in my humble opinion, in providing prescription medications to people already addicted to pain killers—legalized drugs for the druggies. He has a medical license in Florida, Georgia, and Tennessee and writes scripts for anybody willing to pay for them. I have no idea how he and Noah crossed paths, but I intend to find out. I also intend to whisper his name into the ears of some folks I know who love to tear these places apart and acquaint those involved with our judicial system...but that’s a different story for a different time,” he muttered irritably. “Bottom line is Dr. Jones is a fraud and has absolutely no credentials to treat a patient with Noah’s phobia.” Connor shuffled through his files until he found the one he looked for.

“Next, we have a Cameron Maverick—all around asshole from what I could find on social media.” When Zach arched a brow at him, he added, “Don’t knock it, dude. You’d be surprised at what you can find on a person’s social media site. People put all their shit out there for the entire world to see, whether it’s worth looking at or not. So, Cameron Maverick, other than being an asshole, works for the district attorney’s office here in Atlanta. He’s fairly low on the food chain and will probably remain there since all of his employee evaluations indicate he’s rather lazy. He barely skates by but hasn’t fucked up enough to get fired yet. He moved here about six months after John Doe moved into this apartment building and has a supplemental income impossible to trace...which means it’s probably FBI. My guess is he’s paid to take care of Noah.”

“He’s doing a fucking bang-up job with that,” Zach hissed angrily. “He doesn’t even pretend to care about Noah’s mental or physical health.”

Connor frowned at Zach and said, “He may not give a fuck, but he has the authority

to make medical decisions for Noah. He wasn't lying about that. The papers were filed with the courthouse, and Noah, aka John, signed them. You've got to tread lightly with him, Zach. He could yank the rug out from under you in a split second. Until we know what role he's really playing in Noah's life, we can't rock his boat. Got it? Play nice or don't play at all."

"I bet Noah doesn't know Cameron can make medical decisions for him. You can't convince me Noah willingly signed anything." Zach sat back and massaged the bridge of his nose. Cameron's role, whatever it was, was dangerous to Noah's wellbeing. "How am I supposed to work around a court order? Can you take care of something like that?"

"What do you want me to do? Dig around in the files, wad it up, and throw it in the trash? No, Zach, I can't make it disappear. We'll have to do this the legal way, and the legal way, for right now, means keeping Cameron happy."

"No need to be a smartass about it."

"How often does he come around? Could we just dodge him? Do you think Noah will be on board with getting a new doctor, letting you fuck him rough, and keeping Cameron, his only link to the real world in a total blackout? That shouldn't be a tough sell, right?"

"You're hilarious," Zach grumbled. "I'm going to go out on a ledge and say I might fall short in convincing him to agree to the rough fuck. The rest should be easy-breezy." Zach got up and poured himself another cup of coffee.

"No, you should really push for the rough fuck. The kid's up to it; trust me. I saw it in his eyes. He wants you...really bad. He stood outside in the hallway with his entire body trembling like some sort of wild animal testing the waters with humans for the first time. He was as nervous as a virgin, but still looked at you like you were a giant-

sized cupcake. With sprinkles.” Connor stood and went to the fridge to pull out another diet Coke—breakfast of champions. “As for the rough part; he dressed for it. I’m assuming he’s into that scene?”

“No, he isn’t,” Zach said through gritted teeth. It amazed him how quickly he could get pissed when he imagined those other men touching Noah, even if it was just a job. “He was dressed for a photo shoot.”

Frowning, Connor asked, “Photo shoot? What do you mean photo shoot?”

“He does some sort of erotic porn, without the sex, for an online group. It’s how he makes his money.”

Connor’s frown deepened. “And the FBI allows this? With someone involved with WITSEC? That doesn’t make sense, Zach. If he’s supposed to be in hiding, he wouldn’t be doing online photo shoots...even for exclusive chat rooms with paid memberships.”

“Yeah, I questioned that, too,” Zach answered. “He says they never show his face. He always wears a mask of some sort and they put different tattoos and things on him to help disguise his appearance.”

“But still....”

“It’s happening, Conn. I don’t see how they could deem it safe, but they apparently have. His FBI contact sets up the entire thing. Like you told me, we have to make nice with Cameron, so it is what it is...for now.” Zach shrugged and added, “Back to your original comment; he was dressed that way for his job, not pleasure. I hardly think Noah would be one to enjoy his sex with a side of rough.”

“Hmmm.”

“What’s that mean? Hmmm? Hmmm, what?” Zach demanded.

“Hmmm simply means I think it’s been a while since you’ve been clubbing. Old Zach would’ve recognized all those signals he sent your way.” Connor laughed. “New Zach just wanted to take his temperature and blood pressure.”

Zach flipped him off and started pacing nervously. He looked around his apartment and couldn’t help but take note of the stark differences between his place and Noah’s. They were identical in the set up and size, but the similarities ended there. Noah’s place, while spotless and functional, seemed dreary. No sunlight. No pictures. No...happiness.

His resolve to make Noah his strengthened. Maybe the end did justify the means? “So, how are we going to do this? He won’t open the door for me, and I doubt he’ll let you in either. What’s this devious plan you’ve got worked up in that sick head of yours?”

Connor grinned. “Trust me, babe. I’ve got this. You sent me a million texts about Noah last night. I know what it will take to get that front door open.” He waggled his eyebrows and added, “You’re on your own when it comes to getting the back door open.”

“You’re so disgusting. Tell me again why I’m friends with you.”

“More reasons than we have time to discuss right now, but I’ll go ahead and mention

the two major ones: I can get you out of parking tickets and you really don't have a lot of other friend candidates beating down your door. Now, before we go any further, we've got to talk about something serious," Connor warned. "That shit I walked into this morning? You sitting outside his door like a lost puppy? Not okay, Zach. Don't do that again. It makes you look creepy and desperate. At least have the dignity to hide inside your apartment and watch through the peephole, okay?"

"You're such an ass." Zach shook his head. "I've just dug my heart out of my chest and laid it on the kitchen table in front of you, but you're still being a jackass. Just for the record, Conn, friend candidates aren't beating down your door either."

"And don't say jackass. People don't use that term anymore." He rubbed his hands together with excitement. "Okay, for my brilliant plan, give me your cell."

Zach handed it over but immediately felt like their chances of success dropped significantly. He was going to call Noah? Yeah, that worked well last night.

"Perfect," Connor said, typing something into Zach's cell. "Denala! Come!"

Denala perked up one ear, looked in their direction, and then settled back in for a day nap. Day naps were important for new moms.

"She's the dumbest police dog I've ever encountered," Connor muttered. "I know for a fact she came from good breeding stock, yet she's as worthless as the day is long." He looked at Zach and added, "I think she's gotten dumber since she came to live with you."

Zach would have considered punching Connor for talking about his beloved dog the way he was, but he knew how much his friend loved Denala. When she'd struggled during her training, Connor had made it a point to keep a close watch on what the academy intended to do with her if she didn't make the cut. He'd been terrified they

would be afraid to adopt her out since she'd received police training. Connor had fought for Denala's life by calling in every favor owed to him by anybody with influence and, eventually, gotten approval for Zach to adopt her.

Noah stood under the spray of the shower and let the hot water massage his aching back. Maybe sleeping all night on the cold hard floor wasn't the most brilliant plan he'd ever come up with. There wasn't an inch on his body not cursing his stupidity. His body ached and his brain felt baked. Perfect. Another day in the life of John Fucking Doe.

When the water began to lose some of its heat, he soaped up, scrubbed everything that needed scrubbing, and rinsed off. Turning the taps off, he opened the shower door and grabbed a towel to wrap around his waist. He stood in front of the vanity mirror and studied the face looking back at him. There were dark smudges beneath his eyes, and although he'd just started his day, he looked exhausted. It had been a tough night and an even tougher morning.

The sound of the elevator door opening out in the hallway had awakened him bright and early. At first, he'd just laid there, trying to figure out where he was, why he was there, and most importantly, whether he was going to be able to cope with either of those answers. He was on the floor in front of his door and he was there because he was a complete and utter idiot. Those were the answers; he wasn't pleased with either of them, but they were what they were.

Events from the previous day floated through his mind with a clear precision he hadn't felt in a while. A panic attack in the hallway. A trip to the emergency room...which led to another panic attack. Zach rescuing him and bringing him back home. Zach being nice to him instead of glaring at him like he normally did. Zach telling him he wanted them to explore a relationship together. His heart doing a

happy dance. Dozing off for about twenty minutes with Denala wrapped in his arms. Waking up, not remembering the first fucking thing Zach said to him because of the cloudiness inside his head. Him hitting on Zach and Zach trying to slow things down. Then the biggie was him throwing a temper tantrum and locking Zach out of his apartment.

Yep, he recalled each and every delightful detail that morning...several hours too late. What a colossal fuck-up he was. He couldn't imagine Zach wanting to give him a second chance after he'd locked him out for absolutely no reason whatsoever, but he planned to toss pride straight out the window and beg the man to forget everything that happened yesterday. He needed a do-over.

The problem was how to convince a person you weren't crazy when every damned thing you did looked crazy? Crazy—Zach considered that a bad word. Noah needed to stop thinking it and definitely stop saying it.

After brushing his teeth, he went into his bedroom and dug around for some boxer briefs, sweatpants, and a tank top. When he eyed his selections for the day, he made a mental note to go online and order some clothes. Real clothes. Anything other than fucking sweatpants and tank tops. No, he hadn't woken up that morning living under the misconception he would suddenly grow a pair of balls and find the courage to leave his apartment building, but he had woken up thinking the opportunity to get properly laid might be in his future.

Maybe.

A slight chance.

He felt weird and he was certain it had a hell of a lot to do with the fact he hadn't taken any of his medication. Zach's message said he couldn't stop cold turkey and even he knew that wasn't safe, but he didn't want to take them anymore. Was there a

chance his prescribed medication worked against his recovery? He'd never taken the time to research any of the side effects or check to see if they shouldn't be mixed with each other. Why should he question what a doctor prescribed him?

Because the meds made him feel like shit? Because they made it virtually impossible for him to be able to shake the cobwebs out of his head? Because he was twenty-two and there was absolutely no reason for a man his age to take that many pills? Because it took an act of Congress or a miracle from God to get his dick hard?

Noah's lips twitched. Zach made his dick hard.

Finally, he went back into the bathroom to pull out his basket of meds, settled on one pill but made a point to steer clear of the two Zach told him caused paranoia. Like he didn't have enough paranoia in his life without encouraging more.

After swallowing the one pill, he went into the kitchen to find something to eat that might closely resemble healthy, struck out, and settled for a bowl of Fruity Pebbles. With his cereal bowl in one hand and a spoon in the other, he paced the length of his living room, shoveling in a spoonful with each step. He needed to come up with some sort of plan to convince Zach to give him another chance. He could go with complete honesty and let him know sometimes he lost blocks of time and events.

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Funny story, Zach. Because I'm on so many medications, sometimes I forget entire conversations. Sooooo, I forgot what you told me in my bedroom, and when you rejected my advances, I let my paranoia and insecurities make me act like a teenager. How's the weather, anyway? Noah groaned. Nope, that wouldn't scare him off.

He kept pacing. Surely there was another way.

He frowned and walked over to his door. After chewing on his bottom lip for a full minute, he finally looked through his peephole to see if Zach was out there. He'd heard the elevator door earlier, heard another man's voice, and then Zach's door had opened and closed. After that, things had gotten quiet. That was when he'd taken his shower. He supposed Zach had probably left for work; he was usually gone by this time of morning.

The hallway was empty.

Maybe he could leave a note on Zach's door? Just a casual 'I'm sorry' and ask him to drop in later. That way, he wouldn't put Zach in an uncomfortable position. If Zach wanted to give him another chance, he would drop by. If he didn't, Noah would just have to accept it and move on.

Move on to where, Noah had no idea.

Okay, a note was the cowardly way he planned to go. As he got up in search of pencil and paper, his phone chirped again. He nearly broke his neck when he tripped over the chair to make a wild grab at his cell. Chirping sounds equaled Zach. A grin the size of Texas covered his face as he tried to push the correct buttons to make it show

him the text message.

“Hey! This is Connor; Zach’s inappropriate friend from the hallway a couple nights ago. Zach had to leave for work and I think there may be something wrong with Denala. Any chance you could keep an eye on the puppies while I run her to the vet? I hate to ask, but I’m really worried about her and don’t want to leave the puppies alone.”

Noah’s grin grew even wider. If Zach was at work, why would Connor have his phone? He didn’t care. If Zach needed to think he was dumb enough to fall for something like this, he was okay with it as long as it got him another chance with his hot neighbor.

He punched in “sure” and scampered over to his door. Wait. Zach would know he probably wouldn’t, or couldn’t, go into Zach’s apartment without hyperventilating or having a panic attack. What if it really was just Connor needing help? He nearly yelped when the sound of a fist knocking on his door intruded on his internal debate. After peeking out his peephole and seeing it was, unfortunately, Connor standing on the other side of the door, Noah opened it and offered a smile he hoped didn’t show his disappointment. He did, however, still hold out hope that Zach was just using his friend as a way to help lure him out of his apartment.

“Hey,” he said to Connor as his eyes kept darting toward Zach’s closed apartment door. When it didn’t suddenly burst open, he turned his full attention to Connor. “How can I help?”

“I didn’t feel comfortable leaving the pups by themselves, and I think Denala needs to see the vet,” he explained again as he reached down to lovingly stroke Denala’s neck. “She isn’t acting like herself. Zach mentioned you probably wouldn’t be comfortable hanging at his place, but I thought maybe you could help me grab a handful of pups and we could carry them to your place. I swear I shouldn’t be gone

longer than an hour.”

Noah tried not to look like a deer caught in headlights when Connor mentioned him going into Zach’s apartment, but felt confident he’d failed. It wasn’t as if he could just waltz into new places like a normal person. Yes, Zach’s apartment was technically part of his ‘safe zone’ but that didn’t always mean he could do it. Hell, it had taken him nearly six months to gather up his balls and head for the gym. Six. Fucking. Months. Connor wasn’t even giving him six minutes.

“Uh...yeah...about th-that,” he stuttered, feeling like the biggest of fools. “I’m not sure I can...uh...do that.” He seriously contemplated slipping back inside his apartment, locking the door, and never coming back out again when Denala’s wet nose nudged his hand. Just like last night, her presence calmed his nerves. “Okay,” he said quietly. “Okay, I think I can do it.”

Connor paused. “You sure? I can bring them over to you if that would make you more comfortable,” he offered.

“Nah, I’m good,” he answered. He hoped he was good. Another panic attack would definitely be taking a step in the wrong direction.

He paused only a few seconds at Zach’s doorway before stepping inside. Zach’s intoxicating scent and the whining of puppies greeted him. Unfortunately, there was no Zach to be seen. After another comforting nudge from Denala, Noah followed Connor down the hall and into the first bedroom. Noah looked around a room identical to the spare bedroom in his apartment except this one was filled with some unopened moving boxes and a giant dog bed covered with squirming puppies. His spare room had sex props in it for his photo shoots; just another huge difference between him and Zach.

Thankfully, he couldn’t worry about how perfect Zach was and how imperfect he was

because those tiny puppies were calling to him. Without hesitation, he crossed the room and dropped down onto his knees in front of the dog bed. They were so cute and tiny. His soul felt peaceful as he used the tip of his finger to stroke all of them. Their eyes were still sealed shut, but whenever he touched one, they squirmed around to try and latch onto his finger. He had no idea how long he knelt there, doing stupid puppy talk and eventually picking each one of them up and rubbing them against his face, but the sound of Connor clearing his throat jerked him back to reality.

“Oh, sorry,” Noah apologized. “I got carried away. Should we carry the bed next door? I think they’ll be more comfortable in their bed.”

He looked at Connor and noticed Zach’s friend had an embarrassed look on his face. “Yeah, about that,” he said. “I was in the living room calling the vet and Denala let out a huge burp.” He stroked the top of the German shepherd’s head. “I think she feels better.” He shrugged, looking humiliated. “Man, I would have been embarrassed if I’d run her to the vet and she just had a bad case of gas.”

A wave of disappointment flooded Noah’s heart. He’d already determined the next hour of his life would be one of the happiest he’d had in years. Unfortunately, Denala burped that happiness away. Oddly enough, he felt the urge to cry. “Oh, okay; no problem. I’m glad she’s all right.”

“I can’t believe Zach conned me into puppy parenting today. I have to be the worst possible candidate for the job—absolutely no qualifications in caring for things smaller than me,” Connor said with a smile...and a gesture for Noah to follow him to the door. “So, I’m guessing things didn’t work out with you and Zach last night, huh?”

Noah’s eyes jerked toward Connor. How much did the other man know? “Uh, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he answered.

Connor's eyes twinkled. "Sure. Okay. Keep Zach's best friend out of the loop; I get it. That's okay," he joked as he opened Zach's apartment door and leaned against the frame. "You didn't ask for it, but I'm giving you my two cents anyway. Zach's a good guy. He's a catch and keep. Don't give up on him, kid. He'll be worth it."

Noah narrowed his eyes. "I don't think you're as out of the loop as you're pretending to be, best friend. You knew to be concerned about me leaving my apartment earlier. You knew how much I loved Denala. You somehow knew my cell number would be in the phone Zach conveniently left behind." Noah stopped and stared at Connor. Connor didn't intimidate or scare him in the least; he wasn't sure why but assumed it had something to do with Connor's connection to Zach. He took a step closer to Zach's friend. "And you did a real dick-ass job of sliding that piece of plastic between my door and the doorframe when you came to get me earlier, Detective. Did you think I wouldn't notice that the door didn't click shut properly? That I'm not hyperaware of my surroundings?" Noah scoffed and crossed his arms over his chest. He hoped he looked at least slightly menacing. Connor was about Zach's size so he could easily overpower Noah, but he wasn't concerned. "I don't play games, especially with my safety, so what kind of games are you playing with me, and more importantly...is Zach playing them with you?"

Connor glanced nervously at Noah's door and then held his finger to his lips. "Shhhh," he whispered and then moved his body to block Noah's view of his apartment door. A grin split Connor's face. "I should have known you'd be incredibly perceptive, Noah, considering what you did with the Moretti family." He leaned lazily against the doorframe and asked, "Can I call you Noah or would you prefer I stick with John?"

Noah snorted. "I think it's a little late to ask me that now, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess it is," Connor conceded. "Listen, little man, I just want you to know Zach didn't tell me who you are; I figured it out on my own. I thought I recognized

you the other night and went home and dug through all my crime videos.” Looking slightly embarrassed, he added, “I may or may not have an addiction to following crime current events. I’ve been a crime junkie since all that shit happened with…” He frowned and straightened his shoulders before continuing, “I’ve been that way forever. So, just so you know, Zach hasn’t betrayed your trust or anything like that. I’ve been on a need-to-know basis only,” he explained. “If it matters, I haven’t seen another guy mess with Zach’s head the way you’ve messed with it. He wants you. He isn’t used to feeling that way, Noah. Be patient.”

“First of all, don’t ever call me little man again.” When Connor’s eyebrows shot upward, Noah said, “Yeah, I have a chip on my shoulder. It’s impossible not to with all my other shit continuously lowering my opinion of myself. I don’t need you or Zach acting like I’m a kid or little man. So…just stop. Secondly, I’m pretty sure you’re speaking to the wrong person. I’m the one with issues, not Zach. He’s the one that will need to work on his patience skills.” Noah looked around Connor’s broad shoulders. “He in there?” he asked, nodding toward his own apartment.

“Yeah.”

“Then get out of my way,” Noah quipped.

Connor grinned. “A firecracker; I like that.”

Noah rolled his eyes. “I guess firecracker beats little man or kid.” He nudged Connor out of his way and punched in his code. He had another chance with Zach and he was determined to not fuck it up.

Chapter 7

“Hey, neighbor,” Zach said quietly as soon as Noah stepped back into his apartment, thankful Noah didn’t flinch when he heard his voice. While he hadn’t had a huge problem going along with Connor’s plan to lure Noah out and give him a chance to slip inside, startling or scaring Noah was the last thing Zach wanted to do. To try and appear as non-threatening as possible and be in full view when Noah walked back into his apartment, he’d sat on Noah’s couch. He’d hoped for a relaxed appearance, but doubted he was anywhere near success. For reasons he couldn’t begin to understand, Noah’s feelings were already his primary concern.

Zach wasn’t sure what reaction he’d expected from Noah, but nothing could have prepared him for what the younger man did next. Noah’s movements were slow and graceful as he walked across the room, not stopping until he stood directly in front of Zach. Feeling almost like a boy driven by teenage hormones, Zach fleetingly considered sitting on his hands to keep them from reaching up and grabbing hold of Noah’s trim waist and yanking him down onto his lap.

“You wouldn’t answer the door or your cell and I really needed to talk to you face to face. Don’t be too mad at me and Connor for tricking you,” Zach said softly. “I was worried about you.”

Noah rolled his eyes. “I’m not looking for somebody to worry about me, Zach. If that’s the only reason you’re here, you should probably go.”

Zach looked up and the sheer determination in Noah’s blue eyes amazed him. They were a turquoise blue this morning, bright and beautiful, but with dark smudges

beneath them. He looked fully alert and more than a little ready for a confrontation. The Noah standing in front of him, hands resting on his hips, didn't look like he feared anything, much less leaving his apartment complex. The Noah standing in front of him looked strong enough to handle the darkness living in Zach's soul.

Honesty. Connor had suggested he show Noah the real Zachary Meadows, but Zach worried that if the younger man ever got a look of what he tried so hard to keep hidden from everyone, including himself, he might not ever open his door to him again.

"It's not the only reason," Zach answered after a few seconds. "Yes, I was worried about you, worried about what I'd done to hurt you, but I'm also here because there is nowhere else I'd rather be. I'm not here as your doctor. I'm not here as your protector. I'm not even here as your neighbor or friend. Yes, I want to be all of those things, but they don't have one damned thing to do with what's going on right now."

Noah dropped down onto his knees and forcefully pushed Zach's legs open, giving him enough space to slip his body into the opening. "What is going on right now, Zach? I think you and I are both fuck-ups when it comes to reading each other's body language or trying to guess what the other is thinking. Let's not play games neither of us are good at," he suggested.

Zach took a deep breath. Another deep breath. "I'm afraid for you to see the real me, Noah. I don't want to scare you away before we ever have a chance to get to know each other, but I'm afraid if I show you the real me, you'll run in the opposite direction. Is that what happened yesterday? Was I too...forward?"

Noah gazed up at him and then barked out a laugh. "Are you being serious right now?" He snuggled his body farther between Zach's spread legs. "You've got to be kidding me. Have you met me? If anybody is going to be running in the opposite direction, it's definitely going to be you. I'm fucked up. I know this; you know this."

He gripped Zach's thighs as he talked. "Yesterday afternoon, you told me you wanted to explore a relationship with me. You left for a few minutes. I napped. You came back. I forgot the entire conversation. The next thing you know, I've locked you out of my apartment without an explanation." He waved a hand in front of Zach. "I'm the nutcase, Zach. Me. It will be me messing things up every damned time."

"Don't call yourself that, Noah. I've already warned you several times," Zach growled.

"Yeah, yeah. Okay. Whatever. The bottom line is whatever you're afraid for me to see, it's going to be nothing compared to the shit I've waved in front of you."

"I want to fuck you, Noah. I don't know if it's what's best for you, but it's what I want."

Noah laughed nervously. "I'm afraid to leave my apartment building, Zach...I'm not afraid to be fucked. I'm not going to break. I'm not interested in hooking up with somebody who will try to handle me with kid gloves." His fingers moved up Zach's thigh, every inch bringing him closer to the cock that had been hard from the moment Noah had walked back into his apartment. "I'm looking for somebody who will treat me like a man, not a child or medical experiment."

"Are you sure this is something you want to explore, Noah?" Zach asked, once again feeling the need to give Noah an avenue of escape. Seventy-two hours ago, he'd thought Noah was a prostitute. Today, Zach considered him the most cherished, innocent man on the face of the earth. As he met Noah's challenging gaze, he had a feeling the younger man wouldn't appreciate the oldornew opinion Zach had of him.

Noah narrowed his eyes and slowly withdrew his hands from Zach's thighs to place them on his own hips, right above his waistband. Those sweatpants barely hung onto his lean frame, and Zach wanted nothing more than to reach out and give them a

happy nudge in the right direction—to Noah's ankles.

“This isn't an exploration, Zach. Like I told you, I'm not a science project, medical experiment, or charity fuck. Either you want to get to know me or you don't. I know I've left the impression I'm high maintenance, but that isn't the case. I'm just...new to all of this. It's been a while since I've even thought about talking to another guy, much less getting naked with him.”

Oh, yeah; Noah barreled straight toward being pissed off.

“Calm down; I just didn't want to screw things up again. To use some of your words, it's been a while since I've cared about what my bed partners thought about my performance, tastes, or desires. I'm pleased this appears to be something special for both of us.”

“Oh...okay,” Noah answered, apparently allowing Zach's admission to take some of the edge from his irritation. “Just...just don't treat me...weird. My phobias and my ability to fuck are two very separate things, and the last thing I want is for you to mix them up. I'm a nutcase in every other aspect of my life, but not when it comes to that. I'm a grown man, perfectly capable of telling you if I am or am not enjoying myself.”

Zach wanted to believe Noah's words. Desperately. He also wanted to think he would be capable of keeping the two worlds from colliding, to not allow Noah's social phobias to cause him to treat Noah any differently than he would if they'd met at a bar somewhere. Okay, he was worried about that one. His urge to protect Noah was damned near overpowering, and he wasn't sure he could squash it every time it tried to interfere with the physical side of their relationship.

“I'll try, Noah,” he answered honestly. “I have to admit it's going to be tough; I have this overwhelming urge to protect you and keep you safe.” A smile tugged at his lips as he added, “And keeping you safe is a total contradiction to what my dick wants to

do to your ass right now.”

“W-wow. O-okay, then,” Noah stuttered. “Let’s...eh...go with what’s behind the door called your dick, shall we?”

Hunger for Noah slithered through Zach. “If you don’t feel comfortable or get nervous at any time, you have to promise to let me know, Noah,” he ordered.

“Again, comments like that piss me off. It makes me feel like a kid and I’m not one,” he growled. Still on his knees, he edged a few inches closer to Zach, and said, “How about this? If I get too bored or if you’re not giving it to me hard or deep enough, I promise to let you know. Sound fair?”

Zach couldn’t wait to tan Noah’s backside. It wasn’t like he was into the BDSM lifestyle, but that didn’t necessarily mean he wouldn’t enjoy issuing a much-needed paddling to a pert ass if the opportunity presented itself. His snarky neighbor needed discipline. It was, of course, a damned good thing he enjoyed handing out discipline. They could very well be a match made in heaven. He smiled up at Noah and said, “Take your clothes off, Noah. All of them.”

“Hmmm, bossy, aren’t we,” Noah answered as he tugged his T-shirt over his head, tossed it aside, and stood up...all in the same motion.

“You have no idea, babe,” Zach said. “But you’re about to find out. Clothes off,” he ordered again. “You’ve been teasing me and everybody else at the gym with those baggy T-shirts and ridiculous sweatpants that leave way too much to the imagination. It’s time to put up or shut up.”

“Ha! You should see some of my photo shoots. I’m not leaving much to the imagination with those,” Noah sassed as he looped his fingers beneath the waistband of his sweats and underwear, slowly lowering them inch by inch until Zach could see

the head of his swollen cock peeking out.

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“I don’t like those photo shoots,” Zach growled. “Show me more.”

Grinning, Noah dropped the sweats and underwear to the floor and kicked them aside. When he made a move like he planned to join Zach on the couch, Zach held up his hand to stop him. “Don’t move unless I tell you to.”

Noah stood still for a few seconds and then started fidgeting. “I feel...”

“Stop talking,” Zach interrupted and then smiled up at Noah. “What? Are you already getting scared, little man?”

“Fuck you,” Noah snarled, but didn’t make a move to disobey Zach’s earlier order.

“Nah...but I’m gonna fuckyou. Turn around. Slowly.”

Noah rolled his eyes but slowly turned around until Zach had a breathtaking view of the younger man’s bubble ass, and it was just as he’d expected—sheer perfection. Yeah, it was the kind of perfect that made Zach want to own it, to claim it as his own and not let another damn person near it. Zach had never been accused of being an overly possessive man, quite the contrary actually, but with Noah, his whole foundation shifted and turned him into something different.

Zach stood from the couch. Noah flinched when he heard the movement but then looked over his shoulder with an ‘I dare you’ look that spoke directly to Zach’s cock. Never being one to back down from a dare, Zach closed the distance between them and pushed his body against Noah’s backside, making sure the younger, less experienced man had no doubts left about how much he wanted him. His cock, even

while trapped inside his jeans, had to feel like an iron pole pushing against Noah's ass.

"Still no second thoughts?" he asked as he reached down to spread Noah's cheeks just enough to nestle the outline of his cock into the cozy spot.

Noah's breathing hitched and his ass bucked against Zach. "No, absolutely no doubts from me." Chuckling, he added, "Of course, I'm the one buck-ass naked, and you're the one still fully dressed. Second thoughts, Zachary?"

Zach answered Noah by leaning back and firmly swatting his ass. After that, he stepped back and started removing his clothing. Noah was still turned away from him, and apparently his neighbor wasn't happy about it.

"I wanna watch that," Noah hissed. "Can I turn around?"

His shirt was already gone and shoes kicked away. As his hand reached for the buckle of his belt, he answered, "Babe, you can do anything you want. We're in this together."

"Yeah, but I might not know what I'm doing," Noah answered quietly as he turned to face Zach. "Holy fuck," he whispered as he watched Zach peel his jeans down his thighs and then toss them aside. "I mean it. Holy. Fuck."

Zach, when completely naked, stepped back and eased back down onto the couch. With a crook of his finger, he motioned for Noah to join him. When Noah started to sit next to him, Zach grabbed him around the waist and effortlessly lifted him, positioning him on his lap, face to face, legs splayed open. Noah's cock, hard and leaking, bobbed and then bounced against Zach's stomach.

When Noah looked at Zach, his pupils were wide and desire was etched all over his

face. Zach reached his hand around and dipped a finger between Noah's ass cheeks. He tapped against the puckered flesh protecting his opening. "How long has it been since you've had another man in here?"

Noah mumbled something and tried to form words for a few seconds before finally saying, "I-I was eighteen, so...a long time ago."

"Toys?"

Noah shook his head and a pretty blush stained his cheeks. He wiggled around on Zach's lap, clearly trying to put some pressure or friction to the spots that ached with need.

"Your own fingers?"

Zach used his other hand to wrap around Noah's swollen cock, which stood straight up, begging for attention. The silky heat seemed to sizzle against his palm. As he slid his hand up and down the length, using Noah's pre-cum to dampen his palm, he savored holding something so vulnerable yet so powerful at the same time. Noah hissed out a breath of arousal and bucked against his fist.

"Oh, fuck," Noah moaned. "Please."

"Not yet, babe. It's been a while for you. Let's spend some time getting you ready." Zach removed his hand, grinned at Noah's whimper of frustration, and asked, "Do you have any lube?"

"Lube?" Noah's eyes blinked owlishly as he looked at Zach. "Oh! Lube. Yeah. Maybe. No. I have some oils that we use for photo shoots. I'll grab that." He started to scurry away, but Zach yanked him back down.

“That isn’t necessarily the same thing, Noah. Sometimes there’s outside stuff and sometimes there’s inside stuff...sometimes it can be the same. Other times, it can’t.” He winked at Noah’s who-the-fuck-cares-right-now look. “Better safe than sorry,” he explained as he reached for his jeans and dug around in the back pocket for the packets of lube and condoms he’d carried with him in hopes Noah would forgive him. Using his teeth, he ripped open a packet of lube and coated his fingers with it. “Nervous?”

“Excited,” Noah answered, his voice huskier than usual.

“Have I mentioned how sexy you are?” Zach asked as he returned his hands to where they were before...one stroking Noah’s cock and one toying with his tight hole. “You caught my attention that first time and you’ve fucking held onto it since then.” With the aid of the slick liquid coating his finger, Zach pushed against Noah’s entrance. Once he passed the initial resistance, he buried one finger deep inside.

Noah whimpered again and tossed his head back. “Yessss!”

“Put your hands on my shoulders, babe. I’ll do the rest. You just enjoy...just feel.”

“Hell, yeah, I’m feeling that,” Noah answered and then hissed when Zach added another finger.

“Too much? Too fast?” Zach asked.

“Too perfect.”

Zach smiled at Noah’s enthusiasm and the expressions of pleasure that Noah sent him. The heavy breathing. The nibbling of his bottom lip. The soft sounds. All of it. Zach soaked up everything Noah offered him as he continued using his fingers to stretch that tight hole. Every few seconds, he’d pushed against Noah’s prostate just to watch him come unglued. When he felt confident Noah had had enough and even more confident that his body couldn’t take any more teasing without spontaneously combusting, he withdrew his fingers so he could suit his cock up with a condom.

Unable to stop himself, he leaned forward and clamped his teeth on Noah’s neck, biting and sucking until blood rose to the surface, leaving a beautiful love bruise. It might be considered animalistic, but Zach needed to mark Noah as his.

“I gotta...I gotta...” Noah either didn’t know what he wanted or didn’t know how to ask for it. That was okay; Zach knew exactly what he wanted and needed.

“Easy, babe,” he murmured against his neck. “I’ve got you.” Zach wrapped his hand around the back of Noah’s neck and pulled him forward so he would have access to those plump lips. He didn’t normally kiss his lovers—kissing generally led to bonds he didn’t want—but Zach didn’t hesitate when it came to Noah. He had to claim those lips...had to taste the lusciousness that had been made just for him.

So, he kissed him—kissed him with every ounce of lust, frustration, anger, and desire he’d been suffering through since the first moment he’d laid eyes on his hot neighbor.

He was determined to conquer and claim Noah, from top to bottom, inside and out. His fingers slipped back inside the tight channel, searching and finding the bundle of nerves that made Noah growl and then whimper. Noah tasted like heaven. Like youth and innocence. Noah tasted like his. That was the only way to describe what he felt; Noah belonged to him.

Unable to hold back much longer and knowing how badly he needed to be buried inside Noah, he pulled his fingers out. “Set the pace, babe. I don’t want to push you too hard this time. You need to be in control, because I can’t trust myself not to fuck you past the point of painful.”

“Shit,” Noah hissed as his blue eyes dilated from either the sight of Zach’s cock or from the threat hanging in the air between them. Gingerly, he leaned forward and started to reach back to position Zach’s cock against his entrance but then paused. “It’s been a while since I’ve done...anything,” he said, either as a warning to Zach or to himself. “That”—Noah nodded toward his cock—“may be more than I can handle.”

“Come on, babe. Do what feels good. Only what feels good.”

Noah’s teeth caught his bottom lip again, tugged, and then let go for him to say, “Thank you for kissing me, Doc. I could tell it’s really not your thing. It is my thing, so...thanks.”

Shit. Was he a bad kisser? Did you lose a skill when it wasn’t used? Zach’s face heated. He wanted everything about this encounter, their first time together, to be perfect for Noah, but it sounded like he’d already messed it up. “Sorry, babe. I’ll work on my technique.”

Noah frowned for a second and then said, “No! That’s not what I meant. You seemed tense, kinda like you were making yourself take a dose of medicine. Hell, Doc, there

wasn't a damned thing wrong with your technique. You made my toes curl and cock melt. Trust me, the skill level is off the charts. I just...I thought... I'll stop talking now," he finished.

"I love your sassy mouth. I love your whimpers, moans, and growls. I love the way you bite your bottom lip when you're nervous or trying to be quiet. I love how you taste. Hell, Noah, you're a walking wet dream. Now, ride my cock. Please," he added sweetly, hoping Noah took the hint before he took over for him.

Noah braced himself on his knees, placed one hand on Zach's shoulder, and reached behind himself to wrap his hand around Zach's cock. It was fucking huge...and hot. Even through the condom, heat radiated from the thick cock. There was absolutely no way in hell he would ever admit it to Zach, but he'd only had anal sex three times in his life, and it had been with the same person.

Oh, and his one-time partner damned well didn't have a huge cock. No, he did not. They'd been more friends than lovers, experimenting on each other mainly to avoid looking like fools when they finally had the chance to experience the 'real' deal. How was he supposed to know the real deal wouldn't happen until he was in his twenties and his lover would have a fucking python dick?

None of his three experimental sexual encounters had been with him going cowboy-style either. It'd been sloppy and fast, him on his hands and knees with Trevor pounding into him from behind. Well, maybe not exactly pounding, but poor Trevor had given it his best effort.

Playing with his own cock with Zachary's gray eyes watching him so closely would feel strange. Of course, he'd still do it, but that didn't make it less awkward.

Trying to act like he knew exactly what he was doing, he positioned the mushroom head against his puckered hole, closed his eyes, and said a quick prayer to a god that had stopped listening to him long ago, then lowered himself onto Zach's weapon of choice. He tried and failed to hold back a whimper of pain when the bulbous head popped inside, stretching him straight past the edge of discomfort.

He needed to get a grip. The last thing he wanted was Zach to back off before they even really got started. Noah wasn't going to let it happen. Hell to the absolutely not. He could do this. He took a deep breath and concentrated on relaxing his muscles. When that didn't work, he clenched his eyes closed even tighter and just made it happen.

All. Nine. Inches.

His eyes watered. No...it was tears.

He needed to wave a white flag and scream retreat at the top of his lungs. Unfortunately, he couldn't breathe, much less wave a flag or scream. Oxygen would be needed for both of those things. But oxygen, like his courage, had deserted him.

"Shit, babe," Zach barked. "Slow! You were supposed to do that slowly." Zach caressed his back and the sides of his arms, soothing him.

Noah dropped his head against Zach's forehead and tried to breathe. Failed.

Finally, he managed to say, "I'm good. Everything's good." The words were nothing more than a big fat lie, but his embarrassment over his lack of experience and ability drove him to say stupid shit...do stupid things like force nine inches straight into his ass all at once.

"Everything isnotgood, Noah," Zach challenged. "I think you're crying. Are you

crying? Why did you do that? The lube was there to help, not work miracles. What were you thinking?"

"Stop talking," Noah ordered. "Just stop talking. Give me a minute, okay? What the fuck do you do? Rub growth cream on that monster every morning before work and every night before bed?"

Even through the haze of pain, Noah didn't miss the uptick at the corner of Zach's lips. The bastard tried to rein it in before Noah saw it, but failed miserably. Noah was in so much trouble. Zach was already hesitant to give him what he wanted because it was damned clear the older man hadn't thought he was mentally capable of handling a sexual relationship. With this last display of stupidity, he'd just proven he probably wasn't even capable of a physical relationship, much less mental. Fuck it seven ways to Sunday. He had to get his shit together before Zach called an end to the entire thing.

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Zach's forehead dampened with sweat and every muscle in the man's body tensed. While Noah was impaled on a flagpole, trying to figure out how to turn his almost-a-virgin freak show into something enjoyable, Zach was probably busy figuring out a way to politely toss the crazy boy to the curb. Hell, if Noah were on the sane end of the sanity scale instead of the crazy end, he'd be doing the same thing.

Zach would never give him another chance. Sweet Zach who tried so hard to not let this go in the physical direction because he didn't want to hurt Noah. Sweet Zach who...

A smack on his ass jolted Noah back to reality. He jerked his head up to look into not-so-sweet Zach's gray eyes. The man bit back a smirk. Barely. No, he definitely smirked.

"What in the hell was that for?" Noah grumbled. "I'm trying not to move and your smack didn't help matters in the least."

"You not moving is the problem, babe. You've sat, frozen in fear, on my cock for almost five minutes now. Wiggle your ass or something," he pleaded. "While I didn't agree with your all-or-nothing method of impalement, it doesn't mean I can hold this position all night long. Move. Your. Sweet. Ass." Zach followed his order up with a wink. "I promise, it will be better now. You should have taken it slow, Noah. You didn't. That's behind us. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised if you just give it a wiggle or jiggle."

"That's easy for you to say," Noah whined. "You're not the one sitting on a baseball bat."

“Ahhh, that’s sweet,” Zach teased. “My ego loves it.” Zach’s large hands cupped Noah’s ass and gave it a gentle squeeze. “So, now you’ve stroked my ego; how about stroking my cock?”

Noah didn’t believe a word coming out of Zach’s mouth—there was no way things down below had just magically improved, but he was determined to not be a baby about it. He seriously didn’t remember it being this tight of a squeeze.

“Asshole,” he growled as he followed Zach’s instructions and gave his ass a very itty-bitsy, tiny wiggle. When he wasn’t crippled by pain or split asunder, he lifted up a couple inches and then slowly lowered himself again. He might be crazy, but he wasn’t stupid; he wouldn’t be taking that cock with one slide again any time soon. “Ummm,” he said when, not only was there no pain, there was a definite zinger of pleasure. He rocked forward and backward again, this time taking more of Zach’s length in one go.

When he heard Zach chuckle, he glared at him and then flipped him the middle finger.

“Yeah, babe, that’s what I’m waiting for,” was Zach’s answer. That smartass comment accompanied the most beautiful smile Noah had ever seen in his life. He paused all movement as he looked at Zach’s face, into his eyes, and his heart did something ridiculous. Holy shit, he was going to do something utterly stupid like fall in love with Zach. He was one hundred percent sure all Zach wanted from him was a rough fuck, and he was going to fall in love.

Noah tried to shake off the nagging worry he’d become Zachary Meadows’s biggest mistake. Now wasn’t the time. He’d already made a fool of himself with the impalement episode; he didn’t need to top that screw-up with a vow of love and devotion.

He moved his hips again, smiled, and said, “That’s not so bad!”

This time Zach barked out a laugh. “Wow, you stroked my ego and then decimated it in the next minute. Not so bad? Come on. For the sake of our friendship, at least have the courtesy to lie to me.”

“Ha, ha. Very funny, smartass,” Noah grumbled with another flex of his hips. Oh, hell yeah, he was getting used to it. “Like your ego needs stroking from me. You’re a walking, talking wet dream for every gay guy in the world. We both know you’re giving a charity fuck to the crazy kid.”

The lust in those gray eyes changed to anger from one heartbeat to the next. Zach grabbed the sides of Noah’s face and yanked him forward until they were only an inch apart.

“Noah, I think I’ve made myself pretty damned clear about how I feel when you make those negative comments about yourself. I’ve warned you; I’m not playing. Don’t say it again. I don’t know who in the hell has made you feel that way, or who tried to convince you you’re crazy, but I won’t put up with it. Understood?”

Noah nodded, his eyes wide.

“Do it again and I’m going to punish your ass. I don’t know or understand what the hell is going on between us,” he continued. “All I know is I tried to stay away from you because you deserve better than me, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t, Noah. Right now, from this minute forward until you grow tired of me and kick my ass to the curb, you belong to me. You’re mine.”

Well...shit; Noah’s heart did that thing again. He hadn’t ever been anybody’s. He was thrilled to belong to somebody. He looked away, not wanting Zach to see how his words were affecting Noah’s heart...or tried to look away. Zach wouldn’t have any of

that, though. He tilted his head back around.

“That okay with you?” Zach asked.

Noah’s heart screamed ‘yes.’ Noah nodded.

“Good. Now that we’ve got that out of the way, let’s have some fun,” Zach told him with a swat to his ass. “I’ve watched this ass working out in the gym for months now. Let me see if it bounces as good as I’ve imagined.”

Still nervous, but oh so determined, Noah flexed his hips again. No pain. Only pleasure. He could do pleasure. At first, his movements remained slow and controlled as he assured his ass nothing horrible would happen. He actually couldn’t blame it for not trusting him at the moment. After several torturous minutes of slow slides, he grew more confident and needier. Zach urged him on with filthy words about what his cock did to Noah’s ass, and while the explicit words made him blush, they also made him hornier than hell. In what he congratulated himself on being record time, Noah was riding Zach’s cock in a groove that would have made any porn star proud. It felt fucking perfect to have Zach stretching his ass to its limits, maybe a tad beyond. When he leaned back, supporting himself by placing his hands on Zach’s knees, a yelp erupted from his lips when that massive cock stroked the bundle of nerves in his ass.

“Oh, yeah,” he yelled in triumph. “That feels so good. Right there. Oh fuck; right there.”

His eyes were opened only a slit because he barely had the energy to keep them open at all, but he tried to keep his gaze locked with Zach’s. The words tumbling from Zach’s mouth were nothing short of trash—he wanted to destroy Noah’s ass, nothing but sheer willpower kept him from flipping Noah over and pummeling him into next week—but the look in his eyes was even filthier. Hell, Noah wanted it too, but

figured he wasn't ready for that level of fuckdom yet.

Noah barely had time to register the oddness of Zach's slouchy position on the couch before Zach's actions gave him the answer. As he rode Zach's cock, he watched as his lover leaned forward just enough to take the tip of Noah's cock inside his mouth.

"Fuck!" he yelled as warmth enveloped the mushroom head. When Zach's cheeks hollowed out as he sucked the tip into his mouth, Noah suspected he had died and gone straight to heaven. Slouchy position equaled good. Damned good. "Oh, fuck, Zach. Please don't stop," he begged while he could still talk. He wouldn't be at all surprised if he lost use of all his muscles at any second. The pleasure was too much. Zach's fist wrapped around the base of Noah's cock while his lips worked the top. He removed his mouth only long enough to spit some moisture into his hand. After that, Noah was completely lost. Zach's cock stroked inside his ass, teasing his prostate, while his mouth and tongue toyed with and tormented the head of his cock, and a spit-coated hand slid up and down his length, twisting in one direction and then the other.

Noah had played before, but he realized right then and there he hadn't ever really hadsex. He would be addicted to it now, unable to go a full day without having it again. If necessary, he would chain Zach to his bed. He had to have this again and again and again.

His balls drew up, and he clamped down so hard on his bottom lip he tasted blood. His entire body buzzed with pleasure reaching a peak and threatening to explode.

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“Oh, fuck. I’m gonna come, Zach,” he said, as if the other man weren’t capable of seeing what was happening to his body. “Oh fuck. This is too much. This is...”

After that, Noah had no idea what he said. Hell, it probably wasn’t even real words. He didn’t care. The pleasure coursing through him was the only thing he cared about. He’d never been so alive in his life. His own sweat dripped off his forehead and slipped into his eyes. He heard his ass slapping against Zach, knew he writhed like a whore on his lover’s lap. None of it mattered, though. The only thing that mattered was he belonged to Zach.

Zach owned his body, taking what he’d never given to another person. There would be no turning back after this.

He heard Zach roar his release a split second before large hands clamped down on his hips, holding him in a bruising grip, leaving him powerless to do anything other than feel Zach’s huge cock twitching inside him as he came. Warmth filled the condom, and Noah wanted the barrier to vanish, to have nothing between them. He wanted Zach’s cum inside him. As he pictured the thought in his head, his own cock erupted in an orgasm so powerful it caused strange whimpering sounds to spill from his mouth. Ribbons of his spunk coated Zach’s chest, over and over again. Holy fuck, he’d been saving up for that one.

One minute or ten minutes passed—Noah didn’t have a clue how much time. He collapsed against Zach’s chest, the other man’s softening cock still lodged inside him and Noah’s cum trapped between them, making them sticky and icky.

It felt perfect.

When he did finally return to the land of the living, he whispered, “Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit.” His fucking teeth chattered. Embarrassed, he tried to clamp his mouth together, but it would have taken a miracle from God to keep him from showing Zach just how satisfied he was. As his lips continued to quiver, he realized there was going to be no intervention from God on this day.

More incoherent words tumbled from his lips when Zach gathered him closer and then stood, still holding Noah and his cock still buried inside. Noah’s only response was to wrap his legs around Zach’s waist and his arms around Zach’s neck. He’d just add this moment to the long list of embarrassing things he’d done. He’d like to think he could stand on his own two feet like a grown man, but if Zach set him down, he would melt into a big messy puddle of I’ve-been-fucked-to-oblivion.

Zach, on the other hand, appeared to be as strong and manly powerful as usual as he carried Noah down the hallway, turned down the bedspread, and then carefully withdrew his soft cock so he could lay Noah onto the bed. He kissed Noah’s forehead and whispered, “I’m going to grab something to clean us up. I’ll be right back.” He started to walk off, but turned back and said, “You were perfect, Noah—just like I knew you would be.”

If Noah were a cat, he would have purred. Instead, he snuggled into the blankets.

Chapter 8

Nearly two hours passed since Zach lost his balls, heart, and soul to Noah St. Claire. The sneaky bastard had stolen all three, and if Zach was honest, he'd have to admit he didn't want them back. The kid could own him for as long as he could put up with Zach's bullshit.

Was he nervous about what just happened? Fuck, yeah, he was. Terrified, actually. Noah was too good for him; too innocent. From what he'd just witnessed with Noah's lap action, he would guess there was a pretty good chance Noah had been a virgin. If not a virgin, almost a virgin; there was no doubting that. He had no business being in the same room with someone so pure, much less having his cock buried as deep as it would fit.

He walked a fine line, with total fuckup on one side and break the kid's heart on the other. There was no winning; he would eventually destroy Noah's goodness. No matter how hard he tried to pretend like he was something other than the piece of shit his father raised, he would always be that person. Noah deserved better.

But, just like his father, he didn't care what Noah deserved. He wanted him, so he was taking him. He hated himself for it, tried to convince himself they were just having some fun between the sheets, but he knew better. He wasn't a complete idiot; he'd seen the look in Noah's eyes as they'd fucked.

He should pretend like he'd kept ignoring Noah during their elevator rides or visits to the gym. He should walk away...but he wouldn't. It'd been a long time since he'd felt this alive, since he'd wanted anybody the way he wanted Noah. Everything about the

young man checked a box on his my-favorite-things list. Since walking away was an impossibility, he prayed he wouldn't do something to screw up Noah's life even more.

He rolled to his side so he could get a better look at his bed partner. If he had his way, he and Noah would be snuggled against each other right now, his cock spooning Noah's ass. Apparently, he wouldn't get his way. The cutie was on his belly, arms and legs sprawled in every direction, and his cheek resting flat against the mattress. Zach smiled. Someone had grown very accustomed to sleeping alone.

Zach vowed to change that. He'd always been a hit-it-and-quit-it kind of guy, never bringing anybody home to his bed and never sleeping over in another person's private domain. It helped keep a barrier and distance, just the way he liked it. After one night in Noah's bed, he suspected he'd never again want to sleep anywhere else, even if a knee to his stomach impeded his desire to spoon.

Noah's long lashes rested lazily against his cheeks and his full lips formed a satisfied smile. The dark smudges beneath his eyes earlier that morning had faded to barely noticeable. The sheet Zach had tossed over them after he'd cleaned them both up had worked its way down enough to reward Zach with a glimpse of Noah's ass—just a peek, but quite an enjoyable peek. Several love bites marred the extra-pale flesh of Noah's shoulders and neck. He hadn't been able to help himself. The urge to mark Noah as his had been too much to deny.

His eyes strayed back down to the top curve of the perfectly shaped ass next to him. Noah would most definitely be sore, probably too sore for another round. Disappointing, but Zach could be patient. As long as he got to have him again, he could suffer through waiting for Noah's ass to recover. Fuck, the kid had practically been a virgin. While he'd been a perfect lover, his inexperience was obvious. Zach grinned; he'd be more than happy to teach him everything he needed to know.

Noah had been snoring softly for the past two hours, so when an exceptionally loud snore tumbled from his sexy lips, Zach's eyes darted back up to his lover's face. Just as he'd expected; the snore woke him. Sleepy eyes blinked open slowly, and when they finally focused on Zach, sheer terror clouded the blue orbs. Zach's heart plummeted.

When Noah gasped, Zach pulled him close until they were eye to eye. "Easy, babe. It's just me," he urged softly. "Zach. Your neighbor. You remember, right? Don't panic; make your mind calm down and remember. It's okay. Everything's okay." He made his voice as soothing as possible. His hold on Noah was strong, but he hoped it wasn't intimidating or scary. He should have thought of this—should have remembered Noah told him the meds clouded his memory.

Another panic attack would devastate Noah. Unsure of what to do, he wrapped his arms around Noah and stroked his back, whispering reassuring words against his ear. Noah's body remained tense, poised in a fight or flight mode.

"Try to remember, babe. We had a misunderstanding and you locked me out of your apartment. Connor tricked you into letting me back in. We talked. We...uh...fucked." It'd been so much more than fucking, but Zach wasn't prepared to admit to it out loud. "It was good. We had fun. Afterward, you needed a nap. Everything's fine. You're safe. We're in your apartment. It's your safe place."

Noah's body relaxed, inch by inch, slowly but surely, but Zach kept talking, kept rubbing his back. Noah hadn't been touched in a long time. He needed touching, a lot of touching.

Finally, Noah pushed against him as he said, "Ughh, you're a human heater. Give me some space. I'm about to have heat stroke."

Mr. Sassy Pants returned. Zach smiled and eased away from the young man who

made him feel things he had no business feeling. “Do you remember? Is everything okay?”

Noah blushed. “Yeah, yeah. I remember. Sorry about that. It happens. I’m used to it, but it has to look somewhat shocking to a sane person.” He grinned, but Zach could see the embarrassment etched all over his beautiful face. “Waking up next to crazy is pretty exhausting, eh? You should’ve seen the look on your face. I don’t know which one of us was more scared.” He laughed nervously.

Zach’s irritation flared instantly at Noah’s words. He’d warned him about the negative comments. Oh well, it was bound to happen. Zach wasn’t at all surprised it turned out to be sooner rather than later. He patted Noah’s cheek and disentangled himself from their embrace. Reaching behind him, he stacked up several pillows so he was able to comfortably prop up against the headboard. Perfect.

When his eyes returned to Noah, his lover sported a confused expression. “I said something wrong again, didn’t I?” he asked quietly.

Zach grinned. “Why would you say that?”

“Because you damned near broke your back to get away from me. We were all touchy-feely mode one second, and then, the next thing I know, you’re propped up and ready for...what? Breakfast in bed? Television? Or, wait, I know; you hated to leave me alone, but didn’t want to touch me anymore.” Noah turned away from him. “I bet that’s it,” he muttered.

“No, no, and no. You’re wrong on all three accounts, babe.” He set a finger under Noah’s chin to turn his face back toward him before tucking Noah’s hair behind his ear. Bedhead looked good on Noah, all that inky black silkiness stuck out in every direction. “What did I tell you would happen to you if you made another derogatory comment?” he asked. “Do you remember?”

Noah sat up in the bed, cross-legged, and stared at him like he'd grown a third head. "Ha! You said you would punish me. Ha, ha. I'm sorry, Zach. It's a habit that's going to be hard to break. I own my craz—" He grimaced. "Oops, I did it again."

"I heard you," Zach answered. "I think that makes eight times. I realize you think you're being funny, Noah. You're wrong. It isn't funny. You aren't crazy, nor are the other people who suffer from phobias. Your comments are rude and unacceptable."

For the first time, Noah looked ashamed. "Hell, Zach, I didn't mean anybody else, just me. I wouldn't say that shit about another person."

"That's nine."

"What's nine?"

"You were referring to the crazy comments and you said 'just me.' That's nine unacceptable comments I owe you discipline for," Zach explained slowly, like he was teaching a first-grader their ABCs.

"You're funny," Noah said. "But, hey, I'm game. What's the discipline going to be? Do I get a time-out? Take my computer or television away?" He clapped excitedly. "Oh, I've got one; how about you ground me? Let's say I can't leave my apartment building."

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“You’re hilarious,” Zach answered dryly. “Absolutely hilarious.” He narrowed his eyes as he looked at Noah’s grinning face. “No, I was thinking of something entirely different, babe. I’ve always been a fan of corporal punishment.”

Noah’s Adam apple bobbed up and down, and he blinked slowly at Zach. Oh, and his cock twitched.

“You’re kidding me, right?” he asked. “I’m a grown-ass man, Zach. I don’t get spankings anymore.”

Zach wrapped his hand around Noah’s wrist and said, “First of all, you aren’t acting like a grown-ass man. You’re acting like a bully—you’re just bullying yourself instead of the other kids on the playground. Secondly, with a smartass mouth like yours, I suspect you never got any spankings, even when you deserved them.” He tugged Noah’s wrist, pulling him toward his lap. “Come on, babe; take your punishment like a man. Ass up, face down. Across the lap.” Zach grinned. “I wish I could say this was going to be harder for me than it is for you, but we both know it would be a lie.”

Noah tugged back, but not very hard. “You’re kidding, aren’t you? You seriously don’t think you’re going to spank me?”

Noah’s eyes twinkled with excitement and his entire body hummed with excitement. His cock had swollen to almost full arousal as they’d discussed discipline. Noah’s body told Zach he was more than a little interested in getting his ass spanked, but he needed to hear the words straight from the boy’s mouth. Games weren’t fun unless both participants wanted to play.

“I’m very serious when I say I’m going to spank you for saying things you shouldn’t say. I guess the only question left to answer is whether you want me to. Do you, Noah? Do you want to feel the fire of my hand on your ass while you’re draped over my lap like some kind of virginal sacrifice of the naughty?”

Noah sat next to him, heart rate accelerated, face flushed, and cock hard...staring. Zach stared back. After a full minute passed, Noah shrugged and said, “Well, eh,yeah, I want you to do that. Who wouldn’t want that? I mean, I guess you’ve realized I’m a bit rusty in the sex department. I’m hungry to tryeverything.” He frowned at Zach and added, “But for future reference, I would’ve enjoyed this game more if you’dmademe. This could’ve been so much more fun if you’d dragged me, kicking and screaming, over your lap.” He winked. “Just for future reference.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Zach answered with a wink of his own. “I would never do anything to you unless I’m certain you’re a willing participant. Just for future reference.” The moment the last word left his mouth, Zach tugged Noah’s wrist hard enough to pull him up onto his knees and then unceremoniously yanked him over his lap. While Noah was still yelping in surprise, Zach moved one of his legs and put it on top of the back of Noah’s thighs, anchoring his lover in place. He used one hand to clamp down onto the back of Noah’s neck, pushing his head to the mattress. The offering before him was a beautifully pale bubble ass wiggling in fake outrage and just begging to be spanked.

“Dammit, Zach! A little warning next time. I think you’ve done this before,” Noah said, words slightly muffled by the mattress.

The grin on Zach’s face would’ve worried Noah if he could’ve seen it. “Why are you being disciplined, Noah?” he asked.

Noah’s response of laughter stopped when Zach squeezed his right ass cheek hard enough to get his point across.

“Ouch,” Noah hissed before obediently answering, “For making rude and obnoxious remarks about my crazy...even if the comments are true.”

“That’s ten,” Zach remarked dryly, not at all surprised by Noah’s need to be a smartass. “Normally, I would have your ass stuffed with a nice thick butt plug when I spanked you, but unfortunately, we are both currently short of sex toys.” A squeeze to the left butt cheek. “That is, of course, a problem I intend to remedy very quickly.”

“Of course,” Noah agreed.

“Ten swats for ten smartass comments, Noah. Since you’re clearly unable or unwilling to remember to curb your tongue when it comes to negative remarks about yourself, I feel it necessary to give you something to help you think before speaking next time. Understood?”

Zach allowed Noah to twist his head around so he could look him in the eyes. Another wink. “Understood, Principal Meadows. I promise to be a good boy from now on.”

Zach shook his head at Noah’s answer, raised his hand in the air, and then connected with Noah's pert ass with enough force to leave a red handprint on a pale cheek.

“Ow,” Noah yelped in surprised. “That fucking hurt, Zach! Shit. Not so hard next—”

Another smack, this one harder than the first one.

“Shit! You mother fucking son of a—”

Two solid smacks against the same cheek.

Noah wiggled and tried to get away, but he couldn’t escape the iron leg holding his

lower body in place. “Ouch,” he screamed when two more smacks decorated the other cheek. “I am so going to kick your ass for this. I thought we were playing.”

Three smacks, those not as hard as the first six, landed against the plumpest part of Noah’s ass. Zach admired how pretty and pink the skin looked. His baby’s cock was hard enough to cut glass, so while it might’ve hurt more than he’d anticipated, Noah still enjoyed the contact. He would hopefully remember the burn the next time he thought about calling himself crazy. To try and add a little bit of sugar to help the medicine go down, he lovingly patted Noah’s ass, leaned over, and gave each cheek a kiss, and then released him. The minute he loosened his hold, Noah scrambled off his lap and whirled around, ready to do battle.

“You’re evil, Zachary Meadows,” Noah accused. “I thought you were talking about love pats, not fucking paint my ass red bullshit. What. The. Hell.”

Zach allowed his eyes to make a lazy pass down to Noah’s cock and then back up to the icy blue glare being sent his way. “Do you feel the urge to make another crazy comment, Noah?”

“As a fucking matter of fact, I do,” he roared. “Youare crazy! That was sneaky mean, and you know it. My ass is literally on fire, you son of a bitch.”

“Awww, poor baby,” Zach said in the most sarcastic voice he could muster. “Did I hurt your pretty ass? Should I kiss it and make it all better?” Zach narrowed his eyes, attempting a mischievous look as he added, “Cause if you want me to kiss it and make it all better, get on all fours in the middle of the bed.”

“Humph,” Noah retorted. He was on his knees in front of Zach, looking as if he wanted any reason to punch him in the face. He continued to glare for another thirty seconds before saying, “Just to clarify; when you say kiss it and make it better, are you talking about kissing my poor, aching, abused ass cheeks...or, you know, are you

hinting at doing the...other?"

Zach still couldn't believe the beauty in front of him, all fire and sass, was the same shy man who'd barely had the guts to look him in the eye when they'd shared an elevator. It was so sad to think Noah possessed this much energy, excitement, and fun bottled up inside him, but spent the last three years barely speaking to anyone. Noah opened up for him, and it made his heart start beating again. Falling in love with Noah would be so damned easy.

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And so damned unfair to Noah.

He pushed the thoughts aside. To Noah, he said, “Well, I was leaning toward the other.”

“Oh...okay,” Noah murmured, eyes downcast as if taking a sudden interest in the mattress. When he raised those blue babies back up, they sparkled with mischief. “Did you say all fours in the middle of the bed?”

“I did.”

“Consider it done,” he replied with a naughty grin as he made a huge production of getting into position. Once there, he looked over his shoulder at Zach, and said, “I’ve never ever done this before.”

“Oh, Pink Cheeks, I suspect there’s a hell of a lot you haven’t ever done before,” Zach said. He pushed away from the headboard and got to his knees behind Noah, nudging his muscled thighs farther apart. “And I’m going to enjoy introducing you to each and every one of them.” He leaned over and scraped his teeth against Noah’s ass. He put his right hand in the center of Noah’s back and pushed downward, explaining, “All fours, in this case, means knees and elbows, ass up.”

Another two hours passed, and this time when Noah woke up, confusion didn’t enter his beautiful eyes. Zach was glad he remembered him; he’d made the cute fucker scream loud enough to wake the neighbors two floors below. And while it was safe to assume Noah might be on the fence about being spanked, he undoubtedly loved being rimmed. If Zach lived to be a hundred, he would never forget those sexy whimpers,

moans, growls, and groans tumbling from Noah's lips. When Noah enjoyed himself, he didn't care if he let anyone within a one mile radius know it.

They were still on Noah's bed, naked and reeking of sex. Zach figured a shower might not be a bad idea. Lots of fun could be had in the shower. Noah lay next to him, tracing one of Zach's tattoos with the tip of his finger. He would normally cringe if anyone commented or was stupid enough to touch the ink he was so ashamed of, but Noah could do whatever the fuck he pleased and Zach liked it.

From the living room, his cell phone chirped again. It was undoubtedly Connor; he wasn't on call with the hospital today and nobody else called him. His friend was probably convinced they'd killed each other. To keep Connor from calling 911 or shooting his way into Noah's apartment, he whispered, "Let me go grab that. I'll be right back."

"Sure. I'm pretty sure I've heard your phone but then you'd distract me and I'd forget to say anything. I hope it isn't a hospital emergency."

"It's not. I'll be right back."

He climbed out of the bed and walked naked toward the door. When Noah whistled, he gave him an ass shake before disappearing down the hall. As he dug into the pocket of his jeans, he shook his head in embarrassment.

He didn't do ass shakes.

He guessed he did now.

Just as he'd expected, Connor had left him fifteen text messages—the last one threatening to jump from Zach's balcony to Noah's so he could look through the French doors and watch them fucking. Ha! Unless he held superpowers of seeing

through thick black curtains, he would've wasted the life-threatening balcony acrobatics. He quickly texted him back, letting him know everything was good and promised to ask Noah to agree to talk with him about his security.

Shit, Zach didn't look forward to the conversation. How was he supposed to convince a man he barely knew that he and Connor could keep him safer than the FBI?

Back in the bedroom, he said, "That was Connor. He wants to know if we're going to have sex all day or whether he can come over for a visit." He tossed his phone on Noah's nightstand and climbed back into bed. He was unclear and uncomfortable about how he should present his plans to Noah...since he was pretty much suggesting Noah allow him and Connor to take over his entire life. Yeah, this conversation wasn't going to go well.

Noah got up on his knees and straddled Zach's lap. Grinning, he said, "Well, I hope you told him we were going to have sex all day. I'm way behind schedule in the sex department, so I have lots of catching up to do." He shrugged and added, "Since he's your friend and all, he can come over and watch if he wants to."

"Uh...no, he can't," Zach answered. "I'd like for him to stay my best friend, and if I caught him looking at your ass, I'm afraid our friendship might slam into a brick wall." Zach felt queasy, but swallowed and dove in. "Soooo, uh, I have some suggestions for you to consider."

Noah cocked an eyebrow. "Suggestions? Why am I getting the feeling I'm not going to like what you're about to say?" He climbed right back off Zach's lap and plopped down on the other side of the bed.

Since there was no easy way out of the mess he'd created, Zach plowed ahead. "First of all, Noah," he began, "this thing between you and me has absolutely nothing to do with my medical profession or opinion; it's strictly a mutual attraction driving us both

insane. I don't want anything to interfere with what we've got going, okay?"

Noah nodded slowly, like he didn't trust what was coming next. Zach didn't blame him. If it were the other way around, he'd be pissed at Noah for breezing into his world and immediately trying to take over.

"It's just...I don't think you're getting the best medical advice and I'd like you to consider seeing another doctor. And Connor would like to have a discussion with you about what the FBI is doing, if anything, to keep you safe from Donovan Moretti. And neither of us believes Cameron has your best interest or wellbeing anywhere in his top priorities in life." There, he'd said it. When Noah didn't respond, he quickly added, "I know you have absolutely no reason to trust either of us, Noah. I know it as well as I know it's none of our business how you live your life. You have every right to tell us to back our shit down and we will. We...I...am just worried about you."

After what seemed like a lifetime to Zach, Noah drew in a deep breath and finally answered, "Wow."

"You want to punch me in the face, don't you? Go ahead," Zach urged. "I deserve it. Punch away."

"So, uh, I have some suggestions for you to consider," Noah said, mimicking Zach's words. "What's going on between you and me isn't an exploration or a thing. I think I've already mentioned this to you, and if I have to mention it again, someone other than me might have their ass punished," he threatened. "I suggest if you don't have the balls to call it what it is, just refer to it as fucking. Misusing words to avoid saying relationship makes you look like a fool. I also suggest you not get your hopes up you'll be able to fix me. I see it in your eyes when you look at me. You want to rush in and save the damsel in distress. Newsflash—I'm not a damsel and trying to save me is a waste of time and energy. Finally, I do trust you, Zach. I don't know why, but I do. I hope you don't make me regret it. Trust isn't something I give away easily, even

if you would believe differently by how I've acted with you. It's been over four years since the trial, and I haven't told another living soul my real name. Not until you came along. I rarely talk to anybody, but I let you into my apartment, into my body, as soon as you showed the first signs of interest. So, yeah, I trust you. I'll talk to Connor and I'll talk to another doctor, as long as he makes house calls, of course. As for Cameron, I depend on him for too much. He's an egotistical ass, but he's harmless, Zach. He stays."

Zach wanted to argue. He didn't trust Cameron any further than he could throw him. But he'd already pushed his luck with Noah. His new lover was being exceptionally lenient with him. Well, except for the lack of balls comment. He'd call him out on it...if it weren't so damned true.

"Thank you, Noah," he said. "Thank you for trusting me." Zach had let somebody down before. He wouldn't let it happen again.

Chapter 9

Noah gazed into his bathroom mirror, trying to determine if there was any difference in his physical appearance, because there was a huge difference with what was going on inside him. He'd started to live again. He was living, breathing, laughing, and God forbid, loving. He was falling in love with a man he questioned would ever be capable of giving his whole self to another person, especially a person like Noah. Loving Zach was dangerous, would probably end up on the south side of happy, and could very well be one of the most frustrating things he'd ever done. None of that mattered though. Once love's freight train started rolling and picking up speed, it couldn't be stopped. He'd simply have to enjoy the ride until he fell off and it ran him over.

It'd been one week since Zach and Connor pulled their little stunt to sneak Zach into his apartment. One week for Zach to turn his sad life inside out, upside down, and topsy-turvy. Seven days of living out his fantasies. To say Dr. Zachary Meadows was very inventive when it came to sex would be the understatement of Noah's lifetime. The man was kinky and vanilla, rough and gentle, and sometimes just flat-out fucking-fun-weird. Being trapped in his apartment building for three years had apparently turned Noah into a top-level pervert, because Zach hadn't been able to come up with one thing Noah hadn't thoroughly enjoyed. Perversion was fun; he could live the remainder of his life fully immersed in Perversionville.

Besides the scorching, satisfying sex, Noah felt like they were connecting on different levels, too. At least he hoped they were. He was. Again, Zach's feelings were still in question. The man loved to have fun and fuck Noah's ass into the mattress, but he became guarded when their time together turned toward personal topics—like his

past, his parents, where he grew up, or what kind of rebellious teenager he'd been. Noah knew practically nothing. What closed up Zach faster than a Venus flytrap on its prey was when Noah asked about his tattoos. Noah loved them. Apparently, Zach hated them.

Zach had infinite patience to listen as Noah rattled off nonsense about his childhood, his high school years, his colossal fuckup with Moretti, and his meltdown afterward. Zach was inquisitive, sympathetic, protective, empathetic, and would get righteously angry when Moretti's or Cameron's names were brought up. He was a great listener, but a horrible talker. He shared nothing.

Noah wanted something.

Anything.

Toss him a crumb, for heaven sake.

Zach knew Noah inside and out, literally, but Noah had only learned what Zach liked in the bedroom, what his favorite beer was, and that the man was a little over-the-top when it came to protecting those he felt couldn't protect themselves. Yeah, that worried Noah. What if Zach was only hanging around, sucking the love from his heart little by little, because he felt like Noah needed protection? As much as Noah would like to laugh that off and tell himself the possibility didn't really exist, he couldn't; there was too much evidence to prove otherwise: the new doctor Zach hooked him up with; the fact he'd tossed all of Noah's junk food and tried daily to convince him to eat healthier; he had Connor reviewing the entire security system in the apartment complex; and he quizzed Noah each day on things to do if anything triggered a panic attack. The list could go on and on. The bottom line was Zach was focused on keeping him healthy and safe. Was that all that drew Zach to him though?

He hoped not. He prayed it wasn't. It couldn't be.

Fucking him until he couldn't walk straight didn't fit into protecting Noah. Did it?

He shook his head, disgusted with the way his mind worked. For the first time in a long time, he had a good thing going and his warped little mind tried to convince him it really wasn't that good. Zach wasn't that into him. How could he believe someone like Zach could fall for someone like Noah? That shit played on a loop inside his brain when Zach went to work and left him alone. When Zach was there, Noah was strong; when Zach left, he turned weaker than a tiny kitten abandoned by its mother.

He looked down at his watch, a gift from Zach yesterday, and counted the hours left before Zach would get home. Three hours. He only had to push this shit out of his head for three more hours. He could do this. Fuck, he needed his pills back. Dr. Livingston, aka Dr. Fuck-Noah-Over, had cut out every pill he took with the exception of two of them—the Xanax and Paxil. Rumor had it the good doctor planned to wean him off one of those sometime during the next three months. His body quivered in rebellion at the thought of it.

Three hours. Three hours. Three hours.

Okay, he knew what he should do. The doctor had given him homework, and since his next appointment was two days away and he hadn't done the first damned thing the doctor had requested, he should at least try to help himself. He did have three hours to kill.

Three long hours.

Three lonely hours.

When had being alone started being lonely again? When he'd first started allowing his anxiety to control his life, aka agoraphobia, he'd been lonely—so fucking lonely. He'd cried like a child and cussed like a sailor, both angry and horrified by his own

weakness but unable to be brave enough or strong enough to overcome his anxieties, and then he'd finally accepted what he was—a coward. Once acceptance had taken place and all urges to leave his safety zone diminished, he'd become less and less lonely and more and more of a hermit. People bothered him; they made him uncomfortable.

They scared him.

Being alone had been...tolerable. Feeling lonely had become a rarity.

Until Zachary Meadows.

Now, thanks to the gorgeous bastard, he was back to being lonely. Time used to mean nothing; now he counted down the hours until he would see Zach. This wasn't healthy. His new doctor had already given him the over-the-eyeglasses look of dismay when he'd inadvertently mentioned Zach about twenty times during the first fifteen minutes of their first session. No more talking about Zach to his doctor or Zach might end up where his beloved pills had. If that happened, he would have to kill the doctor, and if he needed to kill the doctor, he would have to figure out a way to get rid of the body. That would be tough since Noah was unable to leave the apartment complex.

So, he couldn't mention Zach's name anymore.

It probably wouldn't hurt if he did some of the stupid homework, too. He could mesmerize the doctor with his homework skills to distract him from the Zach dependency dilemma.

"Shit, John Doe, if the doctor and Zach could hear your stupid mental conversations, they'd realize trying to help you was out of the question," he said out loud. Shaking his head in disgust, he went into the bedroom and dug around in the drawers for

something to wear. “You’ve got to order some real clothes, dude. Zach has to be getting tired of your pathetic display of workout clothes.”

After dressing, he meandered into the living room and went to his desk to dig out paper and pen. He was supposed to make a list of all the things causing his panic attacks and why he thought those things turned him from man to mouse in one point zero seconds. Grabbing the notepad, he said, “Ha! I probably don’t have enough paper to write down the entire list.”

“Stop talking to yourself, dumbass,” he said in an entirely different voice, acting like a total idiot. You aren’t really crazy when you know you’re being crazy, right?

He frowned as he looked at his desk. Why was his laptop open? Had he left his laptop open? He never did.

He must have.

He refused to even contemplate any other possibility. This is my safe zone.

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An unopened email waited for him. His fingers froze over the button that would open it up for him to read. Cameron emailed him all the time. Why was he suddenly concerned about what waited for him on the other side of the computer realm?

He wasn't. He had this. His imagination was running wild because of the decrease in his medications. The doctor had warned him about the possibility. That was all this was. Talk yourself through it. Identify the concern and focus only on the facts. No biggie.

He hit the button and, sure enough, the email was from Cameron. The earth started spinning again. Noah nearly groaned out loud. Was it that time already? Zach wouldn't be pleased. Zach could go fuck himself. Noah didn't do this shit because he enjoyed posing nude for sick perverts. He modeled to survive. He'd explained his limited work options. Zach would just have to understand.

Did Zach honestly think this was what he wanted to do with his life? He'd had dreams once. Sure, they'd been all over the board, changing as often as his mood, but never before had he pictured himself posing in provocative positions in kinky costumes for some online viewers who paid big bucks to jack off to his humiliation. Nope, that hadn't been on his list, not at the top or the bottom. The thing was, he'd learned to improvise to survive. If he wanted to degrade himself, it was his decision, not Zach's.

He typed a quick note to Cameron, letting him know he was sick and wouldn't be available for this Friday's shoot. Missing one time wouldn't destroy his "career." He logged off before he had to see and deal with Cameron's reply. Why have all the fun now? I should save some for later, right?

Taking his pen and paper, he went over to the couch, plopped down, and stared at the blank page. Where to start? He hated this shit, hated himself for being so weak it led to this. He hated Dante Moretti for using him, hated Donovan Moretti for being such a fucking slimeball murdering bastard. While he was at it, he hated his father, too. If he hadn't gotten involved with the Moretti family, Noah's life wouldn't be fucked up worse than Humpty Dumpty's trip over that wall. He missed his parents. They hadn't been the most loving or supportive parents in the world, but they'd been his.

He took a breath and started writing.

I'm afraid to leave my apartment building because I know Moretti has somebody on the outside, waiting to kill me.

I'm afraid to talk to people because I have no way of knowing if they've been hired to make sure I permanently disappear.

I can't work because I'm afraid to leave my building—see above.

I can't have a normal relationship because I'm afraid to leave my building—see above.

If I can't work, talk to people, leave my apartment, or have a normal relationship, I'm no longer a functioning member of society...so what's the point of my existence?

If I found myself to be in a wide-open space (like the park), an anxiety attack would come because there could be people everywhere, all around me, wanting to kill me.

Small spaces (like elevators) scare me because there's nowhere to run or hide.

I don't like people touching me (so I can't be in crowds) because I'm convinced they are in possession of guns, knives, or something utterly ridiculous like a drug they

could rub on my skin that would kill me...slowly.

Sometimes panic attacks come because people are looking at me with pity or like they think I'm a freak (which I am).

Sometimes my apartment doesn't even feel safe and I'm forced to hide in my closet—just writing that on paper almost causes a panic attack.

Noah tossed the notepad aside, disgusted with himself because of all his bullshit fears and even more disgusted because tears were running down his face. Fuck, it was even more pathetic when one wrote it down on paper. Was that the purpose? Was the doctor trying to open his eyes to what a disaster he was? Newsflash—he already knew.

Frustrated, angry, and totally pissed off, he stood, stalked over to the French doors leading to an outdoor balcony, and stared at the thick black curtains separating him from the outside world. Yeah, I need to add that one to my list: heavy black curtains are required to cover every damned piece of glass inside my apartment to prevent panic attacks. He took a deep breath and continued to stare. He could do this. It wasn't like there was a member of the Moretti crime family standing outside on his balcony, just pissing away the last three years as he waited for Noah to grow some balls and open the curtains. That was fucking impossible. No, but they could be in one of the apartments across the street, ready to blow my brains all over my clean floor the very second the curtains flutter. That was stupid. Open the goddamned curtain, just a crack.

His heart pounded.

His skin was clammy.

His hands trembled in pure fear.

The room started to spin and his chest tightened up.

His finger automatically reached for the panic button on the bracelet he wore, but then he paused. This wasn't a heart attack. It wasn't a heart attack. With a willpower he hadn't known he possessed any longer, he focused on his breathing, counted each and every breath.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Deep breath.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. He sank to his knees.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Zach was home a little earlier than usual and he'd like to say it was because he'd had a cancelation or the waiting room wasn't filled to maximum occupancy, but those weren't the reasons. No, he was home early because he couldn't stay away from Noah for another minute. Every morning, when he left him all snuggled in bed and looking thoroughly fucked, hair sticking out in every direction and a satisfied smile curving his sexy lips, Zach started counting the minutes until he would get to see him again. It was frustratingly ridiculous, and more often than not, he felt like a teenager in high school, powered solely by testosterone-driven lust. It might be embarrassing, but he wouldn't change a damned thing with the King Kong chest-pounding feeling Noah caused. As it turned out, shy neighbor boy was sassy, snarky, funny, sexually adventurous, too cute for his own good, and the most trusting person Zach had ever encountered. When he looked at Zach with those blue eyes, Zach felt like he could conquer the fucking world. He hadn't felt that way in a long time, not since the day he'd realized what a monster he'd become while living in his father's world.

He wished so badly everything could stay just like this; that Noah would always look

at him with admiration instead of it one day turning to disgust when he found out the things Zach had done in his past. Maybe Noah would never learn that sordid truth? How hard would it be to keep it secret?

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How unfair would it be to keep it secret?

When he noticed the elevator had reached his and Noah's floor, he pushed his negative thoughts aside and focused on Noah and the happiness he brought into Zach's life. The moment he stepped off the elevator, Noah's door opened, and he stepped out, grinning like he'd just won the fucking lottery. Zach's heart purred with satisfaction and his cock started to plump with excitement. Yeah, horny high school teenager was the only way to describe his actions and feelings.

"Hey, babe," he said as he closed the distance between them, dropped his groceries on the floor, and grabbed the back of Noah's neck to haul him in for a kiss. Zach liked to think he seduced the younger man with his skilled tongue, but it was more like he devoured Noah. He could never get enough of the taste, never get enough of Noah. Already, he was addicted.

Noah returned the kiss with desperation and excitement. His boy hungered for physical touch and companionship. Zach was hungry for Noah, plain and simple—everything about him. "You seem to be in a good mood tonight. Did you have a good day?" Zach asked and then cringed at his own words. How could Noah have a good day? He was trapped in his own personal hell, locked away from the rest of the world.

"I did," he answered excitedly. "I talked myself off the ledge!"

"Okay," Zach said slowly. "That's good, except, why were you on the ledge to begin with? What happened? Why didn't you call me? I told you to call anytime, regardless of whether you thought it was important or not." He frowned. "I didn't get a call."

“Calm down, daddy,” Noah teased as he picked up Zach’s groceries, made sure his door shut completely and was locked behind him, and then started toward Zach’s apartment. “Nothing exciting happened. I worked on my homework from the doctor and thought, mistakenly, of course, I was badass enough to crack the curtains today. Ha! Yeah, so not ready for that.”

Zach held the door open for Noah to go inside and frowned when his groceries were once again tossed to the ground as Noah stooped to embrace Denala. When they finished their daily greeting, he continued, “Anyway, I stood right there in front of the curtains, trying to get my nerve up, when the panic attack started threatening. I almost pressed my panic button, but talked my way through the anxiety like the doctor worked with me on.” He grinned up at Zach. “It turns out I was a total badass, after all.”

Zach’s heart soared. Noah’s victory might seem small and insignificant to some, but Zach knew just how important the success was for Noah’s battle against his phobias. One fucking visit from a real doctor, and he already had one win in his column.

“I knew all along you were a total badass, babe,” Zach told him. “Were you able to crack the curtains after you calmed down.”

Noah stood and placed a quick kiss on Zach’s lips. “Oh, hell no. I ain’t doing that. It was a stupid idea anyway. What’s in the grocery bags? Some more healthy shit you’re so determined to get me to eat? You’re wasting your time. If it’s not sugar-coated, oozing in oil, or deep fried, I’m not interested.”

When Noah started to peek into the bags, Zach snatched them away from him. “No peeking. That’s for later. Connor’s coming by and bringing all of us salads from the deli.” He placed the kitchen bags on the countertop. “This contains our dessert...if you’re good and eat your salad, of course.”

“Is it chocolate cake?” When Zach shook his head, Noah continued, “Chocolate ice cream? Candy bars? Debbie cakes? A pie from the bakery?” He chewed on his bottom and lip, staring at Zach in frustration. His shoulders slumped. “It’s something stupid like...like...fruit, isn’t it? You’ve been harping on me to eat fruit. Please tell me it isn’t fruit,” he demanded.

“It’s fruit.” Zach couldn’t contain his grin at Noah’s antics.

“I can’t eat salad and fruit, Zach. My body will go into shock. You’re asking too much. Hell, I think I’d enjoy cracking the curtains more than eating your nasty good-for-you grossness.”

Zach shook his head at Noah’s over-the-top performance. As much as Noah liked to complain about his new doctor’s ideas for helping him gain some control over his phobias and Zach’s insistence he cut out the caffeine and unhealthy eating, at least while he took the anxiety medications, it was easy to see how proud Noah was of his improvements. Because of his idiotic, nonexistent doctor from before, he hadn’t received any professional help, so he’d started accepting he’d never get better. Fuck that shit. Noah was going to fly.

“Keep talking shit like that and I might make you put your money where your mouth is and open those damned curtains,” Zach growled playfully. After Noah made a zipping motion across his mouth and fluttered his eyelashes, Zach said, “Can you take care of the puppies while I take Denala out for her walk? By the time I get back, Connor should be here with supper.”

“First of all, don’t call a salad supper; it gives the noun supper a bad name. Secondly, of course I’ll take care of the puppies,” he answered. “I live to take care of those fuzzy rascals.” He looked up shyly at Zach and added, “I come over and play with them all through the day. I hope that’s okay.”

“You know it’s okay and appreciated, by me and Denala.” He grabbed Denala’s leash, and she went crazy with excitement. Unlike Noah, she didn’t enjoy being trapped inside the apartment with yapping puppies all day long. “Come on, girl. Let’s get this done.”

Shaking his head, Zach led Denala out of the apartment. As they stepped off the elevator downstairs, Connor walked through the lobby door, carrying a huge bag from the deli. Denala barked a “hello,” which was against police academy etiquette, but she rolled by her own set of rules now. Connor rolled his eyes, but dropped down on his knees to greet the dog he referred to as “worthless beyond words.”

Zach smiled as he listened to Connor reprimand Denala, but he defeated the lecture when he loved all over her while telling her what a naughty dog she was. Zach doubted she even understood she’d done something to displease him. When they’d finished and Connor stood, Zach said, “Thanks for picking up supper, Conn. I was swamped at work and didn’t have time to run by the deli. You’re a lifesaver. You’re staying over to eat with us, right?”

Connor cocked an eyebrow and looked his best friend up and down, his eyes holding the same disappointment for him as he’d shown Denala. “Dude, you weren’t swamped at work. You were in a hurry to get home for a booty call. Admit it. You’re obsessed with your hot neighbor boy.” When Zach started to defend himself, Connor held up his hand to stop him. “Don’t bother trying to deny it. It’s written all over your face. Hell, Zach, you’re walking through the apartment building lobby with a semi right now, and I bet you were only with him long enough for a kiss or two. You’ve got it bad. Enjoy it, my man. Noah’s a keeper. He looks good on you.”

“You know that isn’t possible, Conn. Don’t go dreaming impossible dreams. I’m not the kind of man Noah needs to get mixed up with. We’re just having some fun together.”

“I’m calling bullshit. Again. Stop doing this, Zach. Stop pushing your feelings into the ‘not important’ category. We talked about it. We both know how you are. Don’t fuck this up with the kid. He’s important.”

“We aren’t having this discussion,” Zach said, hating how badly he wanted to believe Connor’s words. “Take the food up and keep your hands off my man. I’ll be up in about fifteen minutes.”

“We’ve got to have the discussion one day, so get ready for it,” Connor challenged. “You can have a reprieve tonight because I’ve got myself a hot date. I’ll stay with Noah until you get back, but then I’m hitting the club with a hottie.”

Zach could hear the excitement in his friend’s voice. This sounded like more than one of his regular hookups. Why didn’t I know about this? “You have date? A real live date? Not a fuck and run? How am I just now hearing about this? Where did you meet him?”

“Cut it with the questions, Dad. The salads are getting wilted,” Connor teased, but his eyes still sparkled with excitement. “Yes, I have a date. Yes, it’s a real live date. Maybe a fuck, but hopefully not a run. You’re just now hearing about this because you’ve had your cock up pretty boy’s ass all week long and haven’t had the time to pay me any attention. I met him at the hospital when I stopped in to check on a patient involved with one of my cases.” He grinned and waggled his eyebrows. “It’s somebody you know, I think. At least he says he knows you.”

Zach frowned. “Who?” He hadn’t noticed any gay hot men around the hospital.

“Wayne Jericho. He works with the ambulance service. Ring a bell?”

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Zach barked out a laugh, pleased with Connor's selection. "Yeah, I know Wayne. He's a great guy and, like you said, a real hottie. I didn't know he was gay but, then again, I hadn't asked or put much thought into trying to figure it out." He clapped Connor on the back. "Good for you! Wayne's a good guy. He helped me with Noah during his ER visit."

"He mentioned he'd worked with you on a panic attack case last week, but before you get all possessive, he didn't mention names and I didn't pick up any weird vibes about him lusting after your neighbor-turned-lover." Connor tapped his chin. "Actually, most of his interest seemed to be on you. Just so there's no misunderstandings between us, I'll kick your ass if he likes you more than me."

Chuckling, Zach answered, "You don't have a thing to worry about. Wayne's always been friendly but there's nothing there...either way. He's all yours, hot pants. Have some fun tonight." Denala tugged on the leash, reminding him of what they were supposed to be doing. "Keep Noah company until I get back."

"What?" Connor asked suspiciously. "You've got this huge grin on your face. What's up?"

"I'm sure Noah will tell you about it. He's all full of himself, so he won't be able to hold it back." Zach sobered instantly. "Hey, Conn, try to remember while the victories might seem small to you, they are big for him. Share his enthusiasm, okay?"

Connor looked crushed. "I can't believe you think you have to say that to me. I'm proud of Noah. If he never leaves this building again, I'll still be proud of him. He's been through shit, but can still smile...and put up with your sorry ass. For that alone,

he deserves angel wings.” He grabbed up the bags and saluted Zach. “See you in a few, man. I’ll take care of your hot neighbor until you get back. Are you guys eating in your apartment or his?” He hefted up the food bags as he asked. “I don’t want to haul these around anymore than I have to.”

“Noah’s apartment. He’s in my apartment, watching the puppies now. If you don’t mind, help him get back to his place. Tell him you need help unloading the food, so he doesn’t feel bad. The pups will be fine by themselves for a few minutes.”

“Got it. See you in a few.” Connor took a couple of steps and then looked back at Zach. “You do realize he moves about the entire apartment complex throughout the day without any help, right? Overprotective much?”

Zach growled. “Just do what I asked you to.” Then added, “Yes, overprotective much.”

Noah eyed the salad with no small amount of fear and disgust as he handed Connor some plates and silverware. Salad? He’d been hoping Zach was teasing about the salad, but it looked like his lover enjoyed torturing him. It’d only been a week, but Zach’s healthy regimen already grated on his last nerve. What did the man have against chocolate?

Connor reached into one of his bags and pulled out another large container, still steaming with heat. When he removed the lid, Noah’s tummy did a happy dance. “Spaghetti! He got spaghetti. I’ve never been so happy to see pasta in my entire life. I honestly thought he was only going to feed me greens tonight.” Noah shivered in disgust. “Oh, and fruit. Don’t forget God’s sugary gift. Fruit. Yum.” Sarcasm laced his words.

Connor barked out a laugh. “Calm down, baby boy. Zach’s just trying to make sure you’re taking care of yourself. He said something about your meds not mixing well with sugar and caffeine.”

“Blah. Blah. Blah. I enjoy putting nasty, vile things into my body.” He winked at Connor. “I let your friend in there, right?”

“I like you, kid,” Connor answered. “He doesn’t have a chance against you. Thanks for waking him up, Noah. He was damned near a walking dead man before you came along. Keep up the good work.”

Noah blushed and beamed at the same time. “I’m a shitty companion; I know that. I won’t be able to keep him interested very long, but I’ll try my best to make sure he’s entertained while he’s here.” Saying the words slashed at Noah’s soul. He didn’t like admitting that one day, probably sooner than later, Zach would grow tired of him.

“Bullshit, kid. I’ve never seen him like this before. Trust me, he’s here until you get tired of him.”

Just as Noah opened his mouth to argue, the elevator dinged. Zach was home. Denala barked a hello through his door. Connor completely forgotten, Noah skipped to his door and pulled it open. “Hey, baby girl,” he gushed as he dropped to his knees. “Did you have a good poop? Your puppies did, that’s for sure. You’re gonna have to teach them to use a litter box, my furry friend. They are nasty little shits. Cute as buttons, though. Your man must have been a looker.”

“Ha! She’s a whore, raised her tail for the first man that came along, she did,” Zach teased. “Let me get her put up and then we’ll eat. How did supper look?” He kissed Noah’s forehead sweetly and then grabbed him by the nape of the neck and kissed his lips...not so sweetly.

Connor came to the door and cleared his throat. "I'll see you guys in the morning, downstairs at the gym. Nine o'clock, right?"

"Nine o'clock, Conn. Have fun tonight," Zach said with a wink. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Both Connor and Noah snorted. "You do everything, my friend. That's leaving the roster open wide for me." He leaned down and tickled Denala behind the ears. "See you guys in the morning. I'm going to get me some tonight," he vowed with a wicked smile.

Zach shook his head as he watched his friend step onto the elevator and disappear behind the closing doors. "He's crazy," he muttered with a smile.

"He's awesome," Noah corrected. "Rumor has it he's responsible for convincing you to buy me the spaghetti. For that alone, I'll forever be in his debt."

Zach smacked Noah's ass. Hard. "Very funny, babe. You damned well know spaghetti was my idea. I noticed your eyes glassing over with lust when you were watching the food channel the other night. You were practically orgasmic."

Noah shrugged. "Maybe."

"I'm going to grab the fruit and I'll be right over," Zach said. "Get those clothes off, babe. You're eating naked tonight. My eyes missed you all damned day. They deserve to be rewarded. Naked. Got it?"

"Consider it done," Noah answered. "Don't make me wait too long." He turned to go back into his apartment but stopped and added, "You can forget the fruit if you want to. Fruit is yuck, Zach. I don't want any."

“Too bad, babe. You’re going to be full of fruit tonight,” he promised with a smirk.

“You’re evil,” Noah grumbled as he let himself back into his apartment.

Dinner took almost two hours and Zach literally had never had more fun in his entire life. Not only did he get to enjoy admiring every inch of Noah's gorgeous body, he was entertained by animated expressions, funny stories, and a smartass mouth begging for some discipline. Noah would sass him and then his blue eyes would sparkle with a challenge. His lover bitched through the entire salad but then dug into the spaghetti like a six-year-old. As hard as he tried, Zach couldn't remember seeing or hearing a grown man suck and slurp spaghetti. He was surprised to find it could be both humorous and erotic. Yeah, he'd managed to make it erotic—the hollow cheeks as his lips wrapped around a single strand and sucked hard. No doubt, his arousal from Noah's performance made him all kinds of creepy, but with visuals like that, he had no desire to improve on his creepiness level.

For the first time in a long time, he was fine being just who he was, not the straight-laced Dr. Meadows he'd created to escape his father's shadow. No, he was Zachary Meadows, pervert extraordinaire. It seemed to work for Noah, so Zach let it work for him. He'd worry about the consequences later.

"Okay, so I haven't shut up the entire time and we both know how boring my life is," Noah said as he leaned back in his chair after cleaning his plate. "What happened with you today? Save any lives? Have any embarrassing 'sex sent me to the hospital' scenarios you can share...without giving names, of course."

"Of course," Zach agreed with a laugh. "Nah, an absolute boring day. Three cases of the flu, one broken ankle, one dog bite, and an allergic reaction to a bee sting; the rest was boring paperwork. Trust me, babe, I spent most of my day thinking about you."

That wasn't a lie. He had spent a dangerous amount of his time wondering what Noah was doing, imagining Noah naked, fantasizing about Noah eating his dessert tonight. It'd been hard to stay focused and, not for the first time, he considered taking some time off. He hated putting the hospital in a bind, especially since he was still a newbie to the area, but it wasn't fair to be there when he desperately wanted to be somewhere else.

Noah snorted. "Yeah, that sounds painfully boring, Zach. I'm beginning to fear you're only with me so you can live vicariously through my exciting lifestyle. While you were doctoring, I followed my usual routine. I took a shower, worked out in the gym, took another shower, dusted the entire apartment, made the bed, checked the locks, ate the pathetically boring sandwich you'd left me for lunch, talked to myself...out loud, worked on my homework, contemplated cracking the curtains, and last but not least, fought off a panic attack. Woo-hoo!"

"Hmmm," Zach murmured. "It sounds like you left something very important off your to-do list."

Noah's blush started with his ears, and slowly but methodically covered every inch of his body. Zach's eyes followed the trail of red all the way to the tips of his lover's beautiful toes. Noah was so fucking gorgeous it was almost too much to handle. The innocence mixed with the sassiness caused Zach's aggressive side to completely take over. He walked a fine line with Noah. His lover seemed to crave all things kinky. Zach loved all sex—sweet, rough, and everything in between. Sharing his fantasies with Noah turned him on and clearly revved Noah's engine too, but Zach feared one day he'd take it a step too far.

His father's blood flowed through his veins. Not to become the monster his father had been would be a battle he fought his entire life, he supposed. It'd been easier before Noah. He'd turned himself into an entirely new person and didn't have any problems keeping the old Zach from wanting to force his way out of the imaginary prison

created inside Zach's head. Noah changed things.

Zach vowed to dance along the edge but to never, ever step over the line. Like any other alcoholic or drug addict in the world, he kept telling himself he could handle a little bit. He and Noah could enjoy themselves without either of them getting hurt.

"Hell, Zach," he muttered as he hung his head. "Uh, yeah, I did it."

Zach grinned. "Why are you embarrassed, babe? Surely you've had an enema before?"

"Well, to be honest, no, I haven't," Noah retorted, some of his sass returning. "I've never had to and hope I don't have to again. It, eh, wasn't pleasant."

"Some people enjoy it," Zach answered dryly. He loved watching Noah squirm.

"Some people also enjoy eating healthy, Zach. I'm not one of those people either."

"Okay, okay." Zach laughed. "I hear you loud and clear, babe. I thought you mentioned you might like to try a little medical fetish fun. An enema is fairly basic, but if that's too much for you, I think we need to mark medical kink off your list of things to do."

Disappointment shattered Noah's beautiful face. "Maybe we could just say I don't enjoy any medical shit I have to do by myself. I might have enjoyed it a lot more if you'd been with me."

"You think so?" Zach bit back another laugh.

"No, but I don't want to mark medical fetish off my list." Noah pouted.

“How about healthy foods like fruit? Do you want that on your list?”

“Don’t bring fruit into my sex life, Zachary Meadows,” Noah demanded. “When you do shit like that, it makes me think you’re trying to turn me against sex. That’s just fucked up on every single level, dude. Sex equals good things. Fruit equals bad things. Those two things don’t go together. Nuh-uh. No. I’ll eat your nasty fruit just to make you happy, but I want you to know, inside my head, I’m not eating it. I’m telling you to shove it up your ass.” Noah stuck his tongue out at Zach when he finished his overly dramatic tirade.

Zach tried his best to look disappointed as he answered, “Oh, well. I understand. I had something planned for tonight, but I understand.” He shrugged. “If you’re not interested, you’re not interested.”

Noah frowned.

“Let’s go downstairs and work out for a couple of hours,” he suggested. “We both need it after all that spaghetti.” He stood and started to clear the table.

“Sit. Down,” Noah ordered.

Zach hid his smile. “What?” he asked innocently. “Let me get this cleaned up and then we’ll head downstairs.” He nodded down toward Noah’s crotch and added, “As bad as I hate to say this, you might need to throw on some clothes. I’m not sure anybody in the gym would get anything done with that beautiful cock of yours out and proud.”

“Stop messing with me, Zach. What did you have planned? Come on,” he urged playfully. “I wanna play! I’m sorry I complained about the enema. I loved it. It was fun, fun, fun. It was one of the best ideas you’ve ever day. And the fruit? I love fruit. I’ve just been messin’ with ya. Fruit’s my favorite.” He batted his eyelashes foolishly.

“I’ll be good. Show me the fruit.” Noah slid Zach the sweetest, most innocent smile in all the world. “I want to be a good, fruit-eating boy.” He added a wink to the smile and hoped they outweighed the sarcasm of his words.

After pretending to really ponder whether he believed Noah or not, Zach agreed. “Okay. Go in the living room and get on your hands and knees.”

Noah looked all around and then back at Zach. “Uh, okay, but I thought you were going to make me eat the fruit first.” Then, very quickly, he corrected, “I meant I thought I was going to get to eat the fruit first.”

“Are you complaining?”

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“Oh, hell, no!” Noah jumped up from the table and skipped to the living room. “Anywhere?” he yelled over his shoulder.

“Anywhere. Hands and knees,” Zach answered as he started digging around in the bags for the fruit he’d had prepared. Finding everything he needed, he dumped it into a large bowl and carried it into the living room where Noah was as he’d been directed. He twisted his head around to watch Zach’s every move.

“You’re gonna make me eat the fruit before I get some satisfaction, aren’t you?” he asked. “Kinda like...if I eat this, you’ll do this?” He grinned. “I can play that game. Sounds fun.”

Zach set the bowl of fruit right in front of Noah and went back into the kitchen to get the other items he needed for their game tonight. He removed items from their sealed bags and carried them back into the room with him. Carefully, he sat down next to the bowl of fruit and watched Noah’s face carefully. He didn’t seem to have a clue what the items were or what they were going to be used for. Zach hid his smile.

“Here’s how this is going to work, babe,” Zach said. “All the items in front of you are either items doctors use on a daily basis or some of them are items created specifically for someone interested in the wonderful world of medical fetish.” He grinned at the look of confusion on Noah’s face as he eyed the items displayed in front of him. He guessed that Noah probably knew what some were used for, but had to be in the dark on most of the devices he’d selected for tonight. “You eat a few bites of fruit and then select which device you want me to use on your beautiful body. Sound fun?”

Noah nibbled on his bottom lip, a nervous habit, as he worked out the logistics of the fruit game in his head. “But I don’t know what most of the devices are used for.” He pouted. What if I pick something icky and I’ve already eaten my fruit?”

“Yes, there’s a chance that could happen,” Zach answered without hesitation.

Noah laughed nervously, like he waited for Zach to say he was just kidding. When he didn’t, Noah’s frown deepened. Zach was okay with him saying no to any of their games. At some point, they’d certainly stumble across something his young lover wouldn’t be comfortable with. If the fruit game was a turn-off, there were plenty of other wicked ideas dancing around in Zach’s head.

“You don’t have to, babe,” Zach told him. “It’s only fun if we both are enjoying it. Don’t do something just because you think I want it.”

Noah snorted. “I don’t do that, Zach. I’m a coward in every other aspect of my life, but I won’t be with you. You’re the only person I can be myself with, so I’m not going to fuck up by pretending to be something I’m not. If I don’t want it, I’m not doing it. End of story.”

“So...you don’t want it?” Zach asked, trying to follow Noah’s train of thought.

“I didn’t say that,” Noah corrected quickly as he eyeballed the giant bowl of fruit and the metal devices next to it. “I mean...you’re a doctor, right? You know how to use these...these...things.”

“I am and I do.”

The frown on his face stayed firmly intact.

“Since I’m a beginner and all, do you think we could bend the rules and explain what

each of those things are used for?” His gaze left the fruit bowl to confront Zach. “Oddly enough, it’s the smaller toys that are scaring me the most.” He laughed deliriously. “Because not only does leaving this apartment building for an ER visit lead to a panic attack, I feel confident if I was forced to explain to the attending doctor that I was merely playing a fun medical fetish game and things got out of control, I would have another panic attack.” He sniffed the fruit. “Seriously, Zach, fruit is gross, so I’m going to need to know pleasure is going to be involved.”

“That’s a valid question, babe,” Zach answered. “I certainly wouldn’t recommend this to just anyone wanting to add a little kink to their sex life but, like you said, I am a doctor. I’m also a sweetheart and pushover, so I’ll explain each one to you. Does that make you feel better?”

The frown lightened up just a tad.

“Do I get to reject anything that I deem...unreasonable?”

“Of course, Noah. This is all about having fun and getting you to eat healthier.” Zach dropped his hand to pick up the utensils he’d placed next to the fruit bowl. “I brought an anal scope, a speculum, prostate stimulator, Wartenberg wheel, a beaded urethral dilator with plug, and a cupping set.”

“Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. Stop everything. See, I noticed how you tried to slide that beaded urethral dilator in there, innocently nestled between whatever the hell a Wartenberg wheel and cupping set is. Why would you do something like that, Zachary? That’s sneaky.”

Zach grinned. Noah was right. It had been sneaky. “What? You don’t think you’d be interested in having your urethra stretched? A lot of men find it very pleasurable.”

“That little pretty down there is exit only,” Noah quipped. “Can I get rid of it? The

dilator thing, not my pretty.”

“Most definitely, Noah.” Zach picked up the thin metal instrument and laid it aside. “Perhaps another time.”

“Sure...right after I walk downtown, buy a lottery ticket, and win millions. Okay, I understand the prostate stimulator, and I’m one hundred percent on board with that one. I think I can figure out how the Wartenberg wheel and the anal scope work.” He frowned. “Is the cupping thing for, uh, suction?”

“Correct,” Zach answered.

“Got it. What’s a speculum?”

Zach chuckled at Noah’s perseverance. “A speculum is an instrument doctors use to dilate an orifice to an acceptable level to allow us to properly inspect the canal in question.” He picked up the device, held it from the base. See? This rounded end is inserted into the orifice and pushed into the canal. As I turn this, it clicks open wider and wider and wider.”Click. Click. Click. The noise reverberated in the room as Zach opened the instrument to a...challenging width. “Once you have the orifice open properly, you lock the mechanism like this.” He turned the lever, holding the speculum immobile. “It simply opens a tight area to help the doctor see what he or she is, well, getting in to. Or, as in your case, getting out of.” Zach had no idea what Noah would decide; it was asking a lot. He had, however, noticed Noah’s cock had gotten harder and harder as he’d explained the workings of the speculum. His lover’s eyes were practically glazed over with lust. The fact he was intimidated by the whole scene only made it more fun.

Noah puckered his lips and glared at Zach. “Soooo, this is medical fetish, eh? I’ve been running my mouth, just asking for new adventures, and you decided to come at me with both barrels. You are a very naughty young man, Dr. Meadows.”

Zach shrugged. “You wanted medical fetish. This is medical fetish. I wanted you to eat some fruit, and this will lure you into eating fruit. It seemed like a win/win situation to me.” He winked at Noah. “But, I’ve been wrong before. No pressure, Noah. We’re here to have fun.” Zach couldn’t believe Noah was considering it. He could be wrong, but it looked like Noah was busy sliding all the puzzle pieces into their correct spots. That was how he did things—thought it through and then went for it.

Finally, Noah grinned and said, “Feed me some fruit, Doctor.” He opened his mouth but then slammed it shut again. “Don’t feed me any grapes, though. Those fuckers are just gross. Don’t like ’em. Never have and I never will.”

“I’m thinking about spanking your ass when we’re finished...just for the fun of it.”

“Promises, promises,” Noah quipped and then opened his mouth and obediently ate a plump strawberry.

Zach determined, right then and there, he wanted to keep Noah forever.

Chapter 10

Noah lay on the weight bench, watching as Zach added the weights. There was no way anybody in the gym knew what he and Zach had done last night with an innocent fruit bowl and not so innocent medical equipment, but...he was embarrassed. His face had been red since the moment they'd stepped off the elevator. For somebody who usually did everything possible to not be noticed, he'd felt like every damned eye in the lobby had turned in his direction. Swear to God...half of them were eating fruit!

Zach smirked. He blushed.

On top of that shit storm of humiliation, this was the first time they'd worked out together in the mornings, when most of the other folks used the gym, and Noah literally felt every eye lasered in on him. People appeared curious as they watched the two of them. Surely it was because Noah was always alone...not because they knew the things he'd let Zachary do to him last night.

No, that wasn't possible. There was no way humanly possible anybody there, other than him and Zach, could possibly know about the kink they'd participated in last night. Could they?

No, they can't. Shit, I'm talking inside my head again.

"You okay, babe?" Zach asked with a sexy smirk. "You look...distracted. Were you thinking about the fruit salad we have back up in your apartment?"

“Shut up,” Noah hissed as his skin flamed even hotter. “Don’t make me start thinking about it,” he demanded. “You know what will happen.”

Laughing, Zach stepped around and then hiked one leg over Noah, straddling him as he lay on the weight bench.

Noah glanced around nervously. Yeah, just as he expected—everybody watched them. “What are you doing?” He hissed.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Zach asked innocently.

“What does it look like? It looks like you’re about to feed me your dick. What. The. Fuck. Zach. You’ll get us kicked out of here, and newsflash, this is the only gym I can use.” His eyes surveyed the room again. Yeah, still watching. He shouldn’t be shocked. Whether they would admit it or not, most folks enjoyed watching a blow job. “Stop it!”

Zach frowned and then looked over at a hugely muscled guy about to get on the treadmill. “Hey, Jordan.”

Noah’s entire body tensed in shock as he stared, wide-eyed, at Zach. When the muscled guy started walking in their direction, Noah’s heart rate spiked.

“What’s up, Meadows? You don’t usually come down in the mornings, do you? Good to see you mixing it up some.”

The man’s green gaze dropped to look at Noah, but quickly returned to Zach’s piercing gray gaze when he heard Zach clear his throat. Noah suspected he was about to have a heart attack—this time it was real. No more panic attacks or silly nonsense like before. This was the big one. Zach knew he didn’t talk to people, knew how they made fun of him. Why would he bring one of them over into Noah’s space? Breathe.

Start breathing. He could do this.

“I was wondering if you had a minute to help John,” Zach said.

He couldn’t do this.

Holy shit! Zach wouldn’t do that to him...would he? Did Zach think just because he enjoyed all kinds of kink with him that Noah would be promiscuous with just anybody? Breathe.

Odd...he was breathing just fine. He was mostly pissed Zach would think so little of him. Ha! He was pissed, not scared. That, of course, didn’t matter, though. He wasn’t blowing Mr. Muscles. Zach could get that shit out of his head.

Jordan glanced down at Noah, his eyes inquisitive but friendly. “Hey, John. I’ve noticed you around here a lot, but haven’t had the chance to talk to you any. It’s nice to meet you finally.” He rubbed his hands together. “So...what does John need?”

“He needs somebody to spot him.” Zach looked down at Noah and laughed. “Apparently, he doesn’t trust me. I was going to spot him, but he demanded I move.” Zach shrugged innocently. “I have no idea why he’s worried about it, but I live to make him happy, so...”

“I was just kidding, Zach,” Noah interrupted, feeling like a huge fool. Turning to Mr. Muscles, he said, “I’m fine, Jordan. Thanks for coming over, and it was nice to finally meet you.” Burning with embarrassment, all Noah wanted to do was escape. “You know what? I’ve changed my mind, anyway. I think I’m finished for the morning.” He went to sit up and nearly bumped his head on Zach’s junk, since the frustrating fuck still straddled him. He bit his lip and plunked back down on the bench, even more embarrassed than he’d been seconds ago. He was so going to kill Zach for baiting him like he was. On the other hand, he felt pretty damned good

because he'd interacted with another person and hadn't had a panic attack.

Jordan laughed, soaking up the entire scene and understanding Noah and Zach were a couple. He looked toward Noah. "Don't be a stranger. If you're able to get rid of this guy, yell at me," he suggested with a wink.

Zach growled.

Noah grinned since Zach's plan had just backfired on him. Ha! Take that, big man.

"If you're looking for a physical workout, yell at me instead." Connor's gruff voice interrupted them. He stuck out his hand to Jordan and said, "I'm Connor Vanderwall. Nice to meet you."

His eyes practically raped Jordan as he looked him up and down. Jordan didn't seem to mind, though. Quite the contrary, he looked more than interested in what Connor plainly offered.

"Uh...actually, I was about to hit the showers." He nodded toward Connor's gym bag. "Looks like you're headed in that direction to get changed." He gave Connor the same once-over. "Follow me. You're new to our gym, right?"

Noah noticed Zach's frown. He also noticed Connor's smile was about as fake as humanly possible. What was troubling Zach's best friend?

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“What the hell, Conn?” Zach demanded when his friend started to breeze past him to follow Jordan to the locker room. “You were with Wayne last night, weren’t you? A real date? In case you’ve forgotten, Conn, I think Wayne’s a good guy. He doesn’t deserve you jerking him around like this.”

Connor snorted. “Yeah, I don’t think that’s going to work out. Let’s just say that we didn’t see eye-to-eye on some things.”

Zach’s frown deepened as he swung his leg back over the bench and stood closer to Connor. “Wayne’s a good guy, Conn. What’s up?”

Jordan cleared his throat and asked, “You coming? It’s okay if you’ve got something else going on.”

Flashing the other man a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, Connor answered, “Yeah, I’m coming. I’ll be right behind you.” Turning to Zach, he said, “You’ve already said Wayne’s a good guy. I heard you the first time. Did you hear me say it wasn’t going to work out?” His tone dripped with sarcasm.

Noah hadn’t seen Connor mad before. Sure, he’d only known him a little over a week, but he was consistently funny and friendly, nothing like what he witnessed now. “Are you okay, Connor?” he asked.

“I’m fine, John,” Connor answered in a much friendlier voice. He clapped Zach on the back. “I’m good, Zach. It just isn’t going to work out between Wayne and me. No biggie. It’s fine.”

“You were so excited. Give it some more time. See what happens,” Zach urged.

Jordan started walking away. Without another word to Zach, Connor followed him.

Noah stood up next to Zach and watched with worry as Connor ditched them without a backward glance. “He doesn’t look happy. Who is this Wayne guy? Is it somebody you trust? If it isn’t, I don’t think I like him very much. Something happened last night to upset Connor.” He looked at Zach. “Connor’s always happy.”

“Yeah...it’s weird. Wayne is a nice guy, but I guess I don’t really know him well. He’s an EMT and comes into the hospital on a regular basis. He was there the day they brought you in, and I thought I was going to have to step between him and Cameron.” Zach laughed. “Actually, truth be told, we both wanted to kick Cameron’s ass but managed to hold our tempers at bay.”

“Does Connor date a lot? While we were waiting on you to walk Denala, he told me all about his upcoming date. I don’t know him that well, but he was awfully excited. I mean, it seemed like more than just a normal date.”

Zach stared off in the direction Connor went, brow furrowed as if thinking through the possibilities. Then he shook his head slightly, wrapped an arm around Noah’s shoulders, and said, “Let’s hit the steam room. I’d like to take a quick shower, grab some breakfast from the restaurant, and then fuck you until you scream loud enough for the neighbors to hear, but now the showers are suddenly off limits.” He tugged Noah toward the hallway leading to the steam room.

They quickly ditched their clothes, wrapped white towels around their waists, and stepped into the steam room. Noah automatically went straight for the corner, because that was where he always went, head down and invisible to anyone inside. When he’d settled into his corner, he looked up at Zach and found the mountain of muscles staring at him with a confused look on his face.

“What?” Noah asked.

Shaking his head, Zach walked the few steps that would place him right in front of Noah and then, shocking a yelp of surprise out of Noah, he reached down and lifted him up and into his arms.

“Stop squirming,” Zach growled as he settled both of them in the center of the longest bench. “No more corners for you, babe. When you’re with me, I want you to feel safe enough to talk to other residents, look at something other than your sexy feet, and sit anywhere you damn well please, not the corners meant for hiding. Will you try for me?”

Noah blushed in embarrassment. Was it that easy for people to see how hard he’d been trying to hide? Funny, there was a good chance he would’ve preferred being called crazy over being called a coward.

“Well, I’m not going to sit here in your lap, Dr. Meadows. If somebody walks in, we’ll be the talk of the building.” He wiggled out of Zach’s lap and perched on the wooden bench next to him. He had to admit it was nice not to be in the corner.

Zach’s husky laughter echoed off the walls. “Oh, honey pie, we’re already the talk of the building. They started talking about us the first day we walked into the gym together and you were looking at my ass instead of the floor or your feet. Tell me you’ve noticed all the whispers and blatant stares?”

“Uh, yeah, I’ve learned to block that stuff out,” Noah quipped. “If I let myself get distracted by people talking about me, I’d be trapped in a never-ending distraction wormhole.”

Smiling sadly, Zach answered, “I know, babe. I know. Those days are behind you, though. They were interested in you before because you’re a really hot guy who

never gave anybody the slightest bit of attention. They all wanted to be the one to lure you out of your shell. Now they're looking at you because you're walking funny since I'm fucking you silly."

"Ha-ha," Noah said. "I am not walking funny." I am definitely walking funny.

"Whatever makes you comfortable, babe. Tell yourself whatever you need to," Zach teased. "Now...lie down and put your head in my lap. I want to be able to see your eyes while we're talking."

Noah felt a tad foolish, but followed Zach's instructions anyway. Following Zach's lead always led to fun times. Once he was laid out on the wooden bench, towel still tucked properly in all the right places, and his head in Zach's lap, he looked up to find Zach watching him. "I'm not blowing you in the steam room, Zach. Get that look off your face." I'd totally blow him in the steam room if he asked me to. Hell, Zach might not even have to ask.

Gently, Zach swiped Noah's damp hair out of his face and then toyed with the silky strands. "You were dead-on when you said how excited Connor was last night, and to answer your question from earlier...no, Connor doesn't date. He bar hops. He blows and gets blown by strangers in club bathrooms. He fucks. He rarely dates. Connor is all about the fun. Somehow, this felt so different. I don't know what could've turned things around so quickly."

Zach's fingers moved from testing the texture of Noah's hair to massaging his scalp. Noah nearly melted into a big puddle of satisfaction. The gentle touch felt so fucking good.

Noah forced himself away from the magic of Zach's fingers and back into the conversation. "Maybe you could ask Wayne? Connor sure didn't seem to want to talk about it, that's for sure."

“Maybe,” Zach answered noncommittedly. “Connor doesn’t shut down often, but when he does, you might as well get ready to just wait him out. He’s a master of the silent treatment.”

Noah visited the gym every day, and on most of those days, he visited the steam room. Even though it had become a daily routine, he never really felt safe. But with Zach watching over him, barely touching him physically but stroking his soul mentally, an intoxicating calmness consumed him.

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“Are you listening to me?” Zach asked with a laugh.

“Of course, I’m listening,” Noah lied. His heart listened, but his ears may not have been paying close attention to Zach’s words. With a naughty grin, he said, “Tell me again, though. I listened but I might not have heard you.”

“I asked if you thought I should just mind my own business. Let Connor handle this shit himself. It’s not like Wayne’s a close friend. Maybe I step aside and let whatever is supposed to happen, just happen?”

Noah snorted. “Trust me, minding your own business is always much better than getting involved. I wished to hell I would’ve minded my own business instead of worrying about Moretti’s pathetic son. If I hadn’t been sucked into that bullshit, I might not be afraid of my own shadow right now. Being a coward is so damned time-consuming.”

Zach’s gentle strokes halted. “You aren’t a coward, Noah. The Moretti family’s bad fucking news. They do bad things to good people. Being concerned for your safety is a perfectly acceptable reaction when faced with that kind of evil.”

“Let’s get back to discussing Connor,” Noah said. “Forget what I said about minding our own business. Let’s talk Connor.”

“How about Cameron? Let’s talk Cameron,” Zach countered. “Have you been talking to him any? Has he been over while I’ve been working?”

Zach didn’t trust Cameron. But Noah thought he was way off base thinking Cameron

could be intentionally doing him harm. Was Cameron actually concerned about his well-being? No, absolutely not. Did Noah blame him? Hell, no. Cameron was only a few years older than Noah and, surely, he had better things to do than babysit a grown man.

“No, he hasn’t been over, but I’ll probably have to give him a grocery list before long or he’ll get suspicious. Me starving to death might not look good on his FBI resume. I’ll make a list of the usual stuff and send it to him this afternoon.” Glaring up at Zach, he said, “Then you can take it all away like you did with my other goodies. You’re such a mean, mean man. Sugar is not my enemy, contrary to what you keep telling me.” Noah would never admit it to Zach, but he already felt much better since he’d stopped the majority of his sugar and caffeine intake. He wasn’t sure if it was the loss of the unhealthy foods or the reduction of his medication. It was probably a combination. Either way, his head was clearer and some of the paranoia he fought on a daily basis seemed to be easing up.

“That’s me,” Zach acknowledged with a smile. “Maybe you could just tell him you’ve decided to try for a healthier lifestyle and get him to pick up things you actually need. That way, you won’t be wasting food and money.”

“Nah, he’d never believe it. Hell, half the time I don’t even believe it. Did you know it’s been over one hundred ninety-two hours since I had a bite of chocolate?”

“Hmm, it has been a while. Maybe you’ve earned a reward.”

“Can it please involve melted chocolate and your naked body?” Noah asked with a sly grin. “Because I would lap that up like a kitten with cream, purring the entire time.”

Laughing, Zach answered, “It can definitely involve those things. I do love to hear you purr.”

“I like purring, so we should get along just fine, Doctor.”

Zach cleared his throat, looked away, cleared his throat again, and finally, looked back down at Noah. Noah knew what was coming. By putting Cameron off for this week’s session, he’d only bought himself some time. Zach didn’t seem like a jealous man, but he did come across as possessive.

“Go ahead. Say it,” Noah told Zachary.

After taking a deep breath, Zach said, “It’s time for one of your photo shoots this Friday, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Noah answered, not intending to make it easy on his new lover. Zach needed to understand why he did the photo shoots. Zach needed to respect his decision to continue working and, more importantly, still respect him afterward. Noah had a hard enough time respecting himself after a session. He didn’t need Zach judging him, too.

“I, uh, was thinking,” he stammered before he stopped altogether.

Noah waited...and waited. Finally, he said, “What were you thinking, Zach?” He tried not to sound irritated, but he failed. He couldn’t help it. Zach’s condemnation pissed him off.

“Well, it’s painfully obvious I’m not interested in sharing you with anyone, much less everyone.”

“It’s necessary,” Noah answered through gritted teeth. “And, before you suggest it, I won’t allow you to pay me for a private photo shoot. I’m not a charity case, Zach. I get it. You don’t like what I do to earn money. I don’t like it, either. We can agree on the fact it sucks, but don’t ask me to stop and don’t suggest you will pay my bills. It’s insulting and pisses me off.”

Zach coughed out a laugh. “Damn, babe, you’re a firecracker. Remind me not to ever piss you off. I don’t want to meet your evil personality in any alleyways.”

“Lucky for you, this building doesn’t have any alleyways and I can’t leave. You should be perfectly safe...as long as you don’t treat me like I’m fragile. When I’m with you, I’m all man.”

Zach reached a hand down and lifted the white towel wrapped around Noah’s waist, taking a quick peek at what was underneath. “Don’t I know it, babe. You’re definitely all man, but the problem is you’re my man.”

“Don’t ask it, Zach. It’s going to get ugly.” Noah hesitated and then added, “Don’t make me feel worse about myself than I already do.”

“What I was going to suggest was you ask Cameron about me doing the photoshoot with you,” Zach said calmly. “Me and you, nobody else. That should give the viewers what they’re looking for, right? I’m mean...I’m an okay-looking guy, right? We could even spice things up a little more than what you usually do. Go rogue on your subscribers.”

Noah stared up at Zach, not believing what he’d just heard. Zach would pose with him? Zach? He couldn’t have heard him right. That wasn’t possible. Zach was a respected doctor, not a man-child afraid to leave his own apartment. Noah remained silent as he had conversation after conversation on a continuous roll in his head.

Finally, Zach said, “I mean, if you don’t want me to, that’s okay too. I’d been trying to think of a way to make this work for both of us. You mentioned you weren’t crazy about having to do it and didn’t like the other men getting close to you, so I thought maybe being with me would be better. I’m not as hot as you are, but I do okay in the looks department. I guess.” Zach blushed. “Just forget I mentioned it. It was obviously a stupid idea.”

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Noah, still in shock, slowly sat up, stood, and then straddled Zach's lap, not worrying at all that his flimsy white towel barely covered what it needed to cover with him in that position. If somebody walked in on them, fuck 'em. He was well adjusted to being gossip fodder. He raised his hands to hold the sides of Zach's face, keeping his lover steady as he gazed into his eyes. "Would you do that for me? Really?"

Zach tried to glance away, but Noah wouldn't allow it. When he accepted he couldn't dodge looking him in the eye, Zach met him head on and answered, "This is going to sound stupid, Noah, but I'm finding I would do anything for you. I'm not relationship material. I've got issues with my past keeping me from being...acceptable. I know this, but with you, I struggle to remind myself I'm not what you need. You deserve so much more than what I'll ever be able to offer, but I can't stop wanting you. I want to give you everything, but I know I'll never be able to give you what you need the most."

Noah loved some of those words, but disliked others a whole lot. Zach wasn't relationship material? Was this his way of saying the infamous it's me, not you bullshit? Noah didn't think so. That wasn't the vibe he picked up from Zach. The muscled mountain of a man truly believed he wasn't worthy. That very thought was preposterous to Noah. Zach was wrong and he'd prove it to him.

No, he wasn't foolish enough to believe a forever relationship with Zach was on the horizon, but he damned well intended to prove Zach's worth to the other man. Little by little, he would help Zach see what an awesome catch he was and then Noah would step away and let his lover fly. Yes, it would break his heart, but it wouldn't be the first or last time his heart had been broken. He'd survive.

“Wanna go upstairs and let me show my appreciation for your offer?” Noah asked with a grind of his hips against Zach’s hardening erection. “I can’t fucking believe you would do a photoshoot with me. If you aren’t careful, I’m gonna fall in love with you.” Noah couldn’t believe he’d said the words out loud. He wanted to yank them back and stuff them back down his throat the minute they’d escaped. He was already more than halfway in love with Zachary Meadows, but the man he straddled couldn’t and wouldn’t ever return the sentiment. Humiliation and terror swept through him.

“Don’t do that, Noah,” Zach whispered harshly. “Don’t even think you can fall in love with me. I’m not worth it and not capable of it.”

Noah’s heart withered, but he refused to allow Zach to see what his words did to him. If Zach had any idea the direction Noah’s heart traveled, he’d pull over and put said heart out on the side of the road. Schooling his features and modulating the tone of his voice, he said, “Don’t panic, big guy. I’m not looking for a proposal, just a lick and fuck. You’re capable of that, aren’t you?” The words tasted like bile in his mouth.

The pain flickering in Zach’s eyes didn’t match his words. “I’m definitely the man to call for a lick and fuck, babe. Call on me anytime.” He kissed Noah, but the passion from earlier had wilted along with Noah’s heart. “Hey, I’ll probably have to wear some sort of mask or something to hide my identity for the shoot. That won’t be a problem, will it?” he asked with a grimace. “The hospital might frown on that shit.”

“They love masks in that world,” Noah answered as he climbed off Zach’s lap and unsuccessfully tried to arrange the white towel to hide his erection. That was a waste of time. There was no hiding that bad boy. He was pathetic. How could he still be aroused after being shot down so blatantly?

Zach nodded to Noah’s tented towel with a smirk. “You need me to take care of that before we step back out into the real world?”

“Ha-ha,” Noah said. “We’ve already been in here too long. I think I’d smother from the steam if you took care of that in here.” He grabbed Zach’s hand. “Let’s skip the showers and head straight to my apartment.”

Zach grinned. “I like you bossy.”

Chapter 11

Zach gazed into the mirror and watched as he slid the razor across his chin. He looked the same on the outside but he was damned different on the inside. Noah St. Claire had a way about him that made Zach want to be a different man. Four weeks behind him since Noah had been brought into the hospital. Four weeks of pure fucking heaven. He'd never been so happy in his entire life. It was almost impossible to believe the changes that had taken place, but Zach, looking at himself in the mirror that morning, didn't have any choice but to admit changes, indeed, had taken place.

He no longer hated the man looking back at him.

Who would've imagined that was even possible? For years, he'd tried to become this alter-ego of the Zachary Meadows he'd been during the earlier years of his life. The need to destroy every aspect of the Meadows genepool guiding each and every decision he made in life: where he went to college, his desire to be a doctor, the way he kept everyone at arm's length, and most of all, the way he refused to open his heart. He wasn't foolish enough to think those days were completely behind him, but he was, for the first time, willing to admit the walls might be coming down. Hell, he would even go so far as to say if he'd been capable of feeling the emotion of love, falling in love with Noah would've been so damned easy.

He frowned as he looked back at the face in the mirror. Hewasn'tcapable of love, though. That was a sad fact he needed to keep reminding himself of. He wasn't capable of love nor was he worth loving. Thisthingwith Noah had to remain in the friends with benefits category.

Noah. His mental stability and strength grew every single day, surprising Zach and his new doctor. They'd both thought it would have taken much more time before any improvements started manifesting. They'd both been wrong.

No, Noah wasn't ready to step out into the real world and leave the apartment building, but there'd been what all three of them considered to be giant steps. He spoke to people when they were in the gym or eating in the restaurant off the lobby, smiling and not looking at all scared, nervous, or distant. Almost everyone noticed that change and flocked to be around his lover. Zach didn't like it one damned bit, but there wasn't anything he could do to prevent it. Noah wasn't his. He couldn't make any promises for their future, so he couldn't do anything to hold him back.

Didn't stop it from making him fucking sick to his stomach to watch both men and women flirting shamelessly with Noah. No, didn't stop it one damned bit.

Noah no longer cringed and clung to the walls to stay as far away as he could from the glass walls of the front of their apartment building. He might not look outside, but he didn't hide any longer, either. One evening, he'd even allowed Zach to crack the curtains in his bedroom a full six inches. It'd been pitch black outside and Zach could barely even tell the curtains were open, but he knew Noah was very aware of the peek out into the world. He hadn't enjoyed it, but it hadn't led to a panic attack.

Once Zach finished shaving, he ambled into his bedroom and slid into the suit he'd chosen to wear for the day, like it was a hard choice. He only had black or gray suits. Boring shit.

He hated suits.

There, he'd admitted it. He probably needed to open his eyes and realize there weren't a lot of differences between him and Noah. Noah hid his body away from the world. Zach might put his body out there for everyone to see, but he hid everything

else.

As he looked at his reflection in the mirror in his bedroom, he frowned. He wasn't wearing suits anymore. Noah had talked about doing some online shopping for clothes, and Zach vowed he would insist they both take the time to do it very soon. Not tonight, though. He had something special planned for tonight.

He called Connor to make sure everything was still a green light. If his best friend managed to get all the details and tasks taken care of before tonight's surprise, he would owe Connor for the balance of his life. He held no doubts he asked for a miracle and this particular miracle was more than likely way out of Connor's comfort zone, but those facts hadn't kept him from asking.

"Stop harassing me, Zach," Connor barked into the phone. "I've got this. You can count on me. Tonight will be as perfect as I can make it."

Zach smiled. "I just called to see if you needed me to take care of anything on my end," he lied. Well, it was a partial lie. He would do any job Connor tossed back in his direction, but he'd called to follow up and make sure Connor wasn't forgetting anything.

"Liar," Connor answered with a laugh. "You're as nervous as a high schooler on prom night. It's hilarious. I'm enjoying myself immensely."

"Well, as long as you get some enjoyment out of it, I guess that's all that matters," he teased back.

"Yeah, speaking of that," Connor said nervously. "I wondered if I could woo my date with your scraps."

The comment surprised Zach. The last he'd heard, Connor was back to his usual hit it

and quit it...which didn't involve dates, just sex. On one hand, he was glad Connor had found someone else to have some fun with, but on the other hand, he was disappointed. "My scraps?" he asked. "I'm not sure you're going to get lucky on scraps."

"You know what I mean," Connor growled.

He knew exactly what Connor meant. There was a really good chance Noah wouldn't be able to enjoy the rooftop surprise Zach had planned for him. That would be okay. If Noah wasn't ready, then Noah wasn't ready. He wasn't going to push him. "Who's the lucky guy cashing in on my scraps?"

Pause.

Silence.

Uncomfortable silence.

"Wayne."

Ahhhh, that made sense. Connor didn't give up so easily. It wasn't like him to get mad enough at somebody to toss them out like trash. Zach wasn't surprised to hear Connor hadn't given up on the EMT.

"Wayne deserves more than scraps."

"Yeah...it took some convincing on his end, but I finally know that," Connor answered slowly. "Okay, enough chit-chat. I've got things to do! Just call me the wedding planner."

Zach's good mood plummeted. Connor didn't need to joke about things like that,

things that could never be. “That’s not funny, Conn. Shut that shit up.”

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“Whatever you say,” Connor answered quickly, his voice laced with sarcasm. “Just remember, sometimes it’s out of our control.”

“I don’t lose control.” I can’t lose control, not where Noah is concerned.

Noah stood under the shower spray and let the hot water pound against his back. He was...terrified. He’d already puked twice, and his nervous stomach didn’t appear to be easing up in the least. Zach had something special planned for tonight, and Noah had a feeling it wasn’t the “something special” involving kinky fun where they were both naked. No, he had feeling Zach had adateplanned.

A fucking date.

A fucking date would require him leaving his safe zone.

Hecouldn’tdo it.

Hehadto do it.

There was no doubting it. He was making progress and improvements with his mental health. The doctor assured him of it and he could feel the differences. The fear that had been his permanent companion was still there, but it lurked in the shadows instead of the full-blown terror he’d experienced so regularly. Hell, when he was with Zach, he could almost forget about his anxiety...could almost fool himself into thinking he was a normal person.

But, while progress was definitely being made, Noah didn't think for one minute he was ready to leave his safety zone. Nope. No point lying to himself about it. Beneath all the improvements and giant leaps toward mental stability, he was still a coward.

He turned off the shower, stepped out, and wrapped himself in a thick towel. After taking a deep breath of determination, he went over to the bathroom mirror, wiped away the steam, and stared at himself. There were physical changes going on as well. His eyes were brighter since he'd reduced his meds to something more manageable. His color had improved, but without access to sunlight, he remained pale. He was still thin, but his muscles were more defined. He wouldn't ever have the muscles Zachary sported, but he was doing nicely.

Noah frowned. He actually missed the chocolate and sugar more than his drugs. What did soda ever do to Zach? The man was totally against his beloved beverage. Unsure of what it said about him as a grown man, he liked having Zach take care of him...except when it came to his sodas. There was a good chance he'd snuck some of those from the restaurant downstairs while Zach worked, but he'd never admit that aloud much less in his own thoughts.

His gaze narrowed. "You can do this, Noah. You're strong. You're brave. There's nothing to be afraid of. You are safe." He looked closer at the reflection in the mirror. "That's all bullshit, Noah, but you've got to try really hard for Zachary. You can be brave and be strong for Zach."

Before he started answering himself, he stepped away from the mirror and went into his bedroom. The doctor had sworn those mirror pep talks would help, but Noah sure the fuck didn't feel any braver than before he'd climbed out of the shower.

His stomach rolled with nausea again.

"Stop thinking about it," he warned himself.

Okay, a date. Zach wanted to take him on a date. Sure, the night would more than likely end up with him in an ER somewhere, but he wasn't going to dwell on that ugly fact until the first signs of the panic attack clutched at his heart. No, he'd focus all his attention on finding something decent to wear.

No sweatpants.

No shorts.

No tank tops.

No T-shirts.

Shit, he didn't even know what fucking month it was. That shit wasn't important when one didn't leave their apartment building. He grabbed his cell and found the information he needed. October. Fall. It would be chilly outside, but not cold. He jerked open his closet door and started digging around furiously for a thin sweater. There had to be one in there somewhere. He'd had normal clothes at some point in his life. When he found a black cashmere sweater, he felt like he'd won the lottery. He had absolutely no clue what was stylish, but surely a plain black sweater would be acceptable. Frowning, he sniffed it to make sure it didn't smell like mothballs or something equally unappealing.

After sliding the cashmere sweater over his head, he dug around for jeans. Like the sweater, they had to be there somewhere. Ten minutes and fifteen curse words later, he found a box labelled jeans. He tossed the first three pair, wondering why in the world he would have thought embellishing was attractive, and then hit pay dirt with a pair of soft, faded Levi's plain enough to not look good, but hopefully, not look bad either. Figuring it was the best he would find, he did the sniff test, and then shoved his legs into the denim. They were a bit baggy, loose everywhere except his ass, and Noah wondered if he'd really lost that much weight or if he'd been chubby when he'd

been sane.

A quick look in the mirror told him he was nowhere near what somebody as hot as Zachary deserved to have by his side, but it was the best he could manage until he did more shopping. Grinning like a lunatic, he went back to the closet and pulled out the one online item he'd foolishly purchased when he'd been on a Zachary-high. Yeah, he must have been arrogantly confident when he'd spent the four hundred dollars he didn't really have just so he could have the black biker boots, thick leather belt, and black twisted bracelet he'd thought Zachary might find hot. Sure, Zachary rarely wore anything but expensive, stuffy suits, but when Noah looked at all the tats decorating his body, he saw a different side to his lover. He saw a man who enjoyed it rough and on the edge.

Noah wanted to be the man satisfying those darker hot desires.

He checked his watch again—only fifteen minutes before Zach was supposed to show up. Zach had been so fucking excited that morning when he'd told him he had something special planned for their one month anniversary. Noah didn't want to be the reason that sexy smile disappeared. He had to find the courage to do what Zach wanted. He had to.

Saliva poured into his mouth and he ran toward the toilet. How much more could he throw up before his tank emptied?

He'd been home long enough to walk Denala, tend to the puppies, and shower. The excitement bubbled inside him, both terrifying and exhilarating him at the same time. Since the shit show with his father, he hadn't had any type of physical relationship with another person lasting longer than one fuck, much less one month. One month. If his heart weren't irrevocably damaged, he knew Noah would be the one.

Before leaving his apartment, he called Connor's cell. As soon as his friend answered, he asked, "Is everything ready?"

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Connor laughed, and from somewhere in the background, he heard Wayne's laughter as well. Maybe Zach sounded a bit too desperate? Grinning, he realized he didn't care if they were laughing at him. The only thing that mattered tonight was Noah.

"It's about as perfect as two bachelor dickheads can make it, Zach. Looking everything over, I'm one hundred percent you're going to get lucky tonight. No, Wayne! The blow-up doll goes over there. Stop being stupid."

"Ha-ha," Zach responded dryly. "No blow-up dolls, and please tell me my planners showed up to help you two bachelor dickheads." If the party planners hadn't shown up, a sex doll would probably be the least of his worries. He couldn't begin to imagine what kind of intimate dinner Connor and Wayne would throw together for him.

Connor snorted. "Yeah, they showed up, frowned on everything Wayne and I had already done to make your night extra special. They're a bunch of tight-asses, I tell ya. They probably fuck with the lights off."

"Just get your asses to my apartment and get ready for phase two of my brilliant tight-ass, fuck-with-the-lights-off plan. I need this to be perfect for Noah, Conn, and I'm depending on you to ensure it happens."

"Well, hell, you sure know how to ruin a bachelor party," Connor grumbled. "Got it, man. Best friend reporting to duty. I'll make you proud."

"Idiot." Zach smiled. Before hanging up, he said, "I'm never going to live this one down, am I?"

“Never.”

Noah was sitting on the couch, his head between his legs, doing breathing exercises when he heard Zach’s apartment door open. Then close. The security mechanism of Noah’s door beeped a welcoming signal, and he forced his head up and tried to appear normal. Well, almost normal. Relatively normal. Hell, he would never pass for normal.

“Hey, babe,” Zach said as soon as he entered the apartment. The giant man immediately crossed the room, intent on giving Noah a kiss hello from the look in his eyes, but then stumbled to a halt when only a few steps away. A soft whistle blew through his sexier than sexy lips, and Noah, for a few moments, forgot all about being terrified. When he saw the appreciative gleam sparkling in Zach’s eyes, he felt like he could conquer the world. Yeah, the biker boots, leather cuff, and jeans had definitely caught and held his lover’s attention.

“Damn, Noah,” Zach whispered in awe. “You look fucking hot.” He shook his head, like clearing it of cobwebs, and added, “I mean, you always look fucking hot, but this is a new fucking hot look that’s...fucking hot.”

It was silly, but Noah couldn’t stop the glow of happiness Zach’s praise caused him. He stood and stepped into Zach’s embrace. “The pants are a bit baggy, but they’ll have to do. I didn’t get past ordering the leather.”

“Baggy is good,” Zach answered. “Gives me room to do this.” He slipped his hand past the belted waistband and grabbed a handful of ass. He squeezed and jerked Noah closer against him.

“I’m good with hanging around here and you keeping your hand down my pants all

night long,” Noah said, trying to sound cocky but it came out more like a nervous hyena. He hated the blush of shame burning his cheeks. Zach had to be disappointed in him. Noah wasn’t even trying.

“If you want to stay here, we’ll stay here,” Zach answered slowly. “I don’t want to push you, babe, but I do want to show you how important you are to me. I want tonight to be special, and if special means us staying in your apartment, then it will be perfect, because I’ll be with you.” Zach kept massaging his ass cheek as he talked. “Uh...I’ve never been in a relationship that’s lasted this long.”

Noah laughed nervously. “Well, I’ve never been in a real relationship, so I think you can call us even.” He took a deep breath, stole a quick kiss from Zach’s lips, and said, “Let’s do this. I’ll try my best, Zach. I can’t make any promises, but I’m going to try.”

“Whatever happens will be what should happen. No pressure, Noah. You’ll get there when the time is right, not one damned minute before you’re ready. When you leave this building, it needs to be for you.”

Noah rolled his eyes. “That’s what the doctor tells me.” Bullshit. Bullshit. Bullshit. He couldn’t do this, not for himself, not for Zach, not for the good Lord himself.

Zach clasped their hands together and tugged him toward the door. “Come on, babe. I don’t want us to be late.”

Noah dug in his heels, still somewhat shocked Zach would think he was ready for such a giant step. Progress was him not constantly hugging the walls when they were in the lobby to ensure he was as far away from the glass exits as humanly possible. Progress was him talking to strangers in their gym and not counting every step as he walked to the gym and back to his apartment. Progress was not taking his medication. What Zach had planned for him tonight was more like a giant leap into the unknown,

completely naked, with dick dangling.

I can't do it.

He plastered a smile on his face that he hoped would pass for excitement instead of looking like someone being forced to watch childbirth and answered, "Lead the way. Thanks for planning such a special evening for us. One month, eh? Who would have thought it?" There, that sounded semi-normal, right? I am so going to throw up.

Like a moron, he stumbled over his own feet as they crossed the threshold of his apartment. What the fuck? He walked through that door every damned day. What was his problem now?

"You okay?" Zach asked casually. "Did you trip in your new boots?" He waggled his eyebrows and added, "I don't care if they make you stumble and tumble, you're wearing 'em. I got a chubby as soon as I saw you in them."

Noah laughed, and it sounded delirious. Perfect, he was sweating, too. He couldn't be more gross...and pathetic.

Zach squeezed his hand tighter. "Still with me, babe?"

"I...I...not ready," he finished lamely, hating himself more than he ever had in the past, and he'd hated himself a hell of a lot over the years. "Please don't be mad."

Zach jerked around and pulled him into a tight hug, pressing their chests together and stroking a calming hand down his back. "I would never get mad at you over something like this, Noah," he vowed. "Never! I'm proud of the man you are, how well you've handled what you've gone through, and how well you're moving forward." He kissed the top of his head. "You are my bubble ass, pouty lip, boot-wearin' hero, Noah St. Claire. You're being too hard on yourself right now. Stop it."

“I didn’t want to disappoint you,” he whispered.

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“Not gonna happen, babe. Not gonna happen.” His lips gently touched Noah’s mouth, just a playful peck. “Tell me, Noah. What did you think I had planned for you tonight?”

Noah wanted to lose himself in Zach’s kiss, pretend like he wasn’t being the biggest pussy in the entire world, but his lover wasn’t going to allow it. “You planned on taking me out somewhere nice...like normal people do. Don’t try to cover for my inability to go on a date by acting like you were taking me to the building restaurant. It’s a sweet gesture, but I’m not falling for it. I’m pathetic, Zach. I tried so hard. I wanted to be able to do this for you...for us. I honestly did. Please believe I did.”

“Okay, first of all, I’m spanking you for the ‘normal’ and ‘pathetic’ comments, so go ahead and pencil that in on your schedule. It’s going to happen, and it’s not going to be love taps. Secondly, give me a little credit, babe. I might not be an expert on agoraphobia, but I’ve studied every single piece of medical literature I’ve been able to get my hands on. I wasn’t about to try and force you to leave your safety zone after only one month of solid treatment. Actually, I probably won’t be the one to ever suggest you leave. That’s going to be all on you. I just plan on being here to hold your hand when you’re ready.”

Noah’s nose scrunched up. “What were you planning, then? You were way too excited for it to be one of our normal outings.”

“Well, my brilliant plan was doing something totally romantic, totally new, and, hopefully, totally close enough to your safety zone you would be able to feel comfortable enough to give it a try.”

Not only was Noah intrigued, but his heart did a happy dance right inside his chest. It grooved to some old Britney Spears nonsense. “What were you thinking?”

“Follow me,” Zach said as he tugged him toward the stairs instead of the elevator. “Just promise me you’ll tell me ‘no’ whenever it stops being fun. Promise?”

“Promise,” Noah answered as he eyed the stairs with trepidation. He’d taken the stairs before, so he should be able to accomplish that simple task. He didn’t do it often, so it took him out of his comfort zone, but it was still in the greenlight district.

It surprised him to see Zachary head up the stairs instead of down. There weren’t any other apartments above them, so he wasn’t sure what he had in mind. When they reached a small landing, Zach pulled a key card out of his pocket and nodded toward a metal door in front of them.

“This leads out onto the roof...of our apartment building, your safety zone. I have a dinner table set up for us, really close to the door. Candles, twinkling lights, flowers...all sorts of romantic shit. I know this is a huge step, Noah. You haven’t been voluntarily outside in years. If you feel comfortable with it, I want you to try and focus on assuring yourself this is your safety zone. There is absolutely nothing on the other side of this door that can hurt you. I’ll be with you the entire time. We’ll leave the door propped open. It’s exactly four steps from your chair and this entrance. Three really big steps.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. Outside. Zach wanted to take him outside. There were things outside capable of hurting him, wanting to hurt him. He spent every moment of every day trying to hide from the things on the other side of that door. Evil lurked outside the walls of his safety zone.

What would the night air feel like against his face? It had been so fucking long since he’d felt it, making it almost a fantasy that had never really existed, something he’d

made up in his head. It was fall. It would feel so damned good. Four steps. Three big steps. Zach would be right there with him. Nobody could hurt him.

There was always a way for someone to hurt him.

His first step toward normalcy was right in front of him. Zach had told him they could stop and come back inside any time he wanted. Feeling sick but determined, he nodded at Zach and then quickly moved to stand behind the larger man. For some reason, having Zach between him and the outside world seemed like the most plausible plan before him.

“You sure?” Zach asked, his eyes searching Noah’s face for some sort of sign telling him how to proceed.

Noah doubted he would see any nuggets of wisdom. He was pretty much flying by pure adrenaline at the moment. The fact he could very well crash and burn at any given second was forefront in his mind.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” he answered truthfully. When he heard the key card click the lock mechanism, his stomach tumbled and his heart leapt. What did he think he was doing? Love didn’t cure everything and solve every problem. No matter what his silly heart felt for a man who would probably never return those feelings, it couldn’t conquer his psychological fears.

He was just about to run for his life when Zach turned back around to look at him, one hand holding the door cracked and one hand holding Noah’s hand like a fucking lifeline. Something in that look, in the strength and warmth of Zach’s grip, caused Noah’s feet to remain planted where they were. Love might not be able to conquer all, but his heart told him Zachary Meadows could damned well conquer anything.

He nodded to Zach.

“Four steps and sit down in a chair. I’m right here with you, babe. We stop anytime you want to,” Zach said softly.

“Three big steps and sit in a chair. Got it,” Noah answered, choosing the shorter, quicker option. He’d take a victory wherever he could find one.

Zach smiled and winked. “I’ve got you.” Then he slowly opened the door.

Zach couldn’t have stopped the silly grin stretching across his face if his very life depended on it. Noah did it. Noah was officially his hero. The three big steps took exactly sixteen minutes, most of that time spent with Noah waffling at the door, turning his back on the outside, turning back around, waffling, baby-stepping, laughing deliriously, sweating profusely, and finally, taking the plunge.

“How are you doing, babe?” he asked as he took in every single detail of Noah’s body language and facial expressions. Noah gripped the sides of his seat so tightly his knuckles were a deathly white. His face was pale and his upper lip was coated with dampness. His chest, beneath the cashmere sweater, moved rapidly with deep, nervous breaths, but they were steady and showing no signs of a panic attack. His pupils were wide, his eyes locked with Zach’s.

The planners had done a magnificent job decorating the rooftop for a romantic dinner with candles, flowers, and twinkling lights. Their small round table was set with expensive china and silver cutlery. Next to them sat a serving cart holding prime rib, shrimp, mixed vegetables, and rolls. To add to the celebration, a few bottles of soda chilled in a silver bowl that would normally hold champagne. Every detail was perfect, but Noah hadn’t seen any of it. Those beautiful eyes didn’t look up or down, left or right—only at Zach.

Zach was good with that.

“Hey? How are you doing?” he asked again when Noah didn’t answer.

“Good. Good. Really good.” Noah’s voice sounded one step from losing it. He was so far from good, good, really good Zach wasn’t sure if Noah and those words were even on the same planet.

“What are you thinking?”

Noah coughed out a laugh. “That I’m scared shitless?”

“Wanna go back inside?”

“Yes,” Noah answered without a moment of hesitation. “I want to go back inside more than I want to draw my next breath. Even more than I want you to fuck me tonight, and we both know how much I want that. I want to, but I’m not. Not yet,” he added.

Zach reached across the small table and cupped Noah’s cheek. “Well, babe, it’s your lucky night because you are going to get to go back inside just as soon as you want to and I’m going to fuck you. See? You’re getting everything you want,” he teased. The emotions fluttering across Noah’s face were making Zach’s heart do all sorts of questionable things.

“Promises, promises,” Noah chirped, still sounding deliriously terrified. “Soooo...I did it. I’m a total badass, right?”

“Total,” Zach confirmed. Quietness descended on the table as Zach let Noah absorb all his surroundings and try to deal with all the triggers dinging around in his head. After a few minutes, Noah’s eyes fluttered closed and his face tilted. Zach frowned, wondering what he was doing, what he was thinking, but when he saw a wayward curl dance in the wind, he knew. “Does that feel good, babe? The wind against your face?”

“Perfect. It feels perfect,” Noah answered quietly. “I had accepted I would never feel it again. Fuck, I can’t believe what I allowed Moretti to take away from me.” He

opened his eyes and focused on Zach's face. "I can't believe I'm still too scared to find the courage to say I'll be able to do this again. I hate myself, Zach. I hate myself for being so weak and for being such a damn victim. Hell, Dante must have rubbed his hands together when he saw me. I was so fucking easy," he whispered. "I made it so easy for him to take everything he wanted in life...to take everything from my life."

Zach drew in a deep breath and tried to calm the thundering inside his head and heart. His soul was furious at the Moretti family for stealing Noah's life, for hurting him, and for damn near destroying him. He wanted to kill them. He wanted to be the son his father always wanted him to be. That man would have killed Moretti without thinking twice. Noah was right about the crime family stealing everything from him, but he was so damned wrong about him being weak. Looking at Noah, his pale face bathed in moonlight and twinkling lights, Zach saw one of the strongest people he'd ever met in his life.

Noah thought he was hiding. But Zach knew he was the one hiding. He had transformed into a robot of a man, unwilling to feel...until Noah.

"You are not weak, Noah. Look at you right now, sitting outside on the rooftop like a motherfucking badass. Those bastards did take everything away from you, but you're taking it back, babe. You're going to take every motherfucking emotion back from those bastards."

Noah's lips twisted in a sad pout. "Thank you for seeing a part of me I don't see." He slowly looked around the rooftop, his eyes wide and nervous but still willing to explore what he'd been missing for so long. "I couldn't have done this without you, Zach. Thank you for that and for all this." His eyes swept the area again. Smiling, he added, "Who would have ever thought you to be a romantic?"

Feeling like he'd just won the lottery, Zach answered, "I never was before you. Now,

are you ready to eat this scrumptious feast I slaved over all day long?" He reached for one of the heated serving platters.

"Nuh-uh," Noah answered quickly. "I can't eat. Please don't make me."

"Why can't you eat?" Zach asked, taking his hand away from the delicious-smelling food.

"First of all, I don't have any hands to hold fork and knife with," Noah answered, his eyes glancing down to where he still had a death grip on the chair's edge. "Secondly, I'm afraid I might get sick. I'm so nervous right now, and I don't want to ruin our night by puking everywhere." He glanced at the food cart with sad eyes. "Maybe we could carry it right inside the door and eat there?"

"Nah, there's no need for that, babe." Zach stood and moved to Noah's side. He cupped the side of his face with one hand and leaned down to attack his lips in a hungry kiss before pulling back and saying, "You've done well, Noah. Let's go back to your apartment. I'm so proud of you."

Noah's eyes widened with a look of sheer relief and agonized disappointment. Zach could see how torn he was between wanting to stay and dying to go back inside where he felt safest. No matter what Noah thought or said, their night had been a success. Zach wouldn't have been at all surprised or disappointed if Noah hadn't been able to step outside at all. From all his research, Noah appeared to be improving much faster than experts would have anticipated. It still pissed him off to the point of wanting to beat Cameron to a bloody pulp for not getting Noah the medical treatment he had needed. They had simply been medicating him, and not very well at that.

"No, Zach. Give me a few minutes. I'll do better," Noah argued. "You had all this food prepared, and I'd be a bastard for not eating it." He took a deep breath and flexed his fingers against the edge of the chair. Noah's breathing changed. He was

trying too hard. Zach had pushed too hard. A panic attack threatened if Zach didn't take control of the situation.

"Come on, babe. Let's get inside. The food won't go to waste. Connor already hinted at bringing Wayne up here to eat our scraps. Come on," he urged as he helped Noah stand. Since they'd left the door propped open, Noah rushed back to his safe zone before a second passed. Once there, his breathing calmed instantly.

When Zach started to use the tip of his toe to move the doorstop, Noah reached out and asked him to hold off for a second. "What are those lights over there?" Noah pointed out the lights in question. "I...I don't remember those. It seems like there was some kind of run-down shopping mall in that direction, nothing having that many bright and colorful lights." He turned to gaze up at Zach. "What is it?"

"You're right. There was an old strip mall over there, but they tore it down over a month ago. I think they are planning on putting another apartment building in the spot, but for right now, they've set up a huge carnival for the fall. I drive by when I'm going to work. Causes a huge traffic mess in the evenings."

"I bet it's beautiful," he whispered in awe as his eyes hungrily scanned the horizon. Some of the rides were big enough the tops of them could be seen from where they stood. "I always loved amusement parks." When he turned back to Zach, he looked sad. "Maybe one day," he murmured.

"Definitely one day," Zach argued as he pulled him into a hug. "Come on, babe. Let's head back down."

By the time they reached Noah's apartment door, Zach had heard every single apology known to mankind. He'd taken a quick minute to text Connor and make sure everything was taken care of and to tell him he and Wayne could enjoy the meal on the rooftop. Noah's guilt over not being able to eat the romantic dinner had him

demanding Zach bring the prime rib in so they could eat it in the stairwell. He might have been born into low-class trash, but even he knew prime rib wasn't best enjoyed in a strange-smelling stairwell. Zach hated Noah felt so bad, but he enjoyed listening to him pout and whine. Anyway, Noah wouldn't feel guilty much longer.

"Take me back, Zach," Noah pleaded. "You're killing me. I feel like shit because you went to all that trouble. I'll be stronger. I promise. Please, let's go back and let me try again."

They were standing outside Noah's apartment as he begged Zach one last time for another chance. Without a doubt, Noah would go right back up those stairs and try again, but Zach had pushed enough for one night. The last thing he wanted to do was cause another panic attack. If that happened, he was afraid of how hard Noah would be on himself. No, they wouldn't be going back upstairs.

"Stop whining, Noah. I've got this taken care of," Zach answered with a smile. "You did perfect tonight. Hell, Noah, if you hadn't been able to do more than step one foot outside and then haul that pretty ass of yours right back in, I would have been impressed. The fact you could sit at the table with me and let the night air flutter those girly eyelashes of yours is a huge victory. Huge, Noah. You haven't been able to step outside this building in years, but you did tonight. Huge victory, babe."

Zach punched in the code and pushed Noah's apartment door open.

"It's not much of a victory when I made us leave all that food..." He stopped talking and his eyes grew wide with shock as he finally looked away from Zach and into his apartment. Sitting in the middle of his living room was another intimate dinner table, adorned with the same candles, twinkling lights, fine china, and silver. The serving cart next to the table overflowed with the same foods as upstairs, the aroma even stronger in the small apartment. Noah's stomach growled in response to the delicious smell of prime rib.

When Noah's blue eyes turned back to Zach, they were damp with unshed tears. A cute frown pinched the center of his brow as his gaze traveled from Zach and then back to the scene in front of him. "How? I don't understand. How did you...?"

"I'd like to take full credit, but I have to admit I got some help from a party planning company and Connor. Happy one-month anniversary, Noah." Zach stopped talking before he did something really stupid and told Noah he was falling in love with him. That can't happen. His heart wasn't equipped for love.

Noah deserved somebody whose heart was overflowing.

Damn, but he wished he was strong enough to be that man, wished he didn't have his father's blood flowing through his veins.

"But...but...upstairs? I don't understand." He shook his head as if to clear the confusion. "Why did you do both?"

Zach shuffled Noah into the apartment with a couple firm pats on his ass as he explained. "I wasn't sure what you would be comfortable with, babe. It was going to be your decision. This is your health, and progress needs to be made at the pace you are comfortable with." He grinned as he pulled Noah's chair out for him and nodded for him to take a seat at the table. "I wanted to make sure all my bases were covered to make this a special night for both of us."

When Noah's gaze met his, Zach nearly buckled beneath the love he saw shining bright in those blue irises. If only this moment could last forever. If only he were someone other than Zachary Meadows...

Chapter 12

Noah stretched and immediately became aware of two things: his ass ached in the most delicious of ways, and Zach was still stretched out in the bed next to him. Those were both fabulous feelings, with Zach still being in bed with him edging out sore ass by a fraction. He smiled and savored the warm emotions flowing through him.

Zach's anniversary date last night had been...well, there weren't words for what Noah felt. Zach had managed to check off every damned box on the happiest day of his life list with last night's performance. The fact he'd managed to find the courage to step outside and once again, after all this time, enjoy the things most people took for granted happened only because of Zach. Zach had not only given him the push and tools to turn his life around and start down a path of mental health improvements, but he also gave Noah courage and strength with his very presence. When he was with Zach, he felt the stirrings of the man he used to be, not the man Moretti had turned him into.

Going outside would have easily been enough to make Noah's night a success, but when he saw how much work Zach had put into making his rooftop dinner perfect and romantic, he'd fallen halfway in love with the man. When he'd walked into his apartment and seen the same dinner prepared there as well, he'd fallen all the way in love. Boom. Just like that. He'd suspected it was happening, had even tried to warn his heart to slow down because love wasn't what Zach was looking for. All those warnings evaporated in one night.

He was in love with Zachary Meadows, the man who didn't want to be loved and didn't want to love in return.

It figured. That shit was just his style. If there was a wrong way to do something, he'd find that path and take it, full speed ahead.

The smart thing to do would be to hide his feelings from Zach, keep playing the fun games they were playing, enjoy it while it lasted, and most importantly, keep his fucking mouth shut. He'd never once taken the smart road, so he seriously doubted he would in this case. The thing was, he would keep quiet and hide his feelings if he were capable of pulling off a magic trick as spectacular as that.

He wasn't, though. He would undoubtedly open his mouth and spew out "I love you" at the most inopportune time. Zach would get scared and run for his life. Hell, Noah would probably run if he had anywhere to go or if he wasn't afraid to leave the building.

Could he handle it if Zach left, disappeared out of his life forever, taking Denala, the puppies, and Connor with him? Could he go back to the zombie-like existence he'd been living a month ago? No, he couldn't. He had to find a way to tell Zach what was happening but still assure his lover he didn't expect anything in return. Wanted it? Yes. Expected it? No.

"What in the world is causing that look on your face?" Zach whispered in his ear, surprising him enough a yelp ripped from his throat.

"Holy shit! You scared me to death," he answered as he turned to see Zach's sleepy eyes studying him. Fuck, but the man was beautiful. A wave of terror reached out and clutched at his chest. He couldn't lose Zach. Not now. Even if his doctor insisted it wasn't healthy, his entire world revolved around Zach. The thing was, he knew it was because of the love he'd developed for his neighbor instead of dependency like the doctor thought. "I...I didn't know you were awake."

"Obviously," Zach answered with a smile. "Seriously, Noah. What were you thinking

about? You looked scared to death. Did something happen? Did we push too hard last night? Do you feel a panic attack coming on?"

It was a damned shame Zach's thoughts had to automatically assume the worst concerning Noah, but Noah totally understood why he went there. He was, indeed, a worst-case scenario posterchild.

"No, definitely not," he answered quickly. "Last night was the best night of my life. Hands down. You win. If they hand out prizes for best first anniversary dates, you are the uncontested winner." He chattered like a nervous child.

"I'm glad you liked it," Zach answered as he pulled him closer and wrapped a possessive arm around Noah's waist. "It...it was a best night category for me, as well." Zach's words had been spoken softly, like he hated saying them, but he couldn't hold them back. Zach fought so hard against feeling any sort of commitment.

Noah opened his mouth to make a joke to lighten the mood, but stumbled on his heart and said, "I'm falling in love with you, Zachary."

With Zach plastered against him, he felt every muscle in his lover's body tense as soon as Noah said the words he clearly should have never said. Terrified, he rallied to come up with something to make Zach's fear go away.

"I mean...I think I'm falling in love with you, but don't worry about it, Zach. I don't expect anything in return. I know this. You've told me from the very beginning you didn't do relationships. Please don't get mad at me," he pleaded, hating himself even more with every word that poured from his mouth. "I promise it's okay you can't love me back. I get that. Really, I do."

When he finished, Zach's body was even more tense than it had been before Noah

started backpedaling. Shit. Shit. Shit. He'd fucked up. He always fucked up. Why couldn't he just keep his mouth shut?

"I'll have to spend an extra hour in the gym this morning after all I ate last night." He kept talking, even when he knew it was too late. "I can't believe you gave me soda and chocolate. Yeah, quite the celebration. I'll definitely pay for it on the treadmill today. So, what's on the agenda for you? Got a busy day at work? Bunches of patients to make all better? I bet you..."

Zach stopped the words tumbling from Noah's mouth by capturing his lips in a hungry kiss, a desperately hungry kiss. Noah answered with his own desperation, as if he had to convince Zach everything was going to be okay, that he wasn't going to try and drag a commitment out of him. Their tongues mated and their lips teased. They kissed until every inch of Noah's body burned and begged to be fucked or cuddled. He needed Zach more than he needed oxygen, but he had to convince the man otherwise or Zach would run away and never look back.

When Zach finally pulled away, Noah started talking, even though he knew he should shut up. "I promise I'm not changing the rules on you, Zach. I know you aren't looking for anything more than a fun fuck. I know this and I won't ask for anything more. I...I just wanted you to know what I was feeling. I want to be honest, but I don't want to scare you away with all my fucking honesty. Please don't go, Zach."

He sounded desperate, but stopping the words seemed impossible. No, his mouth was being fueled by the terror seizing his heart, and he didn't have the strength to hold back. A part of him feared when he closed his eyes and stopped talking, Zach would be gone.

"Shhh, babe," Zach answered softly. "Please stop sounding so scared, like I'm going to walk out that door and never come back. I'm not going to leave you unless you ask me to," he said.

Noah's heart started to soar but then plummeted with Zach's next words.

"My heart isn't worth giving to anybody, Noah. It died a long time ago, but that doesn't mean I'm not capable of doing the right thing. You need me, and I know I fucking need you. Let's just focus on that, okay?"

Noah nodded, feeling empty on the inside but trying to make sure he looked calm and reassured on the outside. At least Zach wasn't leaving him. The man who had stolen his heart might not be able to love him back, but at least he wasn't going to abandon Noah like everyone else had.

For some reason, his heart didn't feel one damned bit better.

"You okay?" Zach asked as he cupped the back of Noah's neck in that possessive way that made Noah melt like butter.

"I'm good," he lied. "Thanks again for last night. It was beautiful." At least that much was true.

“Hopefully, the first of many,” Zach agreed.

Noah could tell Zach was getting jittery, like he wanted to escape but didn’t know how to pull off the feat without startling the wild animal. Noah wanted a fucking pill. It was so pathetic. No matter how much progress he made, he always wanted a pill when things got rough. Would he always be that weak? That dependent?

Probably. It was the story of his life.

“I’m running late, so I need to hustle,” Zach said as he climbed out of the bed and started his usual scavenger hunt for his clothes. It was something he did every morning, and Noah usually found it amusing. This morning, however, Noah noticed every single difference in Zach’s usual movements. After he’d rescued all the clothing, he turned to Noah and said, “I’ll take Denala and the puppies back to my apartment so you’ll be able to get plenty of rest today. Listen, I’m going to ask for some time off from work. I’ll work through this week and then take a couple of weeks off. I hate...I hate leaving you every morning, Noah. It literally hurts my heart to walk out of this building and leave you behind.”

“That...that would be fun,” Noah answered. His mind tried to decipher Zach’s words. Was his love for Zach causing him to read something into the words that really wasn’t there? “Don’t get into trouble because of me, but spending more time together would be...fun.”

Fun? How fucking stupid did that sound?

“Okay,” Zach answered. “That’s what we’ll do then. Sounds good. Don’t work out

too hard today, okay, babe? You didn't eat that much chocolate."

"We both know that's a lie," Noah joked. He was still totally confused about the direction of their conversation, about Zach's body language, and most of all, why he'd screwed everything up by telling Zach about his feelings. "See you this afternoon," he said.

Zach nodded and left the bedroom. Noah could hear him gathering the puppies and talking to Denala. Then he heard his apartment door shut, Zach's open, and then quietness descended on Noah's life. For the first time since he and Zach had become lovers, Zach had left without kissing him goodbye.

And Noah had fucked up. Yet again.

Four hours later, Noah felt much better. Zach hadn't been gone thirty minutes when Connor had called Noah. Apparently Zach had called him, going ballistic because he was afraid he'd really fucked things up with Noah. Connor had explained some things about Zach's past, nothing violating Zach's trust, but enough that Noah would have some insight into why Zach was so determined to keep everything purely physical. The bottom line was Zach didn't feel worthy of another person's love and affection. His life had been difficult, and as a way to protect himself, he'd shut down all things emotional. Zach not being worthy was the most ridiculous thing Noah had ever heard, but he, of all people knew how easily the mind could twist reality and convince you of things that weren't true. Yeah, he was the posterchild of that shit.

Since the phone call had lifted his spirits, Noah had hit the gym and spent nearly three hours trying to figure out a way to convince Zach whatever had happened in the past didn't mean a damn thing to their present and future. Countless scenarios had danced around in his head as he ran mile after mile on the treadmill. As he'd lifted his weights, his mind had created fantasies of a life where he healed Zach, just as Zach had started to heal him. In the steam room, his muscles and mind had relaxed to the

point he was convinced he and Zach, working together, could not only conquer the world, but also conquer their damaged hearts.

The wildest thing was he'd also talked to the few people in the gym while he was on that treadmill, lifting those weights, and relaxing in that steam room. He'd never had the courage or urge to do it before Zach. Now, it felt somewhat normal. No one seemed to look at him like he was a freak anymore. Hell, two people had even stayed in the steam room when he'd walked in. Oh, hell yeah, his life was barreling straight toward Normalsville. Zach's affection, even if it wasn't love or could never be love, was healing him, and he vowed to do the same for Zach.

"Your boyfriend is hot...like super intense hot. Seems friendly, too. He's a good guy, yeah?"

The voice interrupted Noah's fantasy and his eyes jerked open. He was still in the steam room, and it was just him and...

What the hell was that guy's name? He lived on the seventh floor and had two cats he walked on leashes like dogs. He wore colorful clothes and seemed to only use the gym for the Jacuzzi and steam room. Friendly. Always smiling. Noah had placed him in the harmless category even before Zach had started helping him step out of his self-imposed no-friend zone.

Levi. That was his name. Levi.

"Yeah, he's a good guy." He smiled at Levi and added, "Really hot, too."

Levi laughed and then stood, tightening the towel around his waist to ensure it didn't find its way down around his ankles. "Well, I've enjoyed this heat about as long as my body can handle it. I'm gonna head out. Listen, I don't want this to sound creepy or anything. It isn't like I've been stalking you over the past year, but you seem a lot

different since you hooked up with the tattoo muscle man. You smile, look at people, and even talk. I think he's a keeper." A blush tinged Levi's cheeks as he added, "I like the new you. Maybe we can hang out sometime. As friends, of course. I don't want the Adonis thinking I'm trying to move in on his man. I'm just looking for a friend."

A smile spread across Noah's face. A friend? He hadn't had a friend in forever. A friend would be nice. "That sounds good. I, uh, don't get out much, but anytime you'd like to hang out around the building, just give me a yell."

"Sounds good," Levi answered. "Hey, don't stay in here too long. You'll shrivel like a prune. I'll check my schedule and see what I've got open and then get back with you. Hanging around here will be fine with me. See ya, later."

Noah watched the slender man exit the steam room. A fucking friend! Who would have ever thought it? Zach would be proud. Noah and Levi seemed like complete opposites, with Levi's flamboyant colors and in-your-face personality, but he also sent out lonely vibes matching what Noah felt on a daily basis.

Ten minutes later, he felt a lot like the prune Levi had warned him about, so he made his way to the locker room to gather the rest of his stuff and head back upstairs. It had been a good morning. Connor had made him feel like there might be hope for a relationship between him and Zach. If, of course, he could slowly tear down the walls surrounding Zach's heart. Levi talking to him in the steam room had left him feeling...normal. Yes, it had been a good morning. If he wasn't careful, he could get used to the happy feeling swirling around in his heart.

As he opened his locker door, he thought maybe he could ask Zach to take him back on the rooftop tonight, just to try and get him more and more comfortable with leaving the confines of the apartment building. Hanging on the back wall of his locker was a note written in bright red.

One. Two. I've decided to come for you.

His world, as small as it was, seemed totally perfect one second and then crashed to the pits of hell in the next. For a few seconds, Noah just stared at the words, unable to accept they were really there, mocking him with the warning. He'd known Moretti would come for him eventually, had even tried to prepare himself for the moment when it happened. He wasn't prepared. Not now. Not when things were going so good.

Why now?

He continued to stare at the words until a whisper of cold fear slithered along the spot between his shoulder blades. With trembling hands, he slammed the locker shut and glanced around the room. There wasn't anyone in the locker room with him, but instead of feeling safe, it made the moment even scarier. Just outside the door, he could hear people talking and laughing, weights hitting the racks, and the sound of feet hitting the treadmill as people continued to work out...while his world crumbled.

His heart rate accelerated, his breathing became quick, shallow pants as a panic attack started to overtake him. Automatically, his hand reached for the alarm around his wrist, but then he immediately let his hand fall to his side. Breathing exercises. He needed to concentrate on breathing exercises so he could process all the information and make an intelligent decision on how to react. He counted his breaths and forced them to become slower...calmer.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:47 am

He opened the locker door again, hoping he had somehow imagined the entire thing, that there wasn't a note from Moretti penned in bright red ink. It had all been something his mind had dreamed up. Moretti was in prison. He still had years before the man would come for him. His identity hadn't been revealed. His home was still safe.

The note was still fucking there.

One. Two. I've decided to come for you.

Calmly, he closed the locker, grabbed his gym bag, and walked toward the exit. He counted his steps and kept his eyes glued to the floor. Someone spoke to him in the hallway, but he didn't bother to attempt to see who or try to figure out what they wanted. He wasn't safe. Moretti could have hired anyone to leave the note for him. All the people around him, laughing, talking, and grunting during exercises, any of them could have been the person to just yank the rug of sanity and safety right out from under him.

He reached the set of elevators leading to the penthouse floor and pushed the button. The elevator, for some reason, seemed so unsafe in his mind. Sure, he would be alone...but he didn't feel alone. Before Zach, he'd always felt like someone watched him. He stepped onto the elevator, and when the doors slid closed, he realized he felt that way again. Cautiously, he looked around but saw nothing but his mirrored reflection.

His breathing started coming in short pants again, so he started counting again. He counted out loud, saying the numbers, as his mind tried to form a plan. What did he

need to do? Who should he call? Calling Zach could lead him straight to danger. No, he couldn't do that to Zach. He wouldn't do anything to risk his lover's safety. Maybe Cameron? Cameron would notify the FBI. They would know what to do. They would keep him safe.

The elevator doors slid open just as his mind realized contacting Cameron was definitely off his list of options. Cameron would call the FBI, and they would move him to another location. Just like that. Poof! He would disappear, and Zach would never know anything about what had happened or where they had taken him.

Denala, on the other side of Zach's apartment door, barked furiously and Noah felt goose bumps form on his skin. It was a different bark than he'd ever heard from her before. His eyes darted to the left and right, searching for danger, knowing it had to be there, but not seeing anything. He trembled with fear as he darted for his apartment door and punched in his code with trembling hands. If the fucking code failed this time, Zach would probably find him dead right outside his apartment door—dead from fear. The code clicked a positive sound and his door opened.

Desperately, he tried to breathe normally as he maneuvered his body through the door and then collapsed against the wall as he waited for the heavy barrier to close. Surely, he would be able to calm down once he was safe. Surely, he would be able to form a viable working plan. Maybe he wouldn't tell anybody? Maybe he could just pretend nothing happened and enjoy a few more days of happiness before Moretti actually came calling. No, he couldn't risk Zach's safety.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he muttered as his chest tightened. "One. Two. Three. Four. Five." He tried every single trick the new doctor had told him about, but nothing seemed to be working. It hadn't escalated to pure panic attack, but the underlying panic didn't lessen either. After what felt like a lifetime, he managed to finally make his legs work again. His muscles were heavy and lethargic as he crossed the room. His mind was sluggish. He had to get his shit together.

He turned toward the kitchen and froze. Plastered on his refrigerator was another note, the letters just as bright red as the ones in his locker.

Three. Four. It won't help for Scaredy-Cat to lock his door.

His finger hit the panic button on his bracelet mere seconds before his body hit the floor. His head cracked against the wood floor and then...nothing.

Chapter 13

Zach said a curse word with every passing second as he waited for the elevator to reach his and Noah's floor. He'd received a call from Cameron about twenty minutes ago, telling him Noah needed him to come home. He didn't know what the fuck was going on, but it was bad if Cameron was involved.

This washisfault. Whatever had happened was his fault because he hadn't had the balls to tell Noah how he really felt about him. The look in Noah's eyes that morning when he'd left him had damned near destroyed him. Why was he so fucked up? Why did he allow his father to still control his life? Other than Connor and Denala, Noah was the only good thing in his life...the onlyrealthing.

He never should have left him when it had been so plain to see how badly he was hurting. The doors slid open, and he let himself into Noah's apartment as quickly as the locking mechanisms would allow. Once inside, he heard voices yelling down the hall—angry voices. Frowning, he made his way to Noah's bedroom. When he got there, he stood frozen in the doorway and watched as two EMTs tried to calm Noah down as they worked on a fresh wound on his forehead.

What the fuck? How had he gotten hurt?

On top of that, Noah was screaming at Cameron. Zach might not be a fan of Noah's FBI guardian, but he almost felt sorry for him at the moment. The man looked confused...and almost frightened. Apparently, he wasn't accustomed to Noah voicing his opinion.

“What happened, Noah?” Zach asked as he walked into the room. With an authority he didn’t really possess, he told the EMTs to step aside, and he immediately started applying pressure to the head wound. “Are you okay, babe?”

“Does he sound fucking okay?” Cameron screeched, finding his tongue and balls as soon as he noticed Zach had arrived. “He’s losing his fucking mind and won’t listen to reason. You need to calm him down before I have him committed somewhere.”

Zach heard himself growl, and the look he sent Cameron’s direction must have successfully told the other man exactly what he thought about his comment. He opened his mouth to demand Cameron get the fuck out of Noah’s apartment, but Noah interrupted him.

“Don’t let him call them, Zach. Please don’t let him call. If he calls them, I’ll disappear. I won’t ever see you again. Please don’t let him. You’ve got to stop him. I’ve tried, but he won’t listen to a damned thing I say. You’ve got to reason with him,” he pleaded.

Noah’s words weren’t making a hell of a lot of sense. Zach decided his time would be better spent focusing on what Noah had to say, to find out what had happened while he’d been at work. “What happened, Noah? What upset you? Was it because of...me...and this morning?” He didn’t know how else to say it, especially with a room full of people he either didn’t know or didn’t like. The EMTs looked nervous as hell. Cameron looked rattled to his core.

“No, we’re good,” Noah answered quickly. “Cameron’s going to call the FBI and tell them what happened, though. That’s bad. You can’t let him do it. You can’t, Zach. You know what will happen to me.”

Noah’s blue eyes pleaded with him to do...something.

Cameron must have finally realized the danger of what Noah revealed because he quickly ushered the EMTs out of the bedroom, closing the door firmly in their faces after telling them to wait in the living room. The three of them listened as the EMTs' footsteps faded as they walked down the hall. When they could no longer be heard, Cameron said, "Since it appears Noah has broken every rule regarding his safety, I guess you know about his past. No one is supposed to know who he is, but you do. Since you already know the ugly past he's hiding from, you might as well know Moretti made contact with Noah this morning, left him some threatening notes. One in his gym locker and one on his refrigerator, which means Moretti has complete access to Noah. When he found the note in his apartment, it triggered a panic attack and he hit the alert button on his bracelet. They called me."

Cameron sent an ugly frown in Noah's direction. Noah flipped him off in response. Zach would have laughed if the situation hadn't been so dire.

"Oh, yeah, Noah," Cameron snarled. "That's real cute, asshole. Flip me off. I don't care. I have a job to do, and I plan on doing it. You can pout all you want. Your life is in danger. Moretti knows where you are! Hell, both our lives are probably in danger because of you and your inability to keep your mouth shut."

Zach gave Noah's shoulder a reassuring squeeze and said, "Tell me everything, Cameron. We both want to keep Noah safe, so let's try to work together."

"All you need to know is he's threatening to call the FBI. He can't do that, Zach. You can't let him," Noah pleaded.

Zach pulled out his phone and texted Connor, telling him he needed him—Moretti had found Noah. After sending the message, he checked beneath the gauze he had pressed to Noah's head. The bleeding had stopped. The gash didn't look bad enough to need stitches, but it was, unfortunately, in the exact place as his last head wound.

“Listen, babe,” he coaxed quietly. “Cameron’s job is to keep you safe and that involves informing the FBI Moretti has found you. He’s only trying to do what’s right.”

The look of fury and betrayal in Noah’s eyes took Zach’s breath away.

“You want them to take me away? To make me disappear? I know you don’t love me the way I love you, Zach, but I thought you cared for me. You’re okay with never seeing me again? Okay with not knowing where I am or if I’m safe?”

Of course, he wasn’t okay with any of that. He started to respond but then stopped as the truth hit him. The FBI would simply come in and force Noah to disappear again. He would never see him again; never know he was safe and not suffering with his mental health issues. He would never touch him again...never hear him say “I’m falling in love with you” again.

Forcing Noah to leave his safety zone was not only dangerous but it would cause a certain amount of mental anguish. Noah was right, the FBI couldn’t get involved, but convincing Cameron to not tell them was out of the question, too. Cameron hadn’t been a good caregiver, but Zach doubted he would do anything that would put his own safety in jeopardy. From what Connor had told him about Moretti, everyone within a ten mile radius of Noah would be in danger.

Moretti could bring it on as far as Zach was concerned. He’d gladly defend Noah with his life.

He turned to Cameron and asked, “Have you contacted them yet, Cameron?”

Cameron rolled his eyes in disgust and answered, “How could I? I’ve had crazy man screaming at me nonstop since he regained consciousness. Fuck, Doc. What have you turned him in to? I’m already at the point where I miss little Mr. Scaredy-Cat and the

fuck knows I never thought I would make that statement.”

Zach noticed how Noah’s entire body grew taut from Cameron’s thoughtless words. He’d forgotten just how obnoxious the bastard behaved when it came to dealing with Noah’s phobias. “You aren’t crazy, Noah. Don’t listen to him,” he said. To Cameron, he ordered, “Shut the fuck up with that kind of talk. If you can’t say something to help the situation, then keep your goddamn mouth shut.” He was way past the point of worrying about what type of influence or power Cameron had over Noah.

“It isn’t that,” Noah answered in a voice quivering with fury. “I’m used to him telling me I’m crazy. I learned to ignore that shit for what it was. No, I’m talking about what he just called me. Scaredy-Cat.” His eyes narrowed as he glared at Cameron. “You’ve called me that hundreds of times, Cameron.”

“So? If the shoe fits...”

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When Cameron shrugged and smirked, Zach clenched his fists and tried to come up with one reason why he shouldn't punch the asshole straight in his face. He was actually about to do it when Noah's next words pulled him up short.

"Apparently you aren't the only one calling me that...or are you?" Noah asked quietly. "That's what's on my note, isn't it, Cameron? The person who left me that note called me Scaredy-Cat too. You have access to my locker downstairs. You also have access to my apartment. Tell me, Cam, just how much money did Moretti pay you to keep an eye on me...to drug me with meds I not only didn't need but that contributed to my paranoia?" Noah made a tscking sound between his teeth. "Wow, Cameron, Moretti is going to be very disappointed in you for making such a grade school mistake. Do you know what Moretti does to people he's disappointed in? Did you ever stop to think about that?" Shaking his head in disgust while laughing at the same time, Noah finished with, "You are so fucking dead, Cameron. He's killed people for much less than that."

Cameron shook his head frantically, his eyes darting back and forth between Zach and Noah like he was trying to determine where the biggest threat came from. He started edging toward the door as he said, "You're crazy, Noah. I'm not involved with Moretti. I work with the FBI. It isn't my fucking fault you're a scaredy-cat and every fucking person that comes in contact with you knows it. So I used the same nickname? Big deal! If Moretti has been watching you closely, I'm sure he's heard me call you that and couldn't help but agree with the accuracy of it. It isn't like you work very hard to keep it a fucking secret."

Zach moved to block Cameron's escape, causing the smaller man to shrink back to the other side of the room. He was so furious he wanted to rip Cameron's heart out

while it still beat. His fury, however, centered on the fact he was being so disrespectful to Noah, not because he was convinced Cameron was in bed with Moretti. Something didn't feel right with Cameron making such a blatant mistake. On the other hand, it wouldn't be hard to see the man joining Moretti if it put an extra buck in his pocket. He clearly had no morals whatsoever.

"Are you working with Moretti, Cameron? Think long and hard about your answer...because your very life may depend on it," Zach warned.

Cameron literally huffed and stomped his foot in outrage. "I don't have to put up with this bullshit. I work for the fucking FBI!" He turned and glared at Noah. "I almost felt sorry for you, Noah. It was heartbreaking to watch you whine and cry over losing the first man that's paid you any attention in years. I'd thought about telling my FBI liaison that removing you from your safe place and Dr. Meadows was a bad idea. Now I don't give a flying fuck what they do with you. Hell, I hope you spend the rest of your life trapped inside that sick little mind of yours."

"What's going on in here?" Connor's booming voice jerked everybody's attention in his direction. He stood in the doorway with Wayne standing directly behind him, their large bodies sending out an intimidating message to Cameron.

"Thank the fuck. You're a cop, aren't you?" Cameron asked as he started moving in Connor's direction. "I want to leave here, but that idiot"—he motioned to Zach—"won't let me pass. Do your civic duty and get me to safety," he demanded in the uppity voice Zach knew he would have nightmares about for years to come.

Connor's gaze flickered to Zach, to Noah, and then back to Cameron. "Why aren't you letting him leave, Zach? You do realize he's Noah's liaison with the FBI, right?"

Cameron stomped his foot again. "Fuck, Noah! Is there anybody you didn't tell? Jeezus, your identity was supposed to be a fucking secret. It's no wonder Moretti

found you.”

Connor’s brows raised in shock and then his eyes hardened as he contemplated what Cameron had just revealed. To Zach, he said, “What’s happened? Why do we think Moretti has found him?”

“Get me out of here, and I’ll explain everything to you,” Cameron promised. “Both the notes are in the kitchen. Let me show you.”

Cameron suddenly turned into Mr. Helpful, but everybody in the room knew it was only because he wanted to make his escape. He moved and as soon as he was close enough to reach Connor, he grabbed his bicep and wrapped his fingers tightly around him. Connor shrugged his hands off and glared down at him. “Touch me again, and I’ll forget all about the badge I carry.” He turned to Noah and asked, “Can you explain everything that has happened to you, Noah? I’d rather hear it from you than this idiot.”

“He isn’t leaving here,” Zach argued. “Not until I have some answers from him about his involvement with Moretti.” Zach took one step in Cameron’s direction, but Connor stopped him by holding up his hand.

“Let it go, Zach. Even if Cameron is working with Moretti, he’s also working with the FBI. They’ll handle his involvement if there is any. We’re about to have enough FBI heat coming down on us without adding his bullshit into the mix. Now, can you or Noah explain to me what has happened today? I’d love to escort this fuck out of here and not have to deal with him anymore.”

“Excuse me?” Cameron roared in outrage. “You can’t talk to me like that. I’m Noah’s guardian. I make all the decisions where he is concerned. You really don’t want to piss me off.”

Connor bumped his larger body against Cameron and said, “No, you really don’t want to piss us off, little man. The last time I checked, the FBI isn’t here to protect you right now. Don’t push your luck.”

Swallowing down a gulp, Cameron muttered, “You’re all going to regret this. You won’t get away with treating me like this,” he vowed.

“Wayne? Can you show our guest out?” Connor asked. “Don’t let him take anything with him. Zach and I will need to see all the evidence of what’s happened today.” Turning back to Zach, he said, “Does Noah need the paramedics any longer? They’re still waiting in the living room.”

“No. Noah’s fine now. I’m here.” He nodded to Cameron and said, “Get him the fuck out of my sight before I kill him with my bare hands.”

“My pleasure,” Wayne answered as he grabbed Cameron’s upper arm and started tugging him out the door and down the hall.

They could hear Cameron’s threats with every step Wayne hauled him. Sadly enough, both Zach and Connor knew they weren’t empty threats. Cameron, unfortunately, held the power to do a lot of damage, whether it be through Moretti or the FBI.

When Cameron and the paramedics had left the apartment, the four men gathered in the living room to discuss what had happened. Zach insisted on holding Noah in his lap while they sat on the oversized sofa, and for once, Noah didn’t argue. He huddled his smaller body against Zach like it was the anchor keeping him sane.

Connor pulled some gloves out of his pocket and handed them to Wayne. “Put these on and bring those notes over here. Let’s see what we’re up against.” While Wayne followed those orders, Connor looked at Zach and asked, “Are you okay, Zach? Noah and I are both going to need you to hold it together. We need to see the threats and

then come up with a plan on how to handle Moretti and the FBI.”

“They’re going to try and make me go away, aren’t they?” Noah asked. “They’ll take me and nobody will ever know where I’m at.” He turned to Zach and pleaded, “Don’t let them do it, Zach. Please don’t let them do it.”

“You aren’t going anywhere, babe.” Zach looked up at Connor and said, “They can’t make him, can they?” Before Connor could answer, Zach plowed ahead and said, “Because if they can, Noah and I are going to disappear right the fuck now. I’m not going to let them take him, Connor. You know this, right? I need you to tell me what I should do next. I know how to hide, Conn.” His eyes darkened when he added, “You know everything I’m capable of. Let me protect him.”

Connor frowned. “The FBI will certainly want to move Noah, to get him to safety as quickly as possible. Maybe it’s the best thing, Zach? I...I don’t know if we can keep Noah safe from Moretti. The man is dangerous.”

“So. Am. I,” Zach answered firmly. “Anyway, the FBI hasn’t done such a bang-up job protecting him so far, has it? They’ve allowed an idiot to see to his medical needs and, for all we know, that same idiot is the very person who told Moretti where to find Noah. Forgive me for not putting my trust in the FBI at the moment,” he spat.

“I don’t have to go,” Noah interrupted. “They told me at the very beginning that I didn’t have to enter the protective custody program if I didn’t want to. Since I didn’t have anything or anybody to keep me where I was, I decided entering the program was best for me.” He touched the side of Zach’s face with his hand. “Now I have something to want to stay around for, to fight for. They can’t make me go. When I panicked with Cameron, I hadn’t really stopped long enough to consider I wouldn’t have to go, that they couldn’t force me to do anything.”

“Is that true, Conn? Can he refuse protective custody?”

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“Of course, he can refuse it,” Connor answered. “But, again, I don’t know if that’s what is best for Noah. Moretti knows where he is and obviously has, or has had, easy access to him. The man is dangerous, Zach. I...I know what this will do to you if you aren’t able to protect Noah.” Connor swallowed and then added, “It wouldn’t be forever, Zach. Just until the threat is...removed. You and I could work on removing that threat while the FBI protected Noah.”

“Absolutely not,” Noah argued. “I’m not going to risk your lives...allow you to do something to ruin the rest of your lives for me. I won’t do it.” Noah looked resigned to his fate. “Forget it. Connor’s right. I need to go with them. I’ve only been thinking about myself and what I want. I hadn’t even stopped to consider Moretti could kill either of you.” Shyly, he glanced up at Wayne, who stood off to the side, holding the notes Moretti had left. “Or risk Wayne’s safety. Hi again, Wayne. My name isn’t really John Doe. It’s Noah.”

“Yeah, uh, I kinda picked up on that. And, like Zach and Connor, I’m not worried about Moretti. If he comes for Noah, he’ll have to get through the three of us first.”

Zach’s eyebrow arched straight up to the top of his head. Either he’d underestimated the casual friendship with Wayne or Connor was the best fuck on the planet. What kind of person just dropped everything and committed to protecting a man he didn’t even know? Zach narrowed his eyes. A man who couldn’t be trusted perhaps...

“Don’t go there, Zach,” Connor hissed. “Wayne’s with me. I trust him, so you trust him. Got it?”

That was how things would normally go with their friendship. In an instant, Zach

realized things had changed. Yes, he trusted Connor, but he wouldn't be willing to blindly trust his best friend's new lover simply because Connor had found himself smitten. No, he couldn't be that naïve or stupid, not with Noah's safety involved. He shrugged at Connor, not really committing to anything but not arguing either.

Connor raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. "This is perfect. We're already fighting with each other...not trusting each other. When have you ever questioned my opinion, Zach? Why now?"

"Because Noah's safety is too important, Conn. I'm sorry. You're going to just have to deal with that," Zach snapped.

"Stop it," Noah ordered. "We don't have time for this. Moretti will be coming and he'll be coming quickly. I've received two warnings in one day. I don't think he's messing around." He kissed Zach's lips. "I know you're worried about me. I'm worried about you, Connor, and Wayne. Just let me go with the FBI, Zach. I'll get in touch with you as soon as it's safe."

"It isn't something I'm going to even consider, so don't mention it again. If Connor and his boyfriend don't want to get involved, I understand. You and I will handle this together." Zach pulled Noah into a tight hug, needing to feel the smaller man's heart beating...needing to know he was safe.

"I don't think you realize what you're up against, Zach. Moretti is a killer. He's evil. He has no morals and even less of a heart. I don't want you involved with that kind of shit because of me. This kind of madness should never have touched a life like yours. It isn't fair I've brought this to your doorstep. I'm going into protective custody. I'll find a way to get a message to you once Moretti has been stopped."

"Forget it, kid," Connor interrupted. "I only said those things to Zach because I felt like it was my duty as his friend. I never fucking once thought he would consider

letting you go.” Connor winked in Noah’s direction. “I told you this morning, he’s kinda hot for your body. When he gets like this, there’s no changing his mind.”

Shaking his head, Noah answered, “You guys aren’t making any sense. I can’t keep up.”

“I knew what you were doing, asshole,” Zach grumbled. “You knew there would be no way I’d let Noah out of my sight. So, what’s our plan going to be? Do Noah and I go on the run or stay here and wait for Moretti to make a move?”

“If we go on the run, we’ll always be looking over our shoulders. I think we confront him head on. I have some contacts at the prison where he’s being held. I’ll get in touch with them and see who his visitors have been. He may still be pulling all the strings, but he must be restricted somewhat due to the fact he’s behind bars. I may even be able to talk to the right people and get his visitors restricted. Cut off his lifeline, so to speak. Unfortunately, the FBI could go a long way with getting that done, but I doubt they’ll be willing to help us when Noah refuses their protection.”

“They can’t force him, though, right?” Zach asked again, needing to reassure himself they wouldn’t just come in and take him away.

“I doubt they would push it that hard. He’s already testified for them, so I’m not sure what would motivate them try and force him to do something he’s against.” Turning to Noah, he asked, “You aren’t scheduled to testify any more, are you?”

“No, I gave them all I had during the first trial, and it wasn’t much. I mean, they only got him for money laundering and a few other misdemeanors. It wasn’t like I had any information on the part of his life involving drugs, prostitution, human trafficking, and all the other disgusting business dealings he conducted.”

Zach’s eyes darkened at Noah’s words, but he pushed the thoughts from his mind. He

had to stay focused on protecting Noah, not worrying about how closely his past resembled the life of the man determined to kill his lover. Drugs, prostitution, and human trafficking. Yeah, he'd been hip deep in all that shit with his father. Add selling illegal weapons to street gangs and murdering rival motorcycle gang members and his and Moretti's lives could be mirror images of one another. Fuck it, but Noah was way too good for someone like him.

"Six years, right? He got six years and still has a little over two years left to go in his sentence. Why move now? It doesn't add up? Why would he risk everything to go after Noah now?"

"Because he can," Noah answered. "I was...acquaintances with his son for a while. The man is brutal. Dante was terrified of him. I don't think his actions have to make sense to anybody except him."

Wayne finally moved over to sit next to Connor, placing the notes on the coffee table in front of them. His eyes drifted up to Zach, but then quickly lowered again, no doubt seeing the blatant distrust. "This is the first note. The one Noah found in his locker in the gym." Wayne pointed to one piece of paper. Everyone looked except for Noah.

One. Two. I've decided to come for you.

Zach's heartbeat stumbled out of rhythm when he read the words. He could only imagine the fear that had clutched at Noah when he'd opened his locker to find that waiting on him inside. Hate for Moretti coursed through his veins, but so did pride for his lover. Noah had to have been terrified, but he'd still managed to make it back to his apartment. Zach squeezed him even tighter, only loosening his grip when he heard Noah squeak.

"This was in your locker?" he asked Noah.

“Yeah, hanging on the back wall. There wasn’t anybody in the locker room when I was in there, so it had to have been placed earlier. I was down there for almost four hours, so whoever did it had plenty of time to get in there, hang the note, and get back out. Did I recognize anybody? No, absolutely not. I did talk to that colorful guy from the seventh floor, Levi, while in the steam room. He was very friendly, asked about you, Zach. He said we should hang out sometime, get to be friends.” Noah hung his head. “I was really excited about the possibility of having a friend. Do you think he could be involved? He didn’t send out any icky vibes or anything.”

“I’ll call my contact from security to get Levi’s full name and then I’ll uncover every damned secret he’s got hidden in his life. If he’s involved, we’ll know about it within the next two days,” Connor vowed. “What else? Anything else happen that seemed different? Did you notice anybody new working out or just hanging out?” He paused and then added, “Any chance Cameron was around this morning, before or while you were working out?”

Noah shook his head. “Not that I saw, and I think I would have noticed. I...I don’t keep my head down as much as I used to. If Cameron had been anywhere near me, I would have seen him.” He frowned as he struggled to remember every detail from his gym visit. “I don’t remember anybody standing out. They were all the usual regulars. I didn’t feel threatened or like I was being watched. Nothing.”

“It’s okay, babe. We’ll figure this out,” Zach assured him. “The thing is, you need to be prepared to not be left alone until Moretti is taken care of. You need to promise me you’ll stay with either me or Connor. Always. No exceptions.”

Noah rolled his eyes and smiled. “You make that sound like a hardship, Zach. I love spending time with you guys...especially Connor,” he teased.

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Zach beamed. “Look at you making jokes during our four-alarm fire. That’s my strong man,” Zach praised. “I’m so fucking proud of you, babe. You were absolutely giving Cameron hell when I walked in. You have no idea how much I enjoyed that bit of entertainment.”

“You have no idea how much I enjoyed entertaining you. I think I’ve had that shit built up inside me for a long time. He’s always been such an ass, and when I started screaming at him, I couldn’t stop. Didn’t want to stop.” Noah’s grin stretched across his face. “On top of that, I didn’t have a panic attack. Yes, I passed out cold and hit my panic button before falling, but it wasn’t a panic attack. Some people might argue with me, but I call that an improvement. Passing out is so much easier than enduring a panic attack,” he declared playfully.

“Okay, you two buttercups,” Connor interrupted. “If you can quit flirting with each other long enough, let’s turn our focus back to Moretti and his threats.” After winking at Noah, he added, “And just for the record, I call it a victory, too. I’m amazed and impressed at how calm you are right now, Noah. You’re a total badass in my book.”

“Mine too,” both Wayne and Zach chirped in. Zach frowned in Wayne’s direction but didn’t say anything.

“So, after you found the note in your locker, what happened next? Did you talk to anybody? Anybody try talking to you?”

“No, I started panicking, but mostly because I was unsure of how I needed to handle the situation. At first I wanted to call Zach, but then I was afraid I might be luring him into something dangerous. Then I thought about calling Cameron, but decided

against that because he would report it to the FBI and I didn't like what that would lead to. I was busy trying to come up with a solution, so I didn't pay a lot of attention to what was going on around me as I made my way back to my apartment." He frowned. "Actually, I was starting to fall back to my old fears and how I dealt with them. I counted my steps and hugged the wall." He looked at Zach and said, "Maybe not a badass after all."

"Nuh-uh, babe. You're a total badass. Trust me on this."

"On the elevator, I felt somebody watching me. Like creepy watching. I guess that's because of all the security cameras though, right? They are everywhere."

When Zach started to say something, Connor shook his head and said, "Don't worry. It's my next stop. There should be footage for me to review, although I doubt there would be anything available for the locker room since you guys get naked in there. Whoever came into Noah's apartment should be on tape, though."

"Unless there's another glitch," Zach snarled.

"Yeah, I have a bad feeling about that. It wouldn't surprise me at all if Moretti didn't have somebody in place on the security staff. That's the way he works," Connor said with disgust.

"Do you trust the man you've been working with in the security department?" Wayne asked.

"He wouldn't be my man if I didn't trust him. Yeah, I feel good, but that doesn't mean I don't double-check and verify." Connor's eyes bore into Wayne's until the other man blushed and nodded.

"Hey, when I stepped off the elevator, Denala was going crazy. She was on the other

side of the door, barking and snarling something fierce. She knew somebody had been out there...somebody who didn't belong."

"Hmmm, that rules Cameron out. She knows him and hasn't ever acted aggressive when he's come to your apartment before," Connor said.

"It doesn't make him innocent, though," Zach hissed. "That bastard is involved somehow. Nobody can be that lazy. Not only did he not offer you any true support, he assisted in over-medicating you." He shook his head in disgust and then added, "I think I'm going to get Denala and the puppies. If she recognized stranger danger earlier, I want her with you all the fucking time. She might not be the best police dog out there, but she damned well knew something was wrong today."

Before Zach could make any attempts to stand, Connor said, "Wayne and I will get the dogs. You stay with Noah. We'll be back in a few. Keep brainstorming. Noah, try to remember everything, whether you think it's important or not."

Zach nodded his gratitude that Connor stepped up so he wouldn't have to leave Noah's side, not even for a few minutes. He was sick. Terrified. Furious. Losing control was his biggest fear. After his father's arrest, he swore he would never allow himself to be in a situation where he wasn't in complete control. All of a sudden, he felt like he had absolutely no control over the most important thing in his life.

"Why the frown?" Noah asked softly. "Are you afraid?"

Zach squinted and frowned. "I'm afraid for you, Noah. That's all. Moretti doesn't scare me. He isn't the first bad person in my life and I doubt he'll be the last. I'm just so fucking pissed off he's managed to find you...to get close to you." He grabbed Noah by the back of the neck and held him possessively. "I won't let him take you from me. You're mine." That was the closest Zach could ever get to telling Noah how he felt about him. The baggage from his past weighed him down like the heaviest of

anchors.

“I’m afraid for you, Zach. I’m afraid Moretti will hurt you to punish me. Do you have any idea how much I wish I’d never laid eyes on that man or any member of his family? I felt sorry for Dante, thought he was such a soft soul to have such an evil father, but you know what? I don’t even give a fuck about Dante. He used me. He wanted his father in jail and he used me to get him there. Over the years, I’ve tried to feel sorry for him, to tell myself I did the right thing by testifying, but in the end, I’m tired of trying to defend him. In my opinion, Dante belongs in the same shit category where his father lives. If...if they hurt you...”

“They aren’t going to hurt me. I need you to stop worrying about that. It isn’t going to happen. If Moretti realizes he can use your...your feelings for me to get to you, he won’t hesitate to do it. Always remember, Noah, he can’t hurt me. I can take care of myself.”

Noah snorted. “Right. You’re a doctor, Zach. You aren’t a criminal like Moretti.” He swore and shook his head in disgust. “I need to let the FBI hide me away. I’m so scared you or Connor will be hurt.”

“Connor is a police detective and has been trained to take care of himself.” Zach hesitated for a second and then continued, “And I know how to take care of myself as well. I’ve been on the receiving end of training. Don’t worry. When this is over, Moretti is going to wish he’d never tangled with Noah St. Claire. We are going to fuck him up for trying to intimidate you.”

“I know you don’t want to hear this, Zach, but I’m so in love with you. I wanted you from the first moment my eyes saw you. When you were an arrogant ass and treated me like shit, I still wanted you. Now that I’ve learned more about you, I’m totally in love. I know you aren’t looking for a commitment...might never be looking for a commitment, but you’re it for me. It’s fairytale bullshit, but I’ve been in love with

you from the get-go.”

Zach felt entirely too uncomfortable with Noah’s words...with the look in Noah’s beautiful eyes. He needed a quick diversion, anything to pull the conversation away from love. Noah was still an innocent child. He didn’t understand love was nothing more than make-believe. As he struggled to come up with the perfect diversion, Noah’s cell chirped. He snatched it up before Noah could reach it. If there was something bad there, he didn’t want Noah to see it.

He frowned as he read Cameron’s text message. Surely he was misreading? He quickly sent a text to Connor, letting him know what Cameron said. He had a feeling Connor would have the same worries he did.

“What does it say? Is it another message from Moretti? Don’t try protecting me, Zach. I’ve got to know everything.”

Shaking his head, Zach answered, “Cameron says that the FBI has determined to not do anything at this time. To wait and see what Moretti’s next move is going to be.”

“That’s good, right? I’ve still got their protection, but they aren’t going to try and take me away?”

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Noah looked so hopeful Zach hated to sprinkle his doubt and distrust into the mix. He hated it, but he wasn't going to lie or keep anything from his lover. No, Noah needed to understand how dangerous this situation was. "Well, it's good you will still have their umbrella of protection, I suppose." He took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "It doesn't make any sense though, Noah. Why would they wait? If they truly believe Moretti to be a danger, then what the fuck are they waiting for? Your location has been compromised. I don't know much about the FBI and how they operate, but I'm sure it's not in their manual to just allow you to remain in a dangerous situation. Oh, and I wouldn't think they would send a text to say that to you," he finished with a growl of frustration.

Noah pondered his words for a few seconds and then said, "Yeah, I guess you're right. It doesn't make sense." His blue eyes lifted to look at Zach. "So, we're saying Cameron is definitely involved on some level, aren't we? Do you think the FBI even knows Moretti has made contact?"

"To be honest, I doubt it, Noah. I doubt Cameron told them anything. Do you have another contact at the FBI? Is it just Cameron?"

"Fuck," Noah said as he nibbled at his bottom lip. "There used to be another guy, but then eventually everything fell to Cameron. I'm sure I have his information somewhere." His eyes drifted to his computer. "Let me grab my computer and see if I can find any notes with his contact information on it."

When he started to stand, Zach tightened his grip. "We'll do that in a few minutes. Just let me hold you right now. We'll dig for information when the detective and his not-so-trusty-sidekick get back. Right now, I want to focus on how good you feel in

my arms. I was so afraid something had happened to you, Noah. When Cameron called me, I nearly lost it.”

Nuzzling Zach’s neck, Noah said, “Sorry I made you scared. I was so pissed at Cameron, so afraid he was going to take me away before I got to see you again.” He chuckled softly. “I might have been mean to Cameron...really mean.”

“Good,” Zach answered. “I have a feeling before all this is over, I’m going to be really mean to Cameron, too.”

“Why are you being so hard on Wayne? I thought you liked him okay. I remember him being at the hospital when they brought me in after the panic attack. He seemed nice enough.”

Zach grinned down at Noah. “Are you politely telling me I’m acting like an asshole?”

“Zach, you are acting like a fucking asshole,” Noah answered with his own grin. “It isn’t hard to see how much Connor likes him. You like Connor. It kinda seems like a no-brainer to me. You need to be nicer to Wayne.”

“If it were only me involved, I’d be okay. I’m not going to risk your safety. I’ll trust Wayne when he earns my trust, not a moment before. Connor will get over it.”

“Are you sure about that? I think Connor really, really likes him.”

“I’m sure. It’s in the best friend code. I can act like an asshole, and he is contractually obligated to forgive me. He doesn’t have a choice.”

“You’re an idiot,” Noah said with a laugh. “I know you don’t want to hear this right now...or maybe ever, but I just wanted to remind you I’m falling in love with you. I don’t think you heard me a few minutes ago,” he teased, knowing good and well

Zach had heard him but chose to ignore his words. “Is there a contract for that? Do I have to forgive you for all ass-hole-ish-ness you partake in?”

Zach’s stomach tumbled and his heart stumbled when Noah said the L word again. He fucking loved hearing him say it, but it terrified him at the same time. He couldn’t say it back, would probably never be capable of saying it back. Noah deserved better. He opened his mouth and tried to think of something clever to say, something to cover the fact he was incapable of love and all things involved in relationships. Nothing came out.

Nothing.

“I know you hate talk like that. I shouldn’t have made you uncomfortable,” Noah apologized with a sad smile. “I...I just feel like time may be running out and I need to tell you how I feel.”

“Oh, hell, Noah,” Zach whispered. “Please don’t say things like that. I may not be what you deserve, but I can’t lose you. Not now. Maybe not ever.” That sounded so fucking lame. Zach hated himself.

“Okay, let’s take the heavy out of the air. Maybe you’ll like this statement of fact better than my L words. I knew I had a new neighbor, but I hadn’t caught a glimpse of anything other than your ass for the first few days. Don’t get me wrong. The ass was really nice. It left me wanting to see more, but no matter how quick I tried to move, I couldn’t get to the door before you were already past. So, the first time I actually saw you, all of you, was in the gym. You had on black shorts, and a red muscle shirt hugged all those hot muscles of yours like a second skin. You had these badass tattoos on virtually every inch of visible skin. You were the hottest damned sight I’d seen in my entire life.” He laughed and swiped his tongue against Zach’s earlobe. “It was also the first time my dick had gotten hard all by itself since I’d started taking so much medication. Right fucking there in front of everybody, my

dick decided to wake up and say hello.” His lips pressed against Zach’s warm mouth. “You did that for me and you’ve done it every time since then.”

Normally those would be the words Zach longed to hear, physical attraction and nothing more. Hearing Noah say them was sexier than fuck, but they didn’t have nearly the same impact on his body the L word did.

“You were wearing green shorts and a black tank top. All those lean muscles, your slender build, pouty lips, and sexy eyes had the exact same impact on my body. I remember thinking you were going to be trouble. The kind of trouble I wanted to dive straight into.”

“I thought you hated me,” Noah whispered. “I was used to people thinking I was weird and trying to ignore me and I’d learned to not really give a fuck. When I realized you didn’t like me, it messed me up. I got pissed at myself for caring, lectured myself good for it, but I couldn’t stop how I felt.”

“I’m so fucking thankful you didn’t give up on me, Noah. I treated you like shit, but you kept giving me another chance. Thank you for seeing something in me worth fighting for.” Zach cleared his throat and added, “Don’t give up on me for the other, okay? I’m trying. My past...it’s just...it’s bad.” Zach was so sick of hearing himself make the same excuse over and over again. How could he expect Noah to not give up on him when he’d already given up on himself? He fucking hated the man he’d become.

The sound of Denala barking right outside the door and then the locking mechanism clicking saved Zach from saying something else he would probably eventually hate himself for. He turned to see Wayne enter the apartment, carrying the basket of puppies. Denala burst into the room and made a beeline for Noah. Before Zach could waste his breath and tell his dog not to jump on the sofa, the oversized German shepherd’s body plastered against Noah in her version of a doggie hug. Connor came

in last, carrying some sort of strange-looking plant and looking like something bad had happened. He looked at Zach and said, “You know what Cameron sent you was bullshit, right?”

“Already figured that one out, but don’t know what our countermove should be.” He nodded at what Connor carried. “What’s that and why do you have it?” Zach asked, afraid of the answer. Noah’s body tensed and then his lover let out a frustrated hiss.

“It’s a spider plant.” To Connor, Noah said, “Is there a note?”

“Yeah, there’s a note. I haven’t opened it yet. One of the girls behind the desk just brought it up, said it had been delivered a few moments ago. They asked that she bring it up to Noah.”

Connor slid his hand into his latex glove again, pulled the card out and held it up to Noah. “Do you want me to open it?”

Noah shrugged. He looked defeated. “Sure. I think we both know what it’s going to say...or at least what it’s going to imply. Open it up. Let’s see what he’s got to say.”

“Five. Six. You committed a sin you can’t fix.”

Zach listened to Connor read the latest threat Moretti had sent Noah. He’d sworn he would never turn out to be like his father, but if Donovan Moretti were in front of him right now, he’d kill him without the slightest hesitation. The bastard was toying with Noah, trying to scare him, like a cat playing with a helpless mouse.

“The threats are coming fast,” Connor said. “I think this is good, at least to a point. We are getting an idea of his timeframe. For some reason, he’s rushed. For a man who’s supposed to be a brilliant crime boss, he’s not being very smart.” Connor shook his head. “I need to call my friend at the prison. See what’s happening there.”

Without another word, he walked down the hall, leaving Zach and Noah to stare at the plant. Wayne followed on his heels.

“What’s the significance of the spider plant? Or is there a significance?”

“I’m afraid of spiders,” Noah answered in a dull voice. “Terrified of them, actually. I told Dante once. I guess he must have passed it on to his father or one of Donovan’s thugs overheard me telling Dante. Who knows? Who cares? The plant is a threat and the note is a threat.” He frowned. “Connor’s right, though. This seems sloppy and rushed for Moretti.”

“Yeah, well, his fucking death is going to be sloppy and rushed, too. I’m going to kill him for doing this to you, making you worry like this. Hell, I’m going to kill him for my own entertainment. Bottom line is the fucker is going to die.”

Chapter 14

Noah lay on his side on the bed, staring at Zach as he slept. His lover had been awake most of the night, tossing and turning and then holding Noah in such tight hugs he'd feared the larger man might accidentally snap him in two. Their sex life had been wild and lusty from the beginning, and Noah had enjoyed every second of it. Last night, however, Zach had made love to him, slow and seductive, worshipping him with each touch and softly spoken word. The small amount of his heart Zach hadn't already taken possession of finally surrendered. He loved Zachary Meadows with every fiber of his being. He loved how he looked, how he talked, how generous he was, how kind he was, how he made Noah feel so...cherished. Hell, he simply loved.

So, this morning, while Zach slept peacefully, Noah watched him. He memorized every beautiful detail of his handsome face. Something told him he needed to catalog every feature and tuck it safely into his memory. When his time came, and it was coming, he wanted Zach's smile to be what he saw as he left this world. In his heart, he knew this was what Donovan had been waiting for. There were no doubts left in his mind about whether Moretti had always known where he was. He'd just been waiting for Noah to finally find happiness because taking it away from him would be the ultimate revenge.

Zach looked boyishly vulnerable in his sleep. His eyelashes were incredibly long as they fanned out against his cheeks, the inky blackness standing out against bronzed skin. His lips were plump and still a sexy pink color from the kisses they'd shared throughout the night. His dark stubble gave him a rakish appearance that only added to his sexiness.

Zach was sheer perfection, and Noah was happy he'd had him in his life, in his arms, for the short period of time they'd shared. Lying there, next to Zach, Noah was sure of two things: firstly, he was madly in love with Zachary Meadows; secondly, there was no way he was going to do anything that put Zach's life in jeopardy. Zach and Connor naively thought they could protect him from Moretti, but if they tried, they would only end up getting hurt, maybe killed, in the process. He wouldn't allow it. No, he would find a way to go to Moretti. He hadn't had the courage or fortitude to leave the apartment building in almost three years, but he would find a way to leave now. He had to in order to protect the man he loved.

His cell had beeped nearly thirty minutes ago, notifying him of a message. Noah knew, without a doubt, the message was from Moretti. He also knew he wasn't going to tell Zach or Connor about it. They needed to remain under the misconception there would be two more messages from Moretti before he attacked. If either of them thought it was time, they would never let him out of their sight. This was going to be yet another one of the times he was forced to bear his cross alone, but he would do it in order to keep them safe.

Quietly, he reached over for his cell and pulled up the message. He hadn't been mistaken. Moretti had reached out again, proving he could touch every aspect of his life: the gym, his apartment, his cell....

Seven. Eight. I've set the date.

He deleted the message and set the phone aside. So, the date had been set. His time left on earth had been given an official number. Noah frowned. It wasn't as if he was going to go down without a fight. No, he would fight Donovan Moretti with his last fucking breath. He would fight to be able to come back to Zach.

He would fight.

He would lose.

Pushing those morbid thoughts aside, he turned back to Zach and continued memorizing the beauty that was Zachary Meadows. Knowing it was time for Zach to get up and start getting ready for work, Noah focused his attention away from all things Moretti and toward all things Meadows. He inched his body closer and wrapped one of his legs around Zach. When he'd finished his maneuvering, they were chest to chest, and their cocks, his more awake than Zach's, were nestled together. Being in that position, his smaller body tucked so close to Zach's larger muscles, felt so fucking perfect, almost like nobody had the power to come between them.

Almost.

With the tip of his finger, he traced the outline of Zach's lips, enjoying their plumpness and marveling at the fact something soft actually existed on Zach's body. The man was all hard muscles and solid planes of definition, but his lips were softer than fucking marshmallows. He was enjoying himself more than he probably should when a hand suddenly reached up and grabbed his wrist.

Zach's gray eyes were watching him with a lazy seduction that made his heart do a cartwheel right there inside his chest. Those beautiful eyes could say so damned much without his mouth ever making a sound. The remainder of his blood raced to his cock.

When Zach started sucking on the fingertip that had just been tracing his lips, Noah heard a needy whimper escape from between his lips. He wasn't at all impressed with the noise, even wished it had come out just a tad more manly, but he didn't have time to worry about that. All his attention needed to be focused solely on the pleasure barreling in his direction.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” he lied as he watched Zach’s lips wrap around and suck on his finger.

“I’m not.”

Grinning, he answered, “It’s almost time for you to start getting ready for work, and I thought a quickie might be on the agenda for the day.” His hand wandered down between them, and he fisted Zach’s cock, loving the silky heat coating the steel shaft. He stroked it up and down, twisting over the crown at the top. “What do you think? A quickie or do you want to roll in a few minutes late and fuck me really good?”

Zach rolled them over to where his body completely covered Noah. With one skilled move, he had spread Noah’s legs and settled his hips right between them...like he owned the spot. Well, Noah supposed he did.

“Hmmm, babe,” Zach whispered as he nibbled on Noah’s lips while his hips rocked in a seductive motion. “I can fuck you all day long if you take a notion to put yourself in a position where you won’t be able to sit down for a full week. I’m not going to work today.” A bite on Noah’s earlobe. “Or tomorrow.” Another bite, this one on the sensitive skin above his collarbone. “Or the next day.” His mouth returned to Noah’s lips. “Wrap those long legs around my waist, babe, and let’s get this party started.”

Noah felt like a bucket of water had just been tossed on him. He shoved at Zach, trying to push him away but quickly found he would have better luck trying to lift an automobile. Zach’s muscles weren’t budging. “You have to go to work, Zach,” he argued. “What are you planning? Just sit around the apartment complex with me for the rest of our lives? No, Zach. That won’t work. I’m not going to let you lose your job so you can babysit me.” He gave another push against Zach’s hulk-like shoulders, but his lover retaliated by lifting his ass off the mattress and sliding his engorged dick straight into his hole with one solid thrust. They’d stopped using condoms a couple of weeks ago, and since Zach had fucked him several times last night, there was only the

slightest bit of discomfort. The invasion and fullness felt so delicious Noah almost allowed Zach's attempt at distracting him to succeed.

"Fuck, Zach," he grunted when huge balls slapped against his ass. "Ever heard of stretching a lover's ass before bottoming out?" Stay focused, Noah. You're mad at Zach. He can't stay home and stand guard all day.

Zach withdrew and then pushed back in again. "I'm confident I did enough stretching of this perfect hole last night. I've got it just the way I like it right now: ready to take my cock and still sloppy wet from my cum." Zach sat back on his heels, tugging Noah's body right along with him, keeping his cock buried as deep as possible. With a wicked grin, Zach reached down to grab Noah's ankles and spread his legs wide and held them there. "Here's the deal, Noah St. Claire," he said in the huskiest voice Noah had ever heard in his life. "I may not be able to give you the sweet words and forever commitment you deserve. That's on me, my bullshit past I can't seem to overcome." He pulled out, tilted his hips, and plunged back into Noah's heat. "Here's what I can do, though. Your body...it's mine. It's mine to hold, to cuddle, to fuck, to play with, to spank, and most importantly, to protect." He pulled out and pushed in again. Harder. Deeper. "You may not like the fact I've added protection to the list of ownership perks, but it is what it is. Mine." The thrust following "mine" was forceful enough to cause Noah to cry out in the sweetest agony.

His hands fisted the sheets every damned time Zach thrust inside him. He bit his bottom lip until he feared he would be tasting blood. Zach's body claiming his in such an animalistic way, along with the naughty words equivalent to his own L word was almost too much for him to handle. He needed to stay focused on ensuring Zach didn't spend the day, or days, watching over him...but all he could think about was how fucking good Zach's cock felt inside his ass.

He opened his mouth to argue, to convince Zach to go to work, but the only word that came out was "Yours." He'd have to worry about convincing Zach to go to work

later. For all he knew, this could be the last time he'd feel the magic of Zach's body, and he'd be damned if he allowed Moretti into the bed with them.

"What's he mad about?" Connor asked Zach in an exaggerated whisper clearly meant for Noah to overhear. "Weren't you able to perform your duties last night?"

They'd joined Connor in the kitchen for breakfast, and Noah was back to figuring out how to convince Zach to go to work. Contrary to what his lover thought, he couldn't spend the rest of his life protecting Noah from all harm. The passion he currently felt would surely die a fast death if Zach were trapped in this apartment with him day after day.

Zach snorted as he slid a bagel into the toaster. "No, it's definitely not that. I performed my duties three times last night and once this morning." He pulled the low-fat cream cheese out of the refrigerator and slapped Noah on the ass as he walked by. "Didn't I, babe?"

Noah gritted his teeth and tried not to smile. Playful Zach was cute and endearing. Too bad, because playful Zach needed to get his playful ass to work. "You did okay," Noah answered dryly as he pulled the box of Count Chocula cereal from the cabinet where he'd hidden it. He topped it off with some milk and a diet Coke. Yeah, he was picking a fight with Zach.

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:47 am

Connor, in response to Noah's "you did okay" comment, spewed his orange juice across the table, sprinkling Zach's bare chest with bits of orange pulp. "Ha! Good one, little man. Keep him on his toes."

Zach frowned and grabbed a handful of paper towels. "How about you keep it in your mouth, Conn? That was disgusting," he said as he wiped off his chest. After clean-up detail, he turned to Noah and asked, "Where did you get that sugary cereal? You know you aren't supposed to eat things coated with sugar and caffeine." He stood and backed Noah against the countertop. "And what the fuckity fuck did you mean by 'okay'? I was there, babe. Your moans and screams indicated better than okay. What's up?"

Noah's face heated with a blush that turned blazing hot when his eyes landed on Connor's smirk. Blast it to hell, but the man has a point about my moaning and screaming.

"You know what's up, Zach. Stop playing dumb. I'm pissed and you know why I'm pissed." He tried to edge away, but Zach placed his hands on the counter on either side of Noah, successfully trapping him between his body and the granite countertop. When he realized he couldn't escape, he rolled his eyes and huffed. "Move."

"Not moving," Zach answered.

"Listen, I know I'm just the bestie and I shouldn't involve myself in your childish squabbles, but shouldn't you be getting ready for work, Zach?" Connor glanced down at his watch and added, "You're already thirty minutes late and you smell like sex...a shower is required."

Noah looked smug. “Yes, he should be getting ready for work. Would you please tell him I don’t need a babysitter?”

“Is that what all this posturing and slamming of dishes is about?” Connor asked in amazement. “That’s ridiculous guys.” Looking at Zach, he said, “You need to get your ass to work. Noah doesn’t need you babysitting him.”

“Thank you,” Noah chimed in with a smirk. “See?”

“I wasn’t finished. Noah doesn’t need you babysitting him today, because I’m protecting him this week. I’ve already gotten the time off approved by my commander this morning. Zach, you finish up this week and see about getting some time off. We’ll take turns until we can eliminate the threat. Easy peasy.”

Noah suspected there was a huge possibility the top of his head blew straight off. Easy-fucking-peasy? Were they kidding right now? He wasn’t sure who to be maddest at—Connor or Zach. Either way, he was pissed.

“You’ve already called in?” Zach asked. “Why didn’t you tell me? We’re going to have to communicate better than this if we plan to make this work.” He shook his head and reached around Noah to pull a bagel from the toaster where it’d sat long enough to be cold. “Grab a seat, babe. Let’s eat breakfast together, let Connor update us on what he found out last night, and then I’ve got to get to work. I can’t believe you made me late.”

He moved to sit down at the small breakfast table and started smearing cream cheese on the bagel like it was nobody’s business. Noah stood there, trying to determine if he should slug Zach in the gut or be thankful it was Connor watching him. He would have a better chance ditching Connor than he would Zach...if Moretti was ready for him. After several seconds, he decided to pick his battles and plopped down in the chair between Connor and Zach.

“I still don’t understand why you are eating that, babe. It isn’t good for you. It can cause a negative reaction between the caffeine and your meds.”

Noah shoveled an oversized spoonful of the delicious cereal into his mouth and answered, “I’m good. Thanks for the info, though.” Some milk dribbled down his chin and he started to wipe it off, but Zach leaned over and licked it off for him.

“Hmmm, that is yummy.”

All of Noah’s anger dissolved in an instant. He was so fucking easy.

Zach winked at him playfully, but his gray eyes begged Noah for forgiveness. Noah knew Zach was only doing what he thought was best for him...just like Noah was only doing what he thought was best for Zach.

“Forgiven,” he said with a smile.

“Thank you,” Zach answered.

“You all are disgusting,” Connor said with a shake of his head. “Okay, so I talked to my friend at the prison last night. There’s been a flurry of visitors in to see Moretti, some of his regulars and some new unknowns. Caleb’s going to try to get me a list of every visitor he’s had over the past three months, but it will probably take him a couple of days to pull something like that together. On top of that, his lawyer is working on an appeal that seems to be getting some legs beneath it. My guess is he thinks there’s a damned good chance he’s either going to get the conviction tossed out, or he will, at the least, get a new trial.” Connor’s eyes locked with Noah. “A new trial is bad, Noah. That may be why he’s coming for you all of a sudden.”

“Stop trying to scare him,” Zach warned. “We don’t know what’s going on in that sick fucker’s head, but we know we’re going to fuck him up if he tries to come for

Noah.”

“He isn’t trying to scare me, Zach. He’s treating me like an adult. I know you’re worried, but you’ve got to quit trying to protect me by keeping me in the dark. The more I know, the better prepared I’ll be.” That was bullshit, but Noah thought it sounded brave, like he planned on fighting Moretti’s attack.

“Once we get the visitor list, we can start trying to narrow down the names to determine who Moretti might trust enough to pull a job as important as this.” Connor frowned and asked Noah, “Did you know his son, Dante, has been running the family business while his father’s been in prison?”

Noah frowned. That sure didn’t sound right. “I haven’t followed the Moretti family in the news at all. I didn’t have any idea Dante was in charge. It’s weird, actually. Dante hated the business almost as much as he hated his father.” In fact, the whole reason Dante dragged Noah into his shit show was to be free of the business. Why would he have stuck around if his father wasn’t there to force him? Had his plans backfired? Noah couldn’t help but find some solace in the fact Dante might have been trapped in his own personal hell for the past four years. He’d been more than willing and plenty eager to throw Noah under the bus, so if he’d been suffering, Noah wouldn’t spend a second of pity on him. He might even go as far as to say the fucker deserved it.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought you’d said.” Connor rubbed the stubble on his chin as he pondered what the latest revelation might mean. “From everything I’ve read and from what you’ve told me, Dante seemed too soft to run a criminal empire. Maybe he’s just a figurehead and somebody else is behind the scenes, pulling the strings for Donovan. Who knows.”

“So, what’s our brilliant plan? You guys can’t spend the rest of your lives taking turns sitting home with me. Are we going to go on the offensive?” Hell to the no they weren’t going on the offensive. Noah wouldn’t allow it but didn’t see any reason to

let Zach or Connor know how he really felt about their odds against the Moretti clan.

“We’re definitely going on the offensive,” Connor and Zach both answered quickly. Then Zach added, “Just as soon as we can get an idea of who we need to attack, we’re attacking. Nobody messes with what’s mine.”

Noah liked belonging to Zach...if only for a short period of time.

“Hey, Noah,” Connor said. “Can you check your cell and computer to see if you’ve gotten any more messages? I’m interested in seeing if Cameron has reached out any more, and I definitely need to know if Moretti has thrown out another threat.”

Source Creation Date: July 1, 2025, 9:47 am

Noah felt like Zach or Connor should be able to see the guilt written all over his face the very second they mentioned his cell. Quickly, before either of them could see what a liar he was, he jumped up and went after his phone and computer. After only a few minutes, he'd successfully lied to the man he loved and a man he loved like a friend. He felt like a pathetic piece of shit but was determined to direct all of Moretti's attention away from anyone except him.

Two hours later, Zach finally left for work. Connor was settled in front of the television with his phone in one hand and working on his laptop with his other hand while Noah hid in his bedroom, trying to gather the courage to be a man. He had to face Moretti on his own. Something told him if he could just be brave enough to step outside his safety zone, Moretti would have somebody there to swoop in and whisk him away. When that happened, Zach and Connor would be safe from the bastard who ruined his life.

The problem was, and always had been, Noah couldn't find the courage. Every time he thought about sneaking out of the apartment, a panic attack threatened. What was wrong with him? How had he let himself get in this shape...too cowardly to leave his fucking apartment building?

Of course, he could always take some of his old medications. He still had leftovers in the bathroom cabinet. Maybe a handful of anxiety pills would give him the strength to do what had to be done?

He was about to walk in that direction when he heard Connor start yelling his name, screaming for him to get into the living room. What the fuck?

Fear for Zach's safety suddenly clutched at his heart, and he took off running down the hall. What if Moretti had gotten to Zach?

"What? What's happened?" he yelled as soon as he rounded the corner. Connor still sat on the couch, but this time, his eyes were glued to the television screen. Noah followed Connor's gaze until he stared at the face of the man who'd haunted him for years. Bigger than life, right there in his living room, smack ass in the middle of his safe zone, was Donovan Moretti's arrogant face...smirking at him from the other side of the television screen. Behind the smirk was a picture of the prison where they housed Moretti. "Did he get released? Escape? Is he out of prison?" Noah demanded. If Moretti was out, Zach definitely wasn't safe.

"Oh, he's out all right," Connor answered smugly. "The coroner's van picked up his body a few minutes ago." He turned to look at Noah, a huge smile on his face. "Donovan Moretti's dead. As of now, the news media isn't sure if it's a suicide or murder...but nobody actually gives a fuck. He's dead."

Noah couldn't believe what he heard. "Dead?"

"Fucking dead," Connor answered. "The guards found him this morning during their first security check. He was hanging and dangling. Fucking dead, Noah. The bastard is a goner."

Noah wouldn't let himself get excited. There had to be a catch somewhere. Was this a joke? Had he somehow faked his death and was right then overpowering whomever was in that coroner's van? There was absolutely no way he was lucky enough for Moretti to be dead. That kind of luck just didn't come his way.

"Call your friend, Connor. Make sure he's dead," Noah pleaded.

"Way ahead of you, little man," Connor answered. "I've already texted Caleb, and we

should have confirmation in minutes.” He grinned and added, “Not that we need it, though. It’s all over the news, Noah. He’s dead. They don’t make mistakes like that. We’ve got to call Zach. He’s going to be over the moon. I’m not lying to you. That man was ready to kill Moretti for you.” Connor reached for his cell and fiddled with the screen as he talked. “Call me, Zachary,” Connor said into the phone. “We’ve got some news. Call as soon as you get this.”

Noah plopped down on the couch and watched the news play out in front of him. Donovan Moretti really was dead. As he soaked it all up, he wondered if his parents knew, if they were happy they would all finally be safe. Would they want to see him again?

He doubted it. He also didn’t give a fuck.

He stood on the threshold of having a future with Zach, and for the first time in several years, hope took hold of his heart and gripped it so tightly he struggled to breathe. Hope...such a vindictive bitch.

Chapter 15

“Hello.” He answered his cell on the first ring even though he didn’t recognize the number. It had to be Zach calling from one of the phones at the hospital. “Did you see the news? Moretti killed himself. It’s over.” He gushed. He and Connor spent the last two hours watching every detail the news had to offer and then confirming each of those facts with Caleb, Connor’s contact at the prison.

“If you ever want to see your boyfriend alive again, you’ll do everything in your power to make sure Detective Connor Vanderwall believes you are on the phone with Dr. Meadows right now,” a voice warned. “You’ve been a disappointment your entire life, John. Don’t let one of your many shortcomings lead to the murder of your lover and his best friend. If you play this smart, you’ll be the only one hurt. If you play it dumb, you, Zachary, and Connor will all die. Which is it going to be, Noah? Are you going to be a good boy or a scaredy-cat? Smart or dumb?”

Noah’s gaze shot straight to Connor. He sat on the couch, his eyes still glued to the television as he watched the news unfold about Moretti’s suicide/murder. As if he sensed something wrong, his brown eyes lifted to find Noah watching him. He arched a brow and nodded to the phone in Noah’s hand.

It was only an instant in time, but Noah saw the train wreck of his life flash before his eyes. He saw Donovan Moretti threaten him as they led him away after the guilty verdict. He saw the look on his parents’ faces when they told the FBI they wanted to enter a separate witness protection program than that of their only son. He saw the four disastrous years that followed and how it led to him being locked in a prison created by his own mind. He knew what Moretti was capable of. It was time for him

to finally pay the price for his sin against the crime family. He smiled calmly and said to Connor, “It’s Zach. I’m going to go to the bedroom to chat. You keep watching the news.”

He walked down the hall as the man on the other end of the phone laughed. Chills washed over him. How could he have not known? Once inside his bedroom, he closed the door and leaned against it. Tears trailed down his cheeks. “What do you want?”

“I’m going to tell you exactly what to do, Noah,” the voice answered with a laugh. “I need you to follow my instructions to perfection. If you do, Zachary and Connor won’t be harmed. If you don’t...well, you know what will happen. You’ve seen my work in the past, haven’t you?”

“Just tell me what you want,” Noah hissed. He listened for a few minutes and then broke in and argued, “If you’ve been watching me like I know you have, then you know I can’t leave this building without making a fucking scene. You can’t expect me to do what you’re suggesting.” The room started spinning wildly. He couldn’t do this...couldn’t do what he was asking of him. Could he go to Connor? Beg for help? Could Connor even get to Zach before it was too late? No, he’d known this would happen, planned for it. Why balk now? He had to find the courage to save the man he loved. He’d known it would all come down to this moment.

“Be a fucking man, Noah! For once in your miserable life, be a fucking man.” The man hissed into the phone, his frustration mounting. “I thought you loved Zach? That’s what you’ve whispered into his ear...I’ve heard you,” the voice said. “I’ve heard you moaning and whimpering like a bitch in heat when he’s been fucking you. Was that all an act, Noah? Were you tricking him or do you really care about the good doctor?”

“How did you...”

“I have listening devices all over your apartment, Noah,” the man answered with another laugh. “I’ve enjoyed listening to you beg him to fuck you almost as much as I enjoyed listening to you cry and start to come undone during those first months. I would have given anything to see your pretty face early on as the terror became wilder and wilder in your eyes. I could hear you begging for strength to keep going. It never came, though, did it, Noah? Strength has eluded you your entire life, so don’t expect to grow a pair of balls now. It wouldn’t be in Zach’s or Connor’s best interest.”

Listening devices meant he would hear Noah if he told Connor the truth.

“Why are you doing this to me?” he asked. “Why can’t you just let it go? I’m no danger to you now.”

“I’m doing it because I enjoy it, Noah. Now, do as you’re told, and remember, I’m listening to your every move and word. Fuck up, and Zach will be dead before Connor can make it to the elevator.”

“Fuck you,” Noah mumbled weakly. He didn’t have any other choices in front of him. Risking Zach’s and Connor’s lives was something he wouldn’t even consider. With robotic movements, he turned the doorknob and stepped out into the hallway. He knew what had to happen next. When he stepped into the living area, he quietly reached for Connor’s gun, lying innocently on a table in the hallway, and unlatched it from the holster. Connor’s back was to him and his eyes were still glued to the television on the wall. News footage of Donovan Moretti’s death still ran. Tears swam in Noah’s eyes.

“Oh...and Noah? Nine. Ten. No one will ever see you again.” With a laugh, the man disconnected the phone.

It all came down to this moment. Noah supposed he should have known the Moretti

family would never leave him in peace. If this could have only happened before Zach came into his life, it wouldn't have hurt so badly. He hadn't really had anything to live for. Why now? Why when he was finally getting strong again? When he was finally getting a taste of living and loving again?

Because they know it will hurt more this way.

As a last-ditch effort to somehow let Zach know how he felt about him, Noah hid the gun behind his back and said, "I love you, Zach."

Connor glanced back and saw him still on the phone, snickered, and then turned his attention back to the television.

"I loved you the first time I saw you. I'd convinced myself I wasn't worth loving, but you proved me wrong. You made my heart feel again. Thank you for that," he whispered.

As he said those final words, the sound of a cell phone ringing caused him to cringe. He stood directly behind Connor and saw Zach's handsome face flash across Connor's phone. Connor lifted the phone, saw who it was, and muttered, "What the..."

Noah slammed the gun against the side of Connor's head before the man could finish his question. Connor, now unconscious, fell to the couch. The cell kept ringing—Zach's face right there for Noah to see. Denala barked at him and then whimpered in confusion. She went to Connor and licked his face.

Noah quickly typed a text to Zach and, like the man had ordered, he dropped his cell onto the couch next to Connor.

I love you, Zach.

He kissed Denala's wet nose and then walked out of his apartment. Silently, he touched his door when he stood outside in the hallway, wondering how in the world he was going to survive the last hour of his life without Zach there to be his strength.

Zach stood in front of the television in the waiting room of the hospital, watching the news unfold about Moretti's questionable suicide inside his prison cell. He should be feeling nothing but elation since the death of Moretti would mean Noah wouldn't have to live in fear any longer, but instead, dread hung over him like a thick raincloud. He'd tried calling Connor three times. He'd tried calling Noah six times. He'd gotten an I love you text from Noah, but that had been the end of any communication between him and Noah or Connor. It wasn't like either of them to not answer his calls.

Something was wrong.

Something bad was happening.

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“Hey, Doc,” a voice interrupted him. “What’s up? I think they’re looking for you on the fifth floor.” Wayne looked him up and down and then frowned. “What’s going on, Zach? You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“Something’s wrong,” Zach murmured as he tried to figure out why the feeling of dread clung to him. He hit re-dial and listened to Noah’s cell phone ring. Nothing. “Noah won’t answer his cell.”

Wayne laughed. “Yeah, I hardly think that’s reason to panic, Doc. He’s probably working out at the gym or something. There’s no way Connor has left him unattended. Call Connor.”

“Connor’s not answering either.”

Wayne’s frown deepened. “What do you mean Connor’s not answering? He was watching over Noah today, wasn’t he? That’s what he told me.” Wayne pulled out his cell and dialed Connor’s number. Nothing.

“Hey, Wayne. You need a lift back to the station? I’m ready to hit the clock and go home,” his EMT partner called from across the waiting room. “Let’s go, man.” Wayne looked at his watch. Turning to Zach, he asked, “Do I need a ride to the station or are we going to check on Connor and Noah?”

“I’m sure I’m just overreacting,” Zach said as he dialed Noah’s cell again. With all the shit on the news about Moretti, he’d expected Noah or Connor to be ringing his cell out of his pocket. Instead, it was radio silence. I’m not overreacting.

“Listen, I know Connor and I just started dating, but he doesn’t seem like the type of guy to blow off his best friend, especially when he’s on VIP duty watching over best friend’s boyfriend.” He motioned for his partner to head on out without him. “Since your shift only started a few hours ago, let me run over to your apartment and check on things. I’m sure everything’s fine, but I know you’ll feel better when one of them calls you. I’ll taxi over and make sure everything’s good.”

“No, I’m going with you,” Zach told Wayne as he texted the other doctor on duty to let him know he was leaving. “Something isn’t right. I can feel it.”

Zach’s fear escalated to terror level on the ride over to his apartment. By the time he and Wayne stepped off the elevator onto his and Noah’s floor, his heart felt like it might pound right out of his chest. You’re overreacting. You’re overreacting. He kept chanting the message inside his head...knowing in his heart it wasn’t true.

He punched in the new code they’d set for Noah’s door last night and burst into the quiet apartment. He saw Denala first, pacing wildly and whimpering with each step. Then Connor, on Noah’s couch with blood dripping down the side of his face. His eyes were open, but Zach could tell he wasn’t completely alert. There was no sign of Noah anywhere. For a split second, Zach was frozen in time, the images in front of him engraved upon his heart. His best friend injured and looking at Zach like something horrible had happened. The love of his life nowhere to be seen.

They’d taken him. Moretti had Noah.

No, Moretti was dead.

What was happening? His gaze flickered down the hall. What would he find when he opened his bedroom door?

“Check on Conn,” he ordered Wayne. “Noah,” he screamed as he ran down the hall

toward the bedroom they'd shared for the past month. Please be okay. Please be okay. The room was empty, only Noah's sweet scent remaining. He checked the bathroom, even idiotically checked outside on the balcony. Nothing. Noah was gone.

He tore back down the hall to find Wayne putting pressure on Conn's head wound with a white towel already bathed in crimson, the two of them speaking softly to each other. As soon as Zach saw Connor was all right, fury bubbled up inside him. Yes, he wanted his friend to be all right, but now that he was, he was going to kill him for not protecting Noah.

"Where. Is. Noah?" he roared. "Where is he, Conn? You were supposed to be protecting him. Where in the fuck is he?"

Wayne frowned in Zach's direction. "Tone it down, Doc. Connor's taken a pretty nasty blow to the head." When he turned back to Connor, he whispered, "It's okay, Connor. None of this is your fault."

Connor looked to Zach and said, "I don't know what happened. I don't know...why..."

"You don't know why what, Conn? You don't know why you let somebody into the apartment and now Noah's gone? You don't know if he was alive or injured when they took him? You don't know he'll literally fall apart when they take him out of this building? You don't know how you could've let me down when I asked you to protect the man I love? Which is it, Conn?" Zach wasn't being fair. He just didn't give a fuck—not with Noah missing.

"Hold up, Doc," Wayne warned as he stood and put his body between Connor and Zach. "He's injured. Back your shit down for a minute." One of his hands massaged Connor's shoulder and the other held the white towel in place against Connor's head.

Zach ignored Wayne and yelled, “Where is he? Hell, Connor, Moretti killed himself in prison last night. Who came after Noah? Please tell me you saw something that will help us get him back.” The expression on Connor’s face ripped Zach’s heart out. “Please, Conn. Please!”

“I...I didn’t see anything, Zach,” Connor answered slowly. “I was watching the news, my cell started ringing, and then I got bashed on the side of the head.”

“How did they get in here? What happened? How could they just walk into a locked apartment? We changed the codes. Nobody should have been able to get inside.”

“Nobody came in here, Zach,” Connor whispered. “Noah hit me.”

Zach stood there, his mouth gaping open and his chest seizing up in pain. Noah hit Connor? Why would Noah hit Connor?

“You’re confused, Connor,” he finally said. “Noah wouldn’t hit you.” He looked around the empty apartment. Connor was mistaken. He had to be.

Noah’s gone.

To Connor, he said, “Tell me exactly what happened.” Connor had to tell him something...anything...that would help him get Noah back.

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His head felt funny, like it was crammed inside something way too small. His mouth was dry. The confusion that used to be so familiar but had vanished since Zach came into his life was back, making him wonder what happened. “Zach?” He tried to turn his head, but a wave of nausea made him stop all movement.

He heard himself whimper...and then heard someone laugh. Chills washed over him. Zach never laughed at him. Zach loved him.

Memories assaulted him: a phone call, a threat, bashing Connor on the head, leaving Zach’s apartment, the parking garage...

“Hey, kiddo,” the voice behind the laughter said. “Wakey. Wakey. Come on, Scaredy-Cat. Don’t make me wait forever. I’m a busy man these days. Thanks to you, I’ve got millions to spend and a crime family to run. Come on. Show me those pretty blue eyes of yours. I know you’re awake.”

The voice was just as soft and timid as Noah remembered. A smack across his face caused him to gasp in shock and pain.

“Open your fucking eyes, Noah. I don’t have all day to babysit you. Your stupid helplessness never ceases to amaze me.” The voice muttered in disgust but then quickly switched back over to the timid sweetness. “I mean, when I hand-picked you all those years ago, I had absolutely no idea how much fun you’d be.”

“Fuck off, Dante,” Noah whispered weakly. What had Dante given him? He couldn’t make his mind function properly. His arms wouldn’t move. His legs wouldn’t move. He couldn’t move anything.

“Oooohhh, aren’t you suddenly such a brave little boy? One minute, you can’t leave your apartment building, and the next, you think you’re going to fuck me?” Dante laughed. “I don’t think so, Scaredy-Cat. I don’t think so. I thought you were a pussy the first time I saw you at your daddy’s office, and trust me, doll, you’ve cemented my opinion of you over the past four years.”

Noah finally found the strength to open his eyes, and after a few blinks to orient himself with the lighting, he was finally able to focus on his surroundings. The room was small, not much bigger than how he would have imagined a dorm room. There weren’t any windows. He was lying on a mattress on the floor. Dante sat on a fold-up chair next to him, smiling like he’d won the lottery.

“Why?” he managed to ask. His tongue felt twice its normal size.

Dante leaned back and crossed his ankle over his knee. “Why? Hmm, let me see.” He scratched his chin. “There are so many reasons, Noah. Because you’re pretty and pretty boys always get the girl...or guy, in your case. Because you fluttered through that damned office like you didn’t have a worry in the world.” He shrugged. “I decided to make you worry.” He checked his watch, frowned, and then continued, “I needed someone to help me set up my father, and I wanted to give you something to worry about. Kinda like killing two birds with one stone.”

He reached down and picked up a bottle of water, took a sip, and then leaned over to pour some over Noah’s face. “Open up, love,” he urged. “Trust me, you’re gonna wish you had this water in a little bit.” He poured some more of it over Noah’s face and then set it back down onto the floor. “Let’s see. Where was I? Ah...yes, I remember. I was fucking with your head,” he joked like everything was just a game. “You found the proof I needed to get rid of my father for a while, and I sincerely appreciated that, Noah. The way you were willing to take the fall, piss off the Moretti family like that? It was so noble. Of course, I, being the perfect son, had to step in and take over my father’s business while he languished away in prison.”

Noah lay there, his eyes trained on Dante, and listened to the other man discuss ruining his life like he was telling him the weekly forecast. There wasn't an inkling of remorse, empathy, or sympathy in Dante's eyes. What the bastard obviously didn't know was he was beginning to get the feeling back in his fingers and toes. If he could keep him talking for just a bit longer, he would snap the fucker's neck like a twig. He could do it. Dante was still tall and slender, waif-like in appearance.

"You, Noah, were a loose end needing to be snipped off. I battled on how to handle you. I truly did. I don't want you to spend the last days of your life worrying if you were an easy kill or not." His cold eyes darkened and his smile widened. "I'd intended to simply kill you as soon as the FBI got you settled in with your new identity." He burst out laughing. "John Doe? How totally idiotic was that? I nearly died laughing when I heard the name they'd given you, but then again, I suppose it did fit at the time. Nobody cared about you. There wasn't one single person left in the world giving a fuck about what happened to John Doe. Well, except me. I've always cared, Noah. I take great pride in how I handle my business. I only had the length of my father's sentence, six short years, to prove to the family I was capable of taking over my father's empire. Every move I made had to be nothing short of perfection."

Noah wondered how he could have ever thought Dante wasn't pure evil. The bastard was worse than his father. Hell, if the truth be known, Dante was probably behind his father's suicide.

"Your death was meant to solidify to the family, and the cartel, that I indeed possessed the balls to step up and take over." He laughed again, softly this time. "Oh, the things I planned. Dismemberment. Buried alive. Fed to wild dogs. Drawn and quartered. The possibilities were endless," he gushed. "But then, Noah, you had to, once again, step up to the plate and become one of my biggest victories. Night after night, I listened to you in that apartment and fantasized about how I would kill you, but then I noticed something. You were absolutely falling apart right in front of me. You were fucking helpless, Scaredy-Cat. Afraid of your own shadow. As I listened,

your mental capacities worsened with every passing day and a beautiful plan formed in my head. I would make your suffering last for as long as possible, for your torture and my entertainment. I used my connections in the FBI to hook you up with a doctor friend of mine and...well, the rest is history, right? He gave you a lovely cocktail of drugs that shoved you right over the edge. After that, all I had to do was sit back and enjoy the show.” He leaned over to whisper, “Did you know that I found you so entertaining that I had to add cameras to your apartment? Listening just wasn’t enough. I’ve even shown videos of you at our family dinners. You, huddled in a corner, tears streaking your face as you stared at your apartment door? You have no idea how much laughter you’ve brought my family over the past four years. Every time we have a family gathering, the kids beg to see a video of the crazy boy.” He sat back and shook his head. “Big laughs. Fun times.”

Noah didn’t really give a fuck whether he’d been entertainment for the Moretti family over the years. All he cared about was killing Dante and getting back to Zach. He held no doubts Dante would order Zach’s and Connor’s deaths to tie things up...and for his entertainment, of course.

“Everything was going beautifully until the handsome, stud muffin doctor moved in next door. He really fucked with my family fun, and I don’t appreciate that, Noah.” He smirked again. “Sure, I enjoyed watching him fuck your ass, but I didn’t enjoy him ruining all my plans. Once I saw he possessed the ability to put you back together again, I knew fun times were over.”

He stood and started digging around in his pocket. Noah panicked. He wasn’t ready yet. He couldn’t move...not yet. His chest constricted and a panic attack edged its way to the surface. “Please, don’t, Dante.” He gasped. “Don’t hurt Zach. He doesn’t know anything,” he lied.

“I’ve got video feed in your apartment, Noah. I know how much Zach and Connor know about my family.” He pulled a needle out of his jacket and squatted next to

Noah. “I’m going to give you another dose. It should help with the pussy attack barreling down on you right now.”

Noah tried to move, tried to get away, but his body wouldn’t follow commands. The needle plunged into his neck.

“Hey, before you drift away to sleepy land, I need to explain some things to you,” Dante said quickly. He motioned around the small room with his hand. “This is your tomb, Noah. Once I leave and they seal up the door, there’ll be no escape. You can scream all you want, but I’ve made certain it’s completely soundproof. I’ve researched it, and it should take you at least three days to die...maybe four if you’re strong.” He laughed again and added, “But we both know that isn’t the case, don’t we? Once I know for certain you’re dead, I’ll drop some breadcrumbs so Zach can find you. Once I feel like he’s suffered enough, I’ll kill him, Connor, and Connor’s current lover.”

Noah saw Dante wink at him, but he was fading fast. He could barely hold onto any of Dante’s words, much less comprehend what he was saying.

“I’m leaving you some paper and a pencil. I suggest you use it to let Zach know how much you loved him and how very sorry you are for involving him in your train wreck of a life.” He stood, grinned, and said, “Ta-ta, Scaredy-Cat. Have fun.”

Dante’s smiling face was the last thing Noah saw, and that terrible laughter, the last thing he heard before the darkness swept him away.

“I didn’t call Noah, Conn. It wasn’t me he was on the phone with,” Zach said quietly.

“What do you mean it wasn’t you on the phone? He called you by name, Zach. Said

he loved you.” Connor frowned in confusion. “Wait. I remember something. He was standing behind me, talking to you, when my cell started ringing. When I looked down, it was your name flashing across the screen. I...I guess that’s why he hit me. Because I knew the person he was talking to couldn’t be you if it was you calling me.”

“Why would Noah hurt you? There’s no reason for him to want to hurt you,” Zach whispered.

“Whoever was on the other end of his call made him do it, Zach. That must be it,” Connor said. “But who? Moretti is dead. Who else would want to hurt Noah?”

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“Are you sure he’s dead? Maybe that’s a lie they’re feeding the media because he’s escaped or something.”

“No, he’s dead. I already called Caleb, and he confirmed Donovan’s dead. It was Moretti. He told me it looked like a suicide, but they’re still investigating. They think maybe he was murdered.”

Zach’s heart ached in agony, knowing how much terror Noah felt at the moment. He wouldn’t let Noah down. He couldn’t let Noah down. Like a fucking coward, he hadn’t been able to tell Noah how he truly felt. Now...he might never get the chance.

“Maybe the FBI moved him? Would they do that if there’s a question about Moretti being murdered?” Zach asked quickly. “They would do something like that, wouldn’t they?” Cameron could have been lying to them last night, tricking them into letting their guard down so the FBI could rush in and take Noah away.

“I...guess. I don’t know. Shit, no they wouldn’t call him and make him pretend to be talking to you and then knock me senseless. That isn’t FBI style. It’s something else, Zach.” His eyes begged Zach to forgive him. “It’s something bad.”

“Hey,” Wayne interrupted. “Don’t go there. Both of you need to keep a clear mind to work through this. Noah is depending on you guys...on us. We can do this.” To Connor, he said, “Do you have any contacts with the FBI? Does anybody know who Noah’s liaison with the FBI was?”

Zach and Connor frowned at the same time. Connor clenched his jaw, but Zach didn’t hold anything back. “What the fuck do you know about liaisons with the FBI,

Wayne?” Suspicion curdled in Zach’s gut. His mistrust of Wayne exploded to a dangerous level.

“Stop, Doc,” Wayne said gently. “I know what you’re doing, and I understand why you’re doing it. You’re wrong, though. How I know anything about the FBI, liaisons, and witness protection has nothing to do with your Noah. I have my own shit to deal with, but that doesn’t mean I can’t help you with yours.”

“Why should I believe you?” Zach demanded. “You suddenly appear in my life, and the next thing I know, Noah’s missing. Give me a break here, Wayne. What else could I think was going on?”

“No,” Wayne answered quietly. “You suddenly appeared in my life, Doc. I lived here eight months before you showed up. You’re also wasting time we could be spending on trying to figure out where Noah is.” He looked down at Connor. “You both need to figure out whether you’re going to trust me or not. If you can’t, I’ll leave. I sure the fuck don’t want to be a distraction.”

The room fell silent and Wayne turned away. Connor stopped him by catching Wayne’s hand in his own. “Zach’s scared, babe. I’m scared. He had to ask the question. You and I have already had this discussion and I trust you. You know this.”

“I understand why Zach doesn’t trust me,” Wayne answered. “I also understand if you all want me to go.”

“No. Stay. You’re right, though—we are wasting time. Time Noah doesn’t have,” Zach finally agreed. “Hey! How about Mack in security? Can you call him, Conn? He would let us review the security footage, wouldn’t he?”

Two hours later, Zach felt like he’d blown through the first four stages of grief, but since he refused the final stage, acceptance, he’d started all over again. As he rode in

the backseat of Connor's truck, he knew he was firmly lodged back in the denial stage again. They were on their way to Cameron's penthouse. Connor was going to demand answers about Noah and, in his words, he would get them one way or another. Zach, though his heart knew there was a zero possibility of it being true, had allowed the denial stage to convince him Noah might be with Cameron.

Maybe the FBI was in the process of moving him, and he'd be with Cameron, ready for transfer to a safe place.

Maybe they'd pulled him out until the investigation into Moretti's death was completed?

Maybe he'd been miraculously cured from his social phobia and decided to go for a fucking walkabout...after knocking Connor unconscious.

Shit, he was firmly back in the anger stage again.

"Are you sure about the address, Conn?" he asked for the tenth time. "Are we almost there? He's got to be there. There's nowhere else."

"Yes, I'm sure about the address. My friend at the DA's office gave it to me. We're about forty-two seconds away from being there. Try to stay calm, Zach. You know I'm not going to let anything happen to Noah." He took a deep breath that was shaky and weak. "I won't fuck up again."

"You didn't fuck up, Conn. I know that. Hell, I knew it when I said all that shit back in the apartment." Zach scraped his hands over his face and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm just scared. I...I never told him I loved him," he whispered, mostly to himself, but Wayne and Connor no doubt heard his shame. "He gave me everything, and I couldn't give him the one thing he wanted." Tears threatened to fall. Again.

They'd fallen like raindrops when they'd knocked on the door to the security office where Mack was always stationed. Where Mack used to be stationed. When no one answered the knock, they'd barged right in and found Mack sitting in front of the countless television screens in front of him. His throat slit from ear to ear. His empty eyes unfocused on the blank screens Zach and Connor had hoped would give them answers to Noah's disappearance. While they'd waited for the police to get there, Zach had sat in the corner of the room, crying like a baby, while Connor busied himself by reviewing the security tapes. Apparently, they'd been erased and then a virus had been uploaded to corrupt the whole security system, including the backup drive.

With that door slammed in their faces, they'd headed out to confront Cameron. The asshole didn't come across as capable of pulling off something like this, but then the whole lazy, incompetent persona might have been faked to lure them into dropping their guard around him.

"Noah told me he loved me exactly six times. I never told him once." Zach could remember each and every damned time. He could also remember the fucking fear that gripped his heart and soul the moment he'd tried to open his mouth and tell Noah he felt the exact same way. Now he might never get the chance.

"Noah knows you love him, Zach," Connor said quietly.

"Sure, he does," Zach mumbled. Of course, Connor would say what Zach needed to hear right now, anything to talk him off the ledge.

"What the fuck?" Wayne muttered as he craned his neck in every direction. "What's going on?"

Three police cars with flashing lights, an ambulance, and a fire truck sat in the parking lot of Cameron's apartment building. Yellow tape blocked anyone from

getting close, and a cop stood outside the tape signaling folks to keep moving. Zach's heart plummeted straight into the pit of his stomach. Connor drove up to where the cop waved wildly for him to move on, rolled down his window, and motioned the cop over.

“Listen, buddy. You need to keep moving. This is a crime...” Surprise etched across the cop's face, but then he quickly moved to step up to Connor's window. “Sorry, Detective. I didn't know it was you. Did you get called in on this one?”

“Nah, just on my way to visit an acquaintance living here. What happened?”

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The street cop looked worriedly at Wayne and then at Zach sitting in the back. “Is it, uh, okay to talk?”

Zach contemplated reaching through the open window and ripping the guy’s head off. Police protocol be damned, he needed to get to Cameron’s apartment. He needed to get to Noah.

“Yeah,” Connor answered quickly. “What’s going on?”

“Got a call to 911 about a jumper, but I think it’s quickly escalated to something else.” He glanced over in the direction of the parking lot and nodded to two black SUVs sitting there. “Not sure what happened to tip the PD off it might be more than a suicide, but the next thing you know, the FBI is on site.” He rolled his eyes and added, “Acting like almighty pricks. In my opinion, they’re definitely living up to their negative reputations. Strolling around, barking orders at our men like they don’t have the God-given sense to wipe their own asses.”

Jumper? There was a jumper? FBI on site? Zach’s stomach started rolling again and, just like that, he shifted from stage two denial to stage three anger. Was it the same fucking FBI entrusted to keep Noah safe from the Moretti family? Well, they’d done a fine fucking job at that.

So did I.

The voice inside his head mocked him. He’d let Noah down. Him...only him. First, he’d blamed Connor and now the FBI. The only person to blame was him, because he was the one who loved Noah. He was the one Noah depended on to keep him safe.

“Got a name on the jumper?” Connor asked quietly as he scanned the parking lot and then up to the top floor of the complex where curtains fluttered in the wind.

“Yeah,” the cop answered, lowering his voice. “He worked for the DA’s office. I guess that’s what all the hoopla’s about. His name was Cameron Maverick. I’d run into him a couple of times—real dick, but didn’t deserve this.” He waved his arm. “Whatever this turns out to be.”

Cameron was dead. Just like that, his last link to Noah had vanished.

“Was he alone in his apartment?”

The cop’s eyes narrowed. “Well, as far as anybody is saying, he was alone. You know him, Detective?”

“Yeah, that’s who I was coming to visit. He’s a friend of a friend.” Connor’s gaze shifted to meet Zach’s in the mirror. “Can you get me into the parking lot? I need to have a conversation with those FBI guys,” Connor said.

Wayne whispered a curse, but kept his eyes glued to the action going on around them.

“Uh...yeah, definitely. If you knew the guy, you should talk to them. Give me a second.”

With that, he jogged toward the lot, dipped down to slide under the police tape, and went straight over to two men in suits. They screamed FBI. This was bad. This was really bad.

“The Moretti family is cleaning up,” Zach said. “I don’t get it, with the patriarch dead just last night, but this is a cleanup if I’ve ever seen one.”

Connor looked at Wayne and said, “You’re white as a sheet, man. It makes me sick to my stomach to ask this, and I don’t want you pissed at me, but do you need to pull a disappearing act?”

Connor was insinuating Wayne might be somebody the FBI didn’t need to see. Zach didn’t need to attend the police academy to recognize what was going on.

Wayne turned sad eyes on Connor. “Yeah, that would be for the best.” He glanced toward Zach sitting in the back seat and then to Connor again. “I’m not the bad guy. I promise.”

“I don’t think you are,” Connor answered quietly. “Please don’t let me be wrong.”

“I won’t let you down,” Wayne answered, slid out of the truck, and disappeared into the crowd of lookie-loos.

“What’s going on, Conn? Why do you think we can trust him?” Zach demanded. “I know you’re fucking him, but he’s...” Zach took a deep breath and finished with, “His reactions aren’t normal. Who would be afraid of the FBI seeing them? A criminal—that’s who. Who are criminals, Conn? The Moretti family—that’s who.”

“It’s more than just a fuck, Zach. There’s something between us, something special. I don’t know how I know this, but we can trust Wayne.”

“You trust Wayne,” Zach practically snarled. “I’ll stick with just trusting you.”

Before Connor could argue or convince him Wayne was a good guy, the cop moved the yellow tape and motioned for them to enter the parking lot. The two FBI men stood off to the side, their arms crossed over their chests, and their eyes wary.

“What are you going to tell them?” Zach asked. “Do you trust them, too?” He told

himself he didn't mean to keep being an ass, but he still didn't put forth any effort to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"I'm going to tell them the truth, Zach. As for the trust... I'll trust them until they give me a reason not to. The bottom line is we need to know what they know." He parked the truck and looked at the two men waiting on him. "As if they'll tell us anything," he grumbled as he unbuckled. "Stay in the truck, Zach. I don't need you losing your cool with the FBI."

Zach ignored him and climbed out of the truck.

Chapter 16

Zach clipped the leash on Denala's collar and slipped his feet into his running shoes. He couldn't do this any longer. He couldn't just sit in his apartment and wait for news about Noah's disappearance to fall into his lap. Twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours since anyone had seen or heard from Noah. The FBI had given them zero information but finally confirmed they didn't know Noah's whereabouts either. Cameron Maverick was dead by a not-so-apparent suicide. The FBI didn't believe he'd jumped from his penthouse balcony and neither did Zach. He'd been pushed or thrown. Zach supposed it didn't matter either way. He was part of the Moretti cleanup. Because the FBI was mute, he and Connor didn't have a clue to what extent Cameron had been "dirty" when it came to Noah, but he'd been involved with Moretti.

Mack in security hadn't been a cleanup; he'd just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Whoever tampered with the security video and backup had been forced to get rid of Mack in the process. Connor thought Mack must have either walked in on them when they were tampering with the computers or killed him in a blitz attack while he sat at his station. Either way, Mack, husband and father of three, was dead, and there wasn't a hint of evidence left behind. The last security video was from a month back.

"Where do you think you're going?" Connor asked when he looked up from his computer to see Zach headed out the door with Denala. "Nuh-uh, Zach. You aren't going anywhere by yourself. Until we know who we're dealing with, you aren't going to be alone. End of story."

Zach sighed wearily. He was too mentally drained and emotionally ruined to argue

with Connor. “I don’t need a babysitter, Conn. More than anything, I need you working on finding Noah, and if you’re taking Denala out for a bathroom break, you aren’t researching Dante Moretti. You stay. I’ll be fine. I’m only taking her across the street to the dog park.” Hell, Zach hoped Dante, if he was the Moretti responsible for the clusterfuck currently taking place, would come after him.

“No, Zach. I’m not kidding. These people are dangerous,” Connor argued as he started logging off his computer.

“Why don’t I go with Zach and you stay and work on figuring out if Dante is our guy, and if he is, where he might be holding Noah,” Wayne suggested. He got up and squeezed Connor’s shoulder, letting him know he’d take care of Zach. “You find a way to bring Zach’s boy back home.”

“I don’t feel one damned bit better with you going with Zach,” Connor argued. “I can’t lose you both.”

“Argue with each other all you want. I’ll be back before you two settle anything. I need to get out of here,” Zach said. “Everywhere I look...”

“I’ll take care of him, babe,” Wayne promised as he hustled out the door after Zach. Out in the hall, he told Zach, “He blames himself for Noah being gone.” When Zach pushed the elevator button and ignored Wayne, the man continued, “Do you blame him, Zach? Do you somehow think all this is Connor’s fault?”

The doors slid open, and Zach struggled to get Denala inside the elevator. She whined, dug her paws in and tried to pull him toward the stairwell. “Denala! Come,” Zach ordered as he tugged harder while Wayne held the elevator doors open for them.

“Is she always skittish of the elevator?”

“No. Never before Noah disappeared,” Zach answered as he finally forced her inside the elevator car. “She acted the same way this morning. I’m scared to death something happened to him on this elevator and that’s why she doesn’t want to get on it.” Zach’s eyes searched the small compartment, looking for any sign of foul play. Nothing.

“Do you blame him, Zach?” Wayne asked quietly as he stroked Denala’s head. She continued whining.

“Blame Connor? No, of course not. I said that shit because I was terrified. Still am. Connor would give his life protecting a stranger so I don’t harbor any doubts he’d do the same for Noah. He loved Noah because he was mine and because Noah’s so damned lovable.”

“When you can, make sure Connor knows that. He’s suffering, too.”

The elevator grew silent except for Denala’s whining. Finally, Zach said, “I don’t trust you.”

“I know.”

Forty-eight hours. Forty-eight hours of pure hell since anybody had seen Noah. Oddly enough, the FBI kept them in the loop fairly well. No, they didn’t have any leads or hopes of digging up any leads, but they were at least talking to Connor on a regular basis. Like Connor, they believed Dante Moretti was behind Noah’s disappearance and probably his own father’s death, but since nobody had a clue where the younger Moretti was hiding, there wasn’t a damned thing they could do with their suspicions.

Connor was gone more than he was at Zach’s apartment, but he always left Wayne behind to watch over Zach. Zach didn’t have the heart to tell his best friend he didn’t trust his lover any further than he could throw him. If he was perfectly honest with

himself, he'd admit he hoped Wayne was somehow involved and they planned to take him, as well. That was what he hoped. In reality, Wayne kept his distance, but watched over Zach at all times. When they were alone in the apartment, he made himself as invisible as possible, but Zach noted the other man was always on the phone...with somebody. Most of the time, it was Connor. Most of the time.

Wayne was hiding something, and Zach had a feeling Connor knew what it was. It wasn't like his friend to be so trusting, especially when Wayne sent out signals right and left that something wasn't quite right. Zach wasn't the investigator Connor was, but he'd called some friends at the hospital and they'd found out Wayne's credentials were legit and there wasn't any criminal history documented in his employee file. By all appearances, he was exactly who he claimed to be. Appearances could be deceiving, though. Zach knew this because of his own life.

So, he maintained his distance and kept an eye on the other man. Denala liked him, so that was one mark in the good column. That meant Wayne had exactly two pluses: Denala and Connor liked him. End of story.

As the hours turned into days, his best friend no longer thought Noah was alive. He wouldn't say it out loud, but his eyes spoke volumes. The sadness. The pity. The anger. The promise of revenge. The bottom line, there were only two options where Noah was concerned: either the FBI had moved him and every word coming from them was nothing more than a lie intended to protect Noah, or Dante had him and he was dead. That was an option Zach couldn't fathom. He would know, wouldn't he? An emptiness would have crept into the space where Noah resided. Surely, he'd have felt it the moment Noah's heart stopped beating.

Thinking things like that was bullshit, but it was all Zach had. The stages of grief called it denial—he called it survival. If lying to himself was what it took, lying was what he'd do. He'd keep telling himself Noah was out there, protected by the FBI, and one day he'd see him again.

Was he safe? Was he terrified? He'd made great progress over the past month, but he was nowhere near being comfortable with being ripped from everything he considered safe. The mental suffering Noah had to be enduring nearly crippled Zach with pain. Why couldn't they have let him go with him? Why couldn't he have had one more day...one more minute? One more chance to tell Noah he loved him.

The door to his apartment opened, and Zach nearly jumped out of his skin. Connor walked through, the same look of despair in his eyes was there when he'd left earlier that morning. Nothing. They'd found out nothing that would help them find Noah. To confirm, Connor shook his head, and then went down the hall in search of Wayne. Zach knew it hurt Connor to face him; Connor blamed himself for not being able to help Noah when he'd needed it. But Zach was the main source of that blame, with all the shit he'd spouted at Conn when he'd come home to find Noah missing. If he could take it back, he would, but his words would always be there between them.

With a sigh of frustration, he grabbed Denala's leash, motioned for his dog to come to him, and snuck out of the apartment before Connor came back down the hall. Wayne and Connor were always whispering secrets to one another, so giving them privacy seemed like a straight-up thing to do...plus, he needed some time to himself, and Connor would never agree to let him out of the apartment alone. He'd also had another stupid thought earlier and wanted the chance to give it a try, without anybody else watching.

He fought Denala to get her on the elevator and then fought with her to get her across the lobby and out the front doors. It was their new thing. She'd never been disobedient to him before, so in his heart, he knew it was because she didn't want to leave the apartment; she was waiting on Noah to return. Once outside, she whined softly but then settled down and followed him across the street to the dog park. He wouldn't have long before either Connor or Wayne came rushing after him, so he enjoyed the peace while he could. Once inside the park, he sat on a bench and turned Denala loose to run. She whimpered then scampered to the nearest poop section to do

her business. In less than two minutes, she was back at his side, whimpering again. He grabbed one of the poop bags, scooped up her business, disposed of it, and then returned to the bench. She rested her head on his knee and watched him.

“I know, girl. I miss him, too.” He stroked her head as he talked. “He misses us, too. It’ll be all right. He’ll be back,” he lied. She cocked her head and looked at him like she wanted to tell him something. Feeling like an idiot, he reached into his pocket and pulled out one of Noah’s T-shirts. He put it against Denala’s nose and said, “Search, Denala. Find Noah.” It was the same command they’d used in her training classes...the command she’d never shown any interest in following. He’d told himself she was capable, she just hadn’t wanted to find what the trainers tried to get her to locate. She wanted Noah.

She sniffed the shirt, stood, and put her nose to the ground, whimpering and growling with excitement. Zach’s heart started racing. He’d known she could do it. Quickly, he snapped on her leash and led her to the park exit. Some of his enthusiasm dissipated when he saw Wayne waiting on him, a sad frown on his face.

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“I thought she couldn’t search and find,” he said when Zach and Denala got close enough.

“Worried?” Zach snapped and immediately felt like shit. Connor trusted Wayne. He trusted Connor.

“Yes,” Wayne answered softly, causing Zach’s eyes to snap up and meet his gaze. “I’m worried you’re only hurting yourself more, Zach. Denala isn’t trained for this. Don’t get mad at her when she can’t work the miracle you need so badly right now.”

Denala tugged furiously on the leash. “Yeah, let’s see what she can do before we throw all hope out the window.” Zach’s lifted spirits were short-lived. With her nose to the ground, Denala traced the exact path they’d taken to get to the park. She went straight for the apartment complex entrance, sat down, and barked at Zach.

“Why is she doing that?” Wayne asked.

“Because she thinks he’s coming back home,” Zach answered. “She doesn’t want to leave the apartment building because she knows that’s where Noah is supposed to be.” He tucked the shirt back into his pocket and prayed he wouldn’t break down and cry in front of Wayne. He wasn’t a weak man, but he also wasn’t accustomed to feeling and being so helpless. If his worthless father had taught him anything, it’d been to take care of business yourself. Never rely on anybody else. For the first time in his life, he couldn’t take care of business. Sure, he wouldn’t hesitate to go straight to Dante Moretti right now and beat the truth out of him, but nobody, including the FBI, seemed to be able to find him. There were even whispers he’d been taken out as well. Zach hoped he had. His deceit had led Noah down this path.

“Sorry, Zach,” Wayne whispered. “You know we’re trying to find him, right? Connor and me? We’re doing everything we can to find Noah or Dante Moretti. One way or another, you’ll get your answers before this is over.”

They stepped inside the building, and Zach gripped the leash tightly, knowing there would be a royal battle to get Denala back on the elevator again. She didn’t disappoint. By the time the three of them were back on the elevator, Zach had worked up a sweat and Denala had spit and foam leaking out of her mouth.

“Is she always like that?” Wayne asked once the doors slid shut and the elevator started moving.

“No,” Zach answered shortly. “What do you mean everything you can do, Wayne? Explain it to me because I’m having a hell of a time understanding your role in this entire shit show. Sure, Connor trusts you, and I’m trying my best to give you the benefit of the doubt, but what the fuck? Are you here because you have the hots for my friend? Are you here because you’re some kind of superhero insisting on doing the right thing every time? Or, are you here for reasons that will eventually lead to me killing you?”

Wayne kept his face straight ahead, not even attempting to look in Zach’s direction. “I’m here for Connor because I’m falling for him and I’m here for you. That’s all I’m saying about it, Zachary. I know asking you to trust me is asking too much, but you’ll eventually see I’m not the bad guy.”

The doors slid open and Denala dragged him off the elevator, ending their conversation. Once inside the apartment, Connor gave him a disappointed look but didn’t say anything. A knowing glance passed between Connor and Wayne, so Zach excused himself to go check on the puppies. He was tired of trying to figure out what was going on.

He was just so fucking tired.

Seventy-two hours. Three days. Would he spend the rest of his life like this? Counting the days without Noah? He rolled over and looked at the clock. It was after nine in the morning. Denala and the puppies needed to be taken care of. After that, he'd sit around and mope all day, imagining horrible things happening to Noah.

When he walked into the living room, Connor was on his cell and Wayne was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Denala. Perfect. Now the man he didn't trust was taking his dog for a poop break. Just as Connor disconnected and slid his cell into his pocket, the door to the apartment opened. Wayne and Denala came in. Denala growling and Wayne frowning.

"That fucking dog nearly pulled my arm out of its socket," he grumbled. "She's strong."

Connor frowned and looked at Zach. "Did you give him her commands?"

"No," Zach answered. "I didn't know he was hired for dog walking too. I thought he was only on Zach babysitting duty." Looking at Wayne, he said, "I'll take my dog out from now on."

"No problem," Wayne answered shortly.

About then Connor would usually step in and try to get them to play nice. This time, he didn't say a word, just looked at Zach with the same sad expression apparently frozen on his face. Feeling like shit, Zach said, "Sorry, Wayne. I didn't mean to be a prick." Turning to Connor, he asked, "Satisfied?"

Connor opened his mouth and then shut it. Opened. Shut.

“What’s happened?” Wayne asked as he crossed the space between them and wrapped an arm around Connor’s waist. “Something’s wrong.”

Connor’s eyes went straight to Zach. “That was the FBI on the phone. They’ll be here in thirty minutes.” Before Zach could say anything, he said, “No, they didn’t say what it was about. Go clean up. You look like shit.”

“It’s going to be bad, isn’t it?” Zach said. “If it’s bad, Connor, somebody’s going to die.”

“Whatever it is, we’ll deal with it. Together. Grab a shower.” Turning to Wayne, he said, “You should probably go.”

Wayne’s eyes went to Connor, to Zach, and then back to Connor. “Yeah, I need to meet with some people anyway. I got a call when I was out with Denala. There’s been some information on that project I was working on. You guys take care of Noah’s stuff, and I’ll take care of my problem.”

Nope, Zach didn’t trust him.

Chapter 17

Eighty-six hours.

“They aren’t looking for Noah any longer, are they?” he asked Connor. “They know he’s dead, so they aren’t even going to try and find his body.”

Their meeting with the FBI had been devastating—on multiple levels. Their arrival at Noah’s apartment brought a whirlwind of agents. After barreling in, they used some sort of device Zach had never seen before, to scan every surface throughout Noah’s apartment. Horror nearly consumed him, as Zach watched the team remove and disable multiple recording and video devices from every room, one after another. How could he not have known someone had been watching them this whole time?

Once they’d completed that task and the larger team had left, the agents in charge of Noah’s case had been brutally honest about their progress in the investigation and their doubts that Noah was still alive. Surprisingly enough, they’d been willing to share the majority of their information, including their own dirty laundry.

Apparently, an FBI agent had been working with someone in the Moretti family, feeding them information about Noah’s whereabouts and daily activities. This agent was Cameron’s liaison with the FBI and, ultimately, the one responsible for ensuring Noah received the medications detrimental to his mental health and had been responsible for the “fake” job Noah had worked. From what they’d said, Cameron Maverick was only guilty of being a negligent human being. He’d simply done what the FBI agent told him without ever questioning anything...or caring.

The agents admitted to them how the dirty FBI agent explained how Zach's name was used to lure Noah out of his safe zone, threatening to kill Zach if he didn't come to them. He claimed not to know where Noah was or how they'd planned to do away with him. Zach knew in his heart they had more information on Noah's fate but weren't sharing all the details. He figured they justified that by telling themselves it was for Zach's protection to not know the gruesome facts. The scenarios he saw every damned time he closed his eyes were as horrifying and soul shattering as the truth could be.

But he'd heard them whispering with Connor before they'd left the apartment. He hadn't been trying to listen, his heart too damaged to even put together a coherent thought or action. No, hearing them hadn't been his intention, but the words had carried to his ears anyway.

Buried alive.

As soon as he'd heard the words, he'd dismissed himself to his bathroom and thrown up. He hadn't eaten anything substantial in days, but hot bile spewed from his mouth. His body convulsed in pain as he imagined Noah's terror and suffering. How long would it take? Why couldn't they have shown some mercy and killed him swiftly? Did he think of me? Did he wonder if I loved him? Did he know how hard we looked for him? Did he cry out for me to save him?

Before leaving, the FBI had stressed they didn't have the evidence to tie anything to Dante Moretti. The man was too smart for that. He'd used people to make things happen and then started his cleanup as soon as Noah disappeared. The vicious cleanup cycle was what caused their own agent to come to them. Apparently, he'd thought jail time would be safer than what Moretti had planned for him.

"It doesn't matter if they're looking for him or not, Zach. We are. I have people looking for him and Moretti." Connor's eyes flashed with fury. "One way or another,

Dante Moretti will pay for what he's done."

"You heard them, Conn. You heard when they explained how slippery Moretti was when it came to making any evidence against him stick. They don't even believe they have a chance of convicting him for a traffic ticket, much less kidnapping and murder." He choked on the last word, still unable to accept Noah was no longer breathing the same air he was, sleeping under the same sky. Denial—his constant companion.

"And I said 'one way or another,' Zach. I'm not going to let Moretti get away with ripping my family apart. I'm just...not." Connor raked his hands through his hair and then banged the back of his head against the wall behind him. "I gotta call Wayne." His eyes jumped back up to meet Zach's gaze. "Don't get pissed."

"Whatever," Zach answered wearily. "I don't even care anymore, Conn. Hell, I don't care about anything."

"Don't say that," Connor whispered. "Please don't give up on me, Zach. I'm doing everything I can to make this right."

"This isn't your fault, Conn. It isn't your fault, and you can't make it right. We aren't going to bring Noah back, and I don't want you losing your job or going to jail for doing something stupid." It wasn't Connor's place to kill Dante. That luxury belonged solely to Zach. His oath to heal and uphold ethical standards was a thing of the past. For the first time in years, he was proud to have his father's blood flowing through his veins. It would take that particular heritage to give him the strength to find vengeance for Noah.

"Whatever." It was Connor's turn to murmur the noncommittal word.

"I'm going to take Denala for a walk." Zach stood and went to get his coat. Fall had

suddenly turned cold.Had Noah been cold?

“Okay, let me send Wayne a text letting him know the coast is clear, and I’ll go with you.”

“Don’t need a babysitter, Conn. If Moretti wants to come after me, let him come,” Zach said through gritted teeth as he shrugged into his coat and hooked Denala’s collar to her leash.

“I know you don’t need a babysitter,” Connor answered as he tucked his phone into his back pocket. “I want to be with my friend. Is that okay?”

With a shrug, Zach opened the door and then held it open to show Connor he wanted his company. Denala started her shit as soon as her feet hit the hallway, but since Zach was ready for it, she didn’t get far. “Heel, Denala,” he yelled angrily. He didn’t want to take his anger and frustration out on his dog,the dog Noah loved, but he was so damned tired. She whimpered and then fell in step next to him. Together the three of them stepped onto the elevator.

“She’s getting worse, isn’t she?” Connor asked quietly. “Her grief is probably causing her to misbehave. Go easy on her if you can.”

They rode the next two floors in silence before Zach said, “I heard what they said before they left, Conn. About them thinking Noah was buried alive.”

The only reaction was Connor’s jawline tightening and his eyes flashing with sympathetic anger. “Don’t think about it, okay? Don’t do that to yourself. It won’t help anything.”

“I was just thinking that if that’s what happened, he could still be alive, Conn. If they gave him a way to breathe, our bodies can go without food for weeks but we need

water within three or four days. It's only been eighty-six hours. Under the right conditions, he could still..."

"Stop, Zach," Connor whispered.

"I can't stop. He could still be alive." Zach retorted, refusing to give up hope even when he knew it didn't make sense; he knew a body could only survive four to five days without water under perfect conditions. Noah was gone, had to be gone, but his heart wouldn't let him accept it.

"Focus on your hate, Zach. It's the only thing that's going to help you survive this. Focus on what we're going to do to Dante Moretti." Connor turned cold and determined eyes to Zach. "Think about how we will make him suffer. He will die, Zach. Slowly. Painfully. I promise you, he'll die. Focus on that instead of...the other."

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“How? How will we find Dante if the FBI can’t?” Zach prodded as the floors counted down.

“The FBI can find him, Zach. What they can’t do is get enough evidence against him to hold up in court.” Connor shrugged as the doors slid open, and they stepped out into the lobby area. “We don’t need court evidence.” He turned to Zach and said, “We have all the evidence we need. Moretti will pay.”

They started walking across the lobby area toward the doors, Denala whimpering, whining, and pulling on the leash with the same frustrating dedication Zach had grown accustomed to over the past few days. Zach couldn’t believe he and Connor were discussing killing a man with the exact same nonchalance they would have used to discuss a ballgame, the weather, or where to spend the holidays. It was, in both their minds, a foregone conclusion Dante Moretti would die. The only questions left were how and when.

When Denala gave a particularly vicious yank on the leash, Zach moaned in pain and irritation. It felt like she tried to pull his arm right out of the socket.

Connor laughed sadly and said, “I can definitely see why she failed her police academy training. I thought she was just incapable of search and rescue and the attack commands. I had no idea she wasn’t even leash trained.”

“Heel, Denala,” Zach barked irritably as he gave the leash a yank to force her back to his side. “She’s been this way since Noah was taken,” he explained. “She was much better...before.” Hell, they’d all been much better before Noah was taken. No, murdered. Buried alive. His legs almost buckled as his mind allowed visions of

Noah's torture to flash through his head.

Connor grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop. "What do you mean? She didn't have problems with leash training before? This only started when Noah disappeared?"

Zach immediately started shaking his head. "I know what you're thinking, Conn. I thought the same thing—that Denala would be able to find Noah. I even brought one of his T-shirts along on our last outing and asked her to find him. I know it was stupid, that she hadn't completed her training before flunking out, but I tried anyway. She loves Noah; I thought she could bring him home." No, she loved Noah—past tense.

Connor was still frowning. "Where did you take her?"

"What? Take her? What do you mean?"

"When you asked her to search, Zach. Where was she?" Connor demanded, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Across the street, in the dog park. She followed our exact walking path back to the door, Conn. Nothing. It was like she had his scent for a second, but then headed straight back to our building." Zach stroked the top of her head as she continued to whine and look up at him with her big brown eyes.

"Drop the leash, Zach," Connor ordered quietly.

"She can't—"

Connor snatched the leash out of Zach's hand and barked, "Search, Denala!"

Without hesitation, Denala raced across the lobby floor, causing several people to cringe in fear before she stopped in front of the door which lead to the stairwell, barking once to alert them...just as they'd tried to train her. The stairs were rarely used, only there in case of a fire. For certain, Zach and Denala had never used them before.

Zach looked at Connor, hope blossoming in his chest, even though he kept trying to squash it back down. Hope was a deceitful bitch. "What's she doing?" he asked Connor.

"I don't know, but we're about to find out. Come on," he said as he started after Denala.

They pushed the heavy doors open, and Denala burst through and headed straight up the stairs, racing like the hounds of hell were closing in on her. Zach and Connor followed as closely as possible, Connor with his gun drawn and Zach with his heart pounding so loudly he could hear it over Denala's barks. His and Noah's penthouse suites were on the twenty-first floor and as they passed the nineteenth floor, Zach's hope started to diminish. Denala was just going home, hoping Noah would be there.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Connor roared as Denala sped past the nineteenth floor. "She's just going home."

A wave of despair racked Zach's body. This was it. He was losing his mind. Laughter bubbled out of his mouth while tears of sadness started to roll down his cheeks. He'd wanted to believe. He should've known better.

Denala stopped on the twentieth floor and barked in front of the door leading to the hallway. Zach froze, the crazy laughter dying in his throat. Connor stared at the door, then at Denala. She barked again, this time more urgent.

“Oh, shit,” Connor said.

Eighty-six hours. Is he dead? Did they only take him a floor below Zach’s apartment to kill him? Has he been there this entire time?

Unable to wait another second, Zach barreled ahead and yanked the door open. Denala ran down the hallway, barking excitedly until she came to the last door at the end of the hall. At that door, she jumped up and started scratching wildly. Her barks turned to whimpers. Zach reached the door ahead of Connor and started banging, demanding they let him in. It was perfectly silent on the other side of the door.

When the apartment door across the hall opened, Connor shoved a gun straight into the face of a kid who barely looked to be in his teens. He yelped in shock, started yelling “Don’t shoot, don’t shoot,” and dropped down on his knees.

“Shit, kid,” Connor said as he dropped his gun to his side. “I’m not going to shoot you. I’m with the police department.” When the kid quit quaking in fear, Connor asked, “Do you know who lives in this apartment?”

Standing back up, he said “Nah, not a clue. About six guys moved in around two weeks ago—did a bunch of construction in there, it sounded like. They were there for several days, but I haven’t heard or seen anything in over a week.” He scrunched up his nose and said, “It smells weird. I wish they’d get evicted. I told my mom it was some weird shit going on, but, as usual, she didn’t believe me.”

Zach’s stomach plummeted at the “smells weird” comment. His hand automatically went to the doorknob, but it was, of course, locked tight.

“Listen, could you call down to the front desk for me? Tell them I need someone up here to open this apartment immediately. Let them know I’m a cop,” Connor said.

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Zach didn't wait. He reached over and yanked Connor's gun out of his hand, unlocked the safety, tugged Denala out of the way, and opened fire on the locking mechanism of the door. After eight rounds, his ears were ringing and the kid was screaming, but the doorknob and security locks were a mangled mess. He handed the gun back to Connor, told him to reload it, and kicked the door open. Denala raced in ahead of him, ran down the hallway, and stopped in front of another door. She turned to Zach and barked.

"Your friend's a badass," the teen whispered to Connor, loud enough for Zach to hear the awe in his voice. "Can I see your gun?"

"No, you can't see my gun," Connor barked. "Call 911. Now!"

Zach heard the sounds of doors, the residents no doubt peeking out to investigate the noise. "Call 911," Connor yelled again as he entered the apartment. He was probably ready to punch Zach, worried he was going to get himself killed.

"Shit! This place is a wreck," Conn said. "Zach! Where the hell are you? It stinks in here, but that's rotten food. Don't panic. I know the smell."

"End of the hall," Zach answered. Zach and Denala stood at the end of the hall, Zach with his hand resting on the wall and Denala in resting position for her search and rescue training.

"What is it, Zach?" Connor asked as he walked down the hall, stopping to check behind each door to ensure they were indeed alone.

When he finally got to his side, Zach whispered, “Buried alive.”

“Shit,” Connor muttered as he eyed the blocked door in front of him.

Boards were nailed in layers in front of the entrance. Zach looked around, eyed the rolls of carpet, and realized they’d probably been used for sound-proofing the room.

“Let me find something to tear these boards away, Zach. Stay calm. It’s not too late.”

Zach placed his hand on the wood in front of him, knowing Noah was on the other side of the door but not knowing what kind of shape he was in. Eighty-six, no, eighty-seven hours wasn’t too long, but he could feel the heat radiating from the wood. He didn’t have to be inside the room to know the conditions were bad. Eighty-seven hours in the heat...

While Connor dug through the gear left behind in search of something to rip the boards away, Zach pulled out his cell phone and called the hospital. He didn’t have the authority to do what he was about to do, but he hoped he could rely on the friendships he’d made in the short time he’d been working there. When they answered, he said, “This is Doctor Meadows. Can you please connect me to Tracey Parks?”

“Got it! This will work,” Connor yelled as he came barreling back down the hallway carrying something resembling a crowbar. “Let me work awhile and then you’ll take over. Got it?” He told Zach as he started trying to rip the boards away.

Zach nodded in agreement but only because he had to talk to Tracey first.

“Tracey Parks,” a chipper voice answered. “What can I do for you, Doctor Meadows? They told me you had taken some time off. I hope everything is all right.”

“I need a huge favor,” he said. “I need some things brought over to my apartment building right away. It's an emergency, Tracey. I need it here as quickly as possible.”

She paused but then answered. “Whatever you say, sir. Give me the list. I'll bring it over myself.”

He gave her the list of the medications he would need and the address to the apartment were Dante Moretti had hidden Noah...right under his fucking nose. The bastard had done this on purpose, just another way to hurt everyone involved. Zach was certain Dante had gotten huge laughs out of thinking Zach and Connor were searching everywhere for Noah while he was slowly dying only one floor beneath them.

As soon as he finished his call, he took the metal bar out of Connor's hand and started ripping the boards away. Connor shook his head but stepped aside to let Zach do things his way. Zach watched out of the corner of his eye as Connor got on his cell phone and started tapping away. He knew his best friend was letting Wayne know what they'd found and then he'd probably alert the police. Zach also knew he didn't have time to worry about whether he trusted Wayne or not. Noah was on the other side of this door, either dying or already dead.

It couldn't have taken more than several minutes, but it felt like a lifetime to Zach—a lifetime before the last piece of wood blocking the door was ripped away. Heavy locks on the door required they use the gun again but he was finally able to shove the heavy wooden door aside. The heat in the room escaped as soon as the door opened, causing Zach and Connor to gasp as it took their breaths away. Inside the room was dark but not dark enough to keep Zach from seeing the lifeless body sprawled on a mattress in the corner. There was no movement, no acknowledgement Noah heard them tearing the walls down to get to him.

There was nothing.

Chapter 18

Zach leaned back in the chair but kept one hand wrapped around Noah's wrist. Nearly eight hours had passed since Denala had found Noah, barely clinging to life. Eight hours, but it felt like only seconds ago—seconds since his heart had frozen in his throat as he'd desperately tried to find Noah's pulse. If he lived to be a hundred years old, he'd never experience another moment of triumph and happiness to equal the second the weak pulse fluttered beneath his fingertips.

Noah was alive...barely, but still alive. He was a doctor—Noah barely alive was all he needed. He would save the man he loved. Everything he'd experienced in his life, all the crap with his outlaw father and choosing a career he'd started to fear wasn't a perfect fit for him, had led to that particular moment. Noah would win and Dante Moretti would lose.

Tracey had gotten there with the IV solutions and medications he'd needed before the police or EMTs, and he'd started pumping the healing fluids into Noah. Wayne made a brief appearance, whispered with Connor, and then pulled another disappearing act. The EMTs finally arrived and, even with Zach's arguments against it, they'd taken Noah to the hospital. He'd ridden with him, never once breaking the contact of their touch. Once at the hospital, they'd stabilized Noah, and after several more heated arguments and a call from Noah's psychiatrist, Noah was back in his apartment. All the medical equipment he needed had been provided in record time, and Zach knew he owed the FBI for that luxury. He also knew the FBI was one of the main reasons Noah almost died, so the relationship was still fucking lopsided as far as Zach was concerned.

The steady beeping of Noah's heart monitor kept Zach grounded and calm. This thing with Moretti wasn't over, wouldn't be over until Moretti was dead, but for the moment, Noah was safe and by his side.

"Hey," Connor said quietly from the doorway. "How's he doing?"

"Good," Zach answered. "He's strong." Zach's fingers caressed Noah's wrist as his eyes flickered across the machines monitoring Noah and then to his lover's face. Dark smudges marred the pale flesh beneath his eyes, and his cheeks were gaunt, but other than that, Noah looked like he was merely sleeping. He hadn't woken up yet, but from how well his body responded to the IVs they were administering, it wouldn't be long. All his vital organs were still functioning properly. Zach was shocked by how well Noah had survived his ordeal. He should be in much worse shape. It was, Zach was sure, Noah's big fat fuck-you to Dante Moretti. He was so much stronger than any of them gave him credit for.

Connor stepped into the room and leaned down to pat Denala's head. The German shepherd hadn't left Noah's side since they'd brought him home. "You did good, girl. You did damned good."

"She knew all along, Conn. She tried to tell me, but I didn't understand. He could've been dead in a few more hours," Zach whispered.

"Could've been, but isn't. We did it, Zach. You've got him back...and we won't let him go again," Connor vowed.

"I'm going to kill him, Conn," Zach said calmly. "I'm going to kill him for what he did to Noah and for what he will keep trying to do to Noah." Zach looked up at Connor and said, "I'm going to become a man like my father, and for the first time in my life, I'm thankful for his blood flowing through my veins. Because of what he is, I'll be able to do this." Zach couldn't believe the calmness he felt regarding his

decision to kill Dante Moretti. A part of him argued he should feel ashamed about how calmly he'd accepted his decision to take another man's life. He didn't, though. He didn't feel at all ashamed. He felt fucking content, almost excited.

"There'll be plenty of time for that later. Right now, let's focus on getting Noah at one hundred percent again. I've hired some off-duty folks to help keep the place safe until we make our move. Sit tight for now and stay by the man you love."

"I'm not going to let you do this with me, Conn. You've got too much to risk. I'll take care of this myself. I didn't forget everything my father taught me just because I went to medical school. The basics of killing stayed with me."

"We'll see. Right now, hold tight to Noah and"—he stepped across the floor and handed Zach some paper—"I thought you might want to read this. They were in the room with Noah, and I snatched them before the FBI got there." He shrugged and added, "They were for you, not the FBI."

After handing Zach the papers, Connor squeezed his friend's shoulder and left the room. Zach stared at what Connor had given him and tears already threatened to fall. Staring back up at him, Noah's handwriting, neat but words sometimes crisscrossing over each other since he'd no doubt written this in the darkened room. Can I handle reading what Noah thought would be his last words? Did Noah blame me, hate me for not being there when he'd needed me most?

Holding Noah's hand even tighter, Zach started reading.

Zachary,

There are so many things I want to be able to tell you, so many things I wanted us to be able to share with each other, but my past seems to have gotten in the way. I always suspected it would happen and perhaps I was greedy to want you in my life

even when I knew the ending would be bad. I've always been a selfish bastard. Nah, actually I was just desperate. I saw you and I wanted you. My desperation to have you caused me to throw caution to the wind and take a chance. I'm sorry I gambled with your feelings, too.

The first thing I want you to know is I know you love me. Don't beat yourself up just because I hadn't been able to drag it out of you yet. You didn't have to say the words. How you treated me told me everything I needed to know. Your love saved me. Your love gave me the strength to survive this. Your love gave me passion, courage, and happiness. I'd stopped living and you brought me back to life. Please know what was planned for me was going to happen no matter what. You gave me love to enjoy during my final time and courage to finish. I hope I left you with no doubts, but in case I did...I love you.

Second, I'm not afraid. This would have been so much harder if you hadn't stepped in and saved me when you did. Yes, I'm pissed and sad but I'm not afraid. Don't sit around worrying about that. I did good and I did good because of you and your love.

I'd planned on telling you I wanted us to go to the Carnival this weekend—the one I could see when you took me on the rooftop for our anniversary. Sure, I probably wouldn't have made it three steps out of the building, but in my mind, I was gonna do it! While lying here, I've imagined how good the night air would have felt against my face when we were at the very tip-top of the Ferris wheel and you were trying to touch me inappropriately. It would have been a dream come true and I got a small taste by imagining it. Cotton candy, candied apples, and corn dogs. Kids laughing, you smiling, and Denala's tail wagging.

Tell Connor I'm sorry I knocked him out. It was the only way. I couldn't risk your life, and he would have never allowed me to leave the apartment. Don't be mad at him and don't let him be mad at himself. It was my decision, and I'm glad I made it. Dante says he's coming after you, but I know Connor will keep you safe. I refuse to

even let my mind imagine him entering your world. Stay safe.

I love you.

Noah

Below that letter, there were some other statements that looked like they'd been added later.

I dreamed about you—it was so fucking real.

I'm tired. I guess it's a waste of my energy to say I'm thirsty. I'm still thirsty.

Lonely.

Confused.

Dante Moretti would die.

Chapter 19

The only answer was he'd died and gone to heaven...which surprised him because Noah would've suspected he was more of a hell person. How could he not be? He'd trusted a murderer, ruined his parents' lives, and because of his greed to taste love, he'd introduced evil into Zachary's life. Those facts alone should have cemented his spot next to Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer, but it didn't feel like he was in hell. Quite the contrary, actually. The mattress beneath Noah felt plush with a cozy warm temperature, instead of the sweat dampened lumpy piece of shit he'd been sleeping on in his furnace tomb. For the past few days all he could hear were the sounds of his own breathing, crying, and cussing, but now there was soft music playing in the background and since it sounded a lot like the music Zachary listened to, a smile curved his lips. The biggest slice of heaven, however, was Zachary's heart-melting scent tickling his nose.

If he kept his eyes closed, he could pretend he was safely back in his apartment and his lover was either snuggled in bed with him or, at least, nearby.

Keep your eyes closed.

He'd learned fairly early on in his captivity that it didn't really help to open his eyes. Whether they were opened or closed, he was plunged into total darkness. When the first batch of Dante's drugs had worn off, he'd awoken to find himself sealed up tightly inside the small space that would eventually become his tomb. The space was bathed in bright lights at that time, and he'd been able to "enjoy" the things Dante left behind for him. Paper and pencil to write a goodbye note to Zachary. Pictures of him and Zachary together—some taken at the gym, some in the restaurant of their

apartment building, some from the elevator, and some from inside Noah's apartment. One only needed to look at those pictures to see how much love Noah and Zachary felt for one another, clearly visible in their smiles, touches, and smoldering looks.

So, he'd had paper and pencil, pictures of him and the man he loved, and spiders. The room was literally crawling with spiders, some large and hairy while others were small and scary. Noah remembered telling Dante how terrified he'd always been of spiders. Ha, the joke was on Dante. His fear of spiders had been pushed so far down on his terror scale that he'd barely given them a second glance. Well, except for the ones he managed to squish and splat. At least he'd taken out a few of them in those first lonely hours of bright light, anger, and remorse.

In a life filled with making one mistake after another, Noah had finally done something right—he'd written his letter to Zachary sometime during those first hours of captivity. Between looking at pictures and squishing spiders, he'd taken the time to tell Zach how much he loved him and tried to assure him he was being brave. The brave part was a definite stretch of the truth, but he suspected Zach would need to hear those words, so he'd written them down.

His plan had been to keep a short log of his ordeal, continuing to assure Zach of his love and bravery. If or when his body was found, he wanted Zach to know. To document his heartfelt thoughts of Zach and their relationship was to be his final gift to his lover, but Dante found a way to take that away from him as well.

Sometime during what he thought was his first day of captivity, although there was no way for him to know for certain without watches or windows, he'd drifted off to sleep. He'd fought it, but the stifling heat in the room and the remainder of Dante's drugs in his system created a losing battle. When he'd opened his eyes, he was surrounded in complete and smothering darkness. The lights Dante provided had been turned off and it was then Noah realized the pictures of him and Zachary hadn't been a gift to help comfort Noah as he died. No, Dante provided those as another form of

torture. Noah found the pictures in the darkness, touched them with the tips of his fingers, but he hadn't been able to see Zach's smiling face...never again. It was the worst form of pain, knowing Zach was right there, within the palm of his hand, but he couldn't see him.

To say it messed with his head and weakened his resolve to die with dignity was an understatement. He'd cried loud and ugly tears. Ranted and cursed the unfairness of it all. Banged his head against the floor. Whimpered and begged. He'd done everything in his power, but when he'd finally settled down and his tears had dried up, nothing had changed. He was still completely alone in the darkness...except for the spiders.

His spider phobia came back tsunami style. He could feel them crawling on him and hear them scurrying across the floor and up the walls. They bit him, and he scratched the bites until he could feel the blood coating his skin. They weren't poisonous, just terrifying. Poisonous would've been too kind and Dante wanted him to suffer for as long as possible.

He had no idea why Dante hated him so badly. He'd done exactly what the other man had wanted. Sure, he'd been tricked, but the outcome was the same. Dante now ruled the Moretti crime family.

Why not just kill him quickly? Why play with him for all these years? Why allow him to finally find love and then jerk it away from him in the most vicious of ways?

There were hundreds of questions and no answers, but Noah finally realized none of it mattered. It was what it was. There wasn't one damned thing he could do to change the outcome. His only hope was that Zachary and Connor remained safe.

A spider crawled across his cheek and he swatted it away. The fact he still possessed the strength to even attempt a swat surprised him. His strength had faded fast, leaving him to the point of just lying there, awaiting death to carry him away.

“Easy, babe,” a husky voice whispered in his ear. “It’s just me. Nobody’s ever going to hurt you again.”

Noah’s eyes flew open...or at least they fluttered open because fluttering was at the tip-top of his capabilities at the moment. Light, which he considered bright but probably really wasn’t, blinded him and made his eyelids crash closed again.

Light? How is there light? Shit, I’ve died. It’s heaven. The soft bed and delicious scent of Zachary are real. I’ve actually made it to heaven.

A soft chuckle, so close to his ear the person’s warm breath tickled that sensitive spot on his neck, gave him the incentive to try opening them again. The last thing he needed was to hit heaven wide open having inappropriate thoughts about whichever poor angel was tasked with welcoming him...but hewashaving inappropriate thoughts.

He peeked again, opening his eyes just a tiny slit so he could get accustomed to the lighting. Of course, a tiny slit was about all he could muster. His entire body, heart, and soul felt like it weighed a ton. It wasn’t the lifeless, weighted-down feeling he’d gotten acquainted with in his tomb, but more of a lazy, contented heaviness. He wondered how long of an adjustment period one was given once they passed through the pearly gates. Was there any chance they would consider letting him lounge around in his bed, passing the days and nights with naughty thoughts of Zachary? He doubted it.

“Hey, babe,” the familiar voice whispered again. “Are you ready to wake up for me? I’m right here waiting. There’s no rush. Take your time and know you’re safe. I’ll be right here, no matter how long it takes.” Lips touched his forehead softly. “Never again, Noah. I swear Moretti will never hurt you again. I love you—that’s another thing you’ll never have to wonder about again. I love you. You’re it for me. Hell, babe, you were it for me the first time I laid eyes on you. I’m so fucking sorry I

couldn't tell you sooner. I was a coward. I was afraid to admit you'd stolen my heart when I wasn't looking." The lips touched his cheek. "You're sneaky—that's what you are. You turned my pathetically boring world topsy-turvy with those sad eyes and sexy pout." Soft lips touched against Noah's. "I love you, Noah. You'll never doubt it again."

Noah opened his eyes more fully, squinted against the light, and turned his head in search of Zach's voice and warmth. It couldn't be. Zach couldn't be with him. He was lost...dying in a dark tomb, alone and scared.

Zach is with me.

"Hey, babe. How are you feeling? Don't move around too much. I've got you hooked to all kinds of IVs and monitors. You're safe and you're home. I knew you'd feel better if you woke up at home." Zach moved to sit on the edge of Noah's bed and his hands were busy touching every inch of Noah's body. He giggled nervously and said, "I'm sorry. I can't stop touching you. I was so fucking scared, Noah. I can't live in a world without you in it. Don't ever leave me again."

"How?" Noah croaked out, his voice sounding like he'd swallowed a cactus. Terror gripped his chest and he tried to swivel his head around, just to ensure he really was in a safe place. Wait, it wasn't his safe place, at least not anymore. Dante had cameras. He'd told him so. He needed to tell Zach, to warn him, but he couldn't make his tongue cooperate.

"Denala found you. She'd been trying to tell me for days, but I didn't understand." Zach's voice cracked, and he dropped his forehead against Noah's chest. "You would've been dead in another few hours. You were so fucking close, and I kept ignoring the signals she sent to me. I...I don't know what I would have done if she hadn't found you. Losing you would have shattered my soul but then finding out you were only one floor below the entire time? I wouldn't have survived. None of us

would've survived that." A disgusted laugh rolled from his mouth. "But then that was Dante's plan all along, I'm sure. He wanted to make us all suffer as much as possible."

"Cameras in my apartment, Zach," he finally managed to whisper. "He's watching now, I'm sure."

"Don't worry about that," Zach answered as he gently touched the side of Noah's face. "The FBI took care of the cameras and listening devices. Nobody's watching or listening. You're safe. That man will never touch you again."

Noah tried to make his brain compute all Zach's words, but fuzziness made it difficult. He'd been one floor below their apartment? Is that what Zach had said? One fucking floor? He didn't know whether he wanted to scream in outrage or laugh hysterically. Since he didn't have the strength to do either, he just lay on the bed and let his eyes soak up Zachary's beauty. He thought he'd never see his lover's beautiful face again...not this side of heaven, at least. Dark rings were under Zach's eyes, giving evidence to how much he'd suffered not knowing where Noah was or if he was safe. He looked like he'd aged ten years, but Noah knew he'd have him whipped back into shape in a matter of days. Not knowing where Noah was, what was happening to him, and most of all, not being able to do anything to help would've been the biggest torture of all for someone like Zachary.

Dante left him the pictures and then plunged him into inky darkness as a way to torture him. What he'd done to Zach was even worse. Had he died in that apartment, so close to Zachary all along, it would have been more than his protector and lover could have survived. Dante needed to die—no more hiding and waiting. The bastard had to go. Noah would never risk Zachary's wellbeing again. If he had to kill the bastard himself, Dante Moretti was leaving this world.

Using what very well may have been the last of his strength, Noah patted the side of

the bed and was rewarded by Denala immediately jumping onto the bed and stretching her body next to him. An even bigger surprise was when a slew of puppies followed right behind their mother. Noah giggled...or puffed out a breath that was supposed to be a giggle.

“Oh, shit,” Zachary mumbled as he tried to catch the wiggling puppies and put them back onto the floor. “Denala’s been dying to get on the bed with you, but I wouldn’t let her. I didn’t want you to be disturbed until you were ready. These damned puppies will drive you insane and rip every single tube out of your body for the benefit of their own enjoyment.” He grabbed the last puppy and set it on the floor. “Connor! Come get the puppies.”

That was the last Noah heard regarding the puppy apocalypse. With his right hand buried in Denala’s soft fur, he drifted off to sleep again. This time, feeling safe and so fucking happy he feared his heart might explode.

He was safe. Denala had rescued him. Zachary loved him. Connor might still be pissed with him, but he was at least in the apartment somewhere. As soon as Dante Moretti was dead, all would be perfect in his world.

Chapter 20

Zach stared at Noah as he slept. Despite the red welts covering the majority of his body from all the damn spider bites, the dark rings beneath his eyes, and the thinness of his face, he still looked blissfully peaceful as he slept. The dehydration and lack of nourishment over the last ninety hours made his cheekbones even more prominent and his long black lashes darker against his pale flesh. His lips might appear just as pouty as Zach remembered, but their normal pretty pink had faded. That, he vowed, would change soon enough. If he had his way, he would spend the rest of his life hand-feeding Noah every single delightful treat his body might be craving at the moment. It wasn't healthy or the correct way of thinking, but he'd be over-the-moon satisfied with the idea of Noah never wanting to leave the apartment again. It would be easier to keep him safe from all harm right where he was.

That wasn't fair, though. They couldn't live the rest of their lives in fear. As much as he wanted it, he couldn't keep someone as beautiful as Noah hidden away from the rest of the world. Noah deserved to shine, to live his life with the hint of excitement and carefreeness he'd started to exhibit before Dante invaded their happiness. In his letter, Noah had talked about braving the carnival, and Zachary could imagine the sparkle in Noah's eyes when he'd imagined them on the Ferris wheel, even as he thought he was about to die. They would do that one day—laugh together and then kiss with wild abandon when they were at the top of the carnival ride. As soon as Noah was ready, Zachary would move heaven and earth to see it happen.

Nothing...and no one would ever hold Noah back again.

It was simple enough: Dante Moretti would die and Zachary was more than happy to

ensure it happened sooner as opposed to later. As soon as Noah was completely safe and recovering nicely, he would find a way to destroy Moretti for what he'd done. Some folks might laugh at him for thinking he could take out a Las Vegas crime boss. Hell, even the FBI couldn't locate him, much less arrest him and make him answer for what he'd done to Noah. But those people who might not think him capable didn't know how he'd grown up. They weren't aware his father had taught him to shoot a gun before he'd been taught his ABCs and 123s. His father might be considered a vile man by most everyone he encountered, and he'd been the worst father and role model imaginable, but if he'd ever done anything in his life, he'd taught his son how to survive...how to kill.

That part of his life was something Zach had wanted to be able to put behind him, forget all about, and pretend it never happened. He was better than that. He was a respectable doctor living in a respectable apartment building, wore respectable clothes, and carried himself in a manner making it unquestionable he fit in with the upper crust of respectable society. When he rolled out of bed, dressed in his tailor-made clothes, and went to his job, nobody could ever look at him and know what he came from. With a life-plan formed when he was barely a teen, Zachary had always known he would walk away from the motorcycle gang his father had ruled with a blazing gun and a sincere shortage of morals.

He hadn't ever intended to return to that way of life. Walk away and never look back. Shake it off and pretend to be something he wasn't. That had always been his plan.

But now, he would take all those skills he'd tucked away into the deepest corners of his heart and soul and he'd use them to kill a man...to kill an entire family, if that was what it took. There was no doubting it; doing this, becoming a killer like his father, would destroy a part of him he'd tried so hard to protect, but it would be worth it. Noah's safety was worth everything.

"What are you thinking about?" Noah's weak voice interrupted his dark thoughts.

His heart leaped into his chest as he jumped to his feet and leaned over the bed. Crystal blue eyes were locked onto him, still looking a bit foggy and weak, but locked onto him nonetheless. Noah blinked slowly and offered Zach a weak smile. His hand, covered with red bites, automatically reached for Denala, and Zach could see the happiness settle on Noah's face when he found her still lying next to him. Once Noah had patted the bed to allow her to join him, she'd only left to see to the puppies, eat, and take care of her personal business. Zach didn't have the heart to even attempt to keep her out of the bed. His dog and his lover had formed a bond that had ended up saving Noah's life. The most worthless tracking dog in the history of the training academy where she'd grown up turned out to be the most valuable asset in his life.

Stroking the side of Noah's face, he answered, "I'm thinking about you, baby. I'm thinking about how much I love you and how I never intend for us to be apart again."

Noah coughed out a weak laugh. "I hope to hell you weren't. The look on your face was dark and dangerous. I'd hate to think thoughts of me put it there." He reached up to touch the hand stroking his cheek. "Thank you for rescuing me, Zach. I hadn't really held out much hope. I have some firsthand experience on how thoroughly Dante Moretti can cover his tracks so I'd already accepted death. Did you get my note? I wasn't sure if you'd ever see it, but I hoped you would. I worried about you."

Zach couldn't believe what he was hearing. Noah worried about me? "Why me? You were the one he'd left to die slowly. Did you know where you were? Please tell me you knew you were still in your safe zone," Zach whispered. Noah's hand touching his made his heart feel perfect. Unable to stop himself, he climbed into the bed and snuggled against Noah, making sure not to dislodge any of his tubes or the leads to his monitors. He needed Noah's body against his, to feel his heart beating.

"Climb aboard, sailor," Noah teased in a voice still sounding way too weak for Zach's peace of mind.

“I love you, Noah,” Zach told him after he’d settled into a comfortable position with Noah’s back resting against his chest and Zach’s arms wrapped possessively around Noah. “I can’t believe I almost lost you without telling you how I really felt. I’d been so selfish...so cowardly. I wanted to say the words, babe. I honestly did, but I was too fucking weak. Not any more, though. I love you.”

Noah snuggled against him and laughed softly. “I know you love me, Zach. I told you in the letter. I didn’t need to hear the words. Your actions were enough to tide me over until you felt comfortable enough to say it out loud. You gave me your heart. I gave you mine. That was enough for me.”

Noah’s heart was so perfect, even with all the damage the Moretti family had inflicted on it. Zach wanted to squeeze him tighter but was afraid he might snap him in two. Noah felt frail in his arms. “That may have been enough, but you deserved more. You deserved to have all of me, and I held some back. It won’t happen again. I promise, babe.”

“I’m tired, Zach. I’m gonna try not to drift off again, but I can’t make any promises. I feel so fucking weak and it pisses me off.” He swiveled his head around to gaze up into Zach’s eyes. “I really want you to fuck me right now, to make me feel alive again, but I suspect that’s out of the question.”

“Definitely out of the question,” Zach answered quickly and then softened it with a kiss to the top of Noah’s head.

“I was afraid you would say that, but you’re gonna have to watch yourself, babe,” Noah warned in a firm voice that was downgraded from angry to just plain sexy by the yawn accompanying it at the end. “We’ve done that whole you in protective mode and not giving me the what I want and need thing, and it didn’t work out for us. Remember? I know you, know how you like to control and protect. I’m going to try to be lenient with you for a while ’cause you’ve been through a lot, but don’t get

comfortable with my generosity. I want to be treated like a man, not a mouse. Got it?" Another yawn, this one bigger than the last.

Zach was so fucking thankful Dante hadn't succeeded in taking away Noah's love of life and never-ending sassiness. "Agreed," he said as he tugged Noah closer to him. "I'll try to put my big boy panties on and handle you with my usual intensity just as soon as I know you're back to one hundred percent."

"Sixty percent," Noah countered.

Zach rolled his eyes, loving Noah more with each passing second. All he'd been able to think about since seeing Noah looking like a corpse was killing Dante Moretti. He'd imagined every form of torture his mind could conjure up and had even taken a few minutes to research torture methods on the internet. He wanted to hear Moretti cry and beg for mercy. He wanted to see his crimson blood spray the walls in a glorious display of macabre art. More than anything, he wanted to stare into his eyes and watch as the very last of his life essence drained from his body. From the moment Noah had woken, he'd been his usual fun-loving, playful self. Zach didn't deserve someone like Noah, but he sure as hell wasn't giving him up.

No secrets.

"I'm going to tell you a story, babe. The short version of my life, and I hope it helps you understand why I'm such a fucking asshole."

Noah wiggled around until his head rested on Zach's chest and he was able to look into Zach's eyes. His blue eyes were weak, making it look like it took every drop of his energy to keep them open. He blinked slowly and then whispered, "I love you, Zachary Meadows. I want to tell you now, before you share your short story, and I'll tell you again when you're finished. There isn't a goddamn thing you can say that is capable of changing how I feel about you."

“I hope not,” Zach answered quietly. “My father was a bad man...isa bad man,” he corrected. “I grew up in Texas where I spent practically every moment of my life surrounded by every form of immorality one could imagine, and my old man was at the tip-top of the shit pile. He was the president of the mother chapter of a motorcycle gang called the Demons of Riot.” Zach drew in a deep breath. “They were bad, Noah, but they were all I had...all I knew. It sounds weird, but they were my family. I pretty much grew up down at the clubhouse, each member throwing their two cents in on how to raise a baby and turn him into a man. Let’s just say, if you added all their cents in together, you still didn’t come up with a shit’s worth of anything when it came to morals, empathy, or just simply doing what the fuck was right. I knew about loyalty—you never betrayed your brother. They were willing to die for each other, to die for me without a thought or a moment of hesitation.”

Noah’s eyes were still locked with his, watching him closely and holding him even closer. There wasn’t shock or judgment in those blue depths, though. There wasn’t even pity. He was just...there. When Zach looked down into Noah’s eyes, he was looking at the same loyalty he’d witnessed with his motorcycle family, but with Noah, there was also morality, empathy, love, and a hint of innocence.

“They sound a lot like my family but only wrapped with different paper and different bows,” Noah said. “Keep going. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“You never interrupt, babe,” Zach assured him. “So, I grew up with some pretty damned warped views of life. I knew how to load a gun and fire it before I could construct with Legos. I’d watched people having sex, live and right in your face, before I knew Santa Claus wasn’t real. I couldn’t put a number on the times people had been dragged into the club, shuffled into one of the back rooms, and then I’d never see them again. Kids at school feared me. Hell, parents of the kids at school feared me. Through all that shit, though, I loved my dad. He wasn’t a good guy, but he was my guy, and I loved him. While I never said it out loud, I knew he hurt people and sold drugs and illegal weapons. I knew this, but kept turning a blind eye because

he was my dad.”

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Zach took a deep breath and probably wouldn't have been able to continue with his story if Noah hadn't used his last bit of strength to raise up and kiss him softly on his lips. "I love you," he assured Zach.

"One afternoon I was hanging out at the club because there wasn't any point in me attending high school anymore. I'd already flunked for the year and pretty much decided I was dropping out. Hell, like I needed a high school diploma to replace my dad as president of the club one day. He was teaching me everything I needed to know, right? So, there I was, drinking and enjoying the latest street drug the club was selling, when some of dad's soldiers brought in two teenage girls and a young boy." Zach's eyes took on a haunted look. "I didn't have a clue what was going on, but I was still sober enough to know that whatever it was, I didn't like it. These kids were...clean. They weren't the regular motorcycle riding, drug selling, law-breaking citizens who usually frequented the club. No, the three of them had a halo of purity hanging over them. The girls, probably around my own age at the time, were the type of girls I hated because I knew they were better than me. The boy, still just a baby, wasn't any bigger than a minute. He had these big blue eyes and pale blond hair. His skin was a flawless alabaster shade. He'd peed his pants, and my dad's enforcer was making fun of him. Couldn't have been a day older than eight years of age, and he was being made fun of for pissing himself. Hell, I was nearly a grown man and there were times when they scared me so fucking bad I'd almost pissed myself...and I knew they liked me."

Noah's right hand, still anchored by the IV, gently stroked Zach, methodically moving from one spot to the next...always touching him. His pale skin, marred only by the bites, looked as pure and alabaster as that little boy's had looked. His eyes just as blue. His heart just as innocent.

“Those girls? The ones I’d always hated on sight because I just knew in my heart they were heartless bitches only caring about themselves? Yeah, they were facing my dad’s enforcer down, threatening to cut his balls off and shove them down his throat if he didn’t leave the little boy alone. I sat there like a fucking mute while those two teenage girls tried to protect a boy who, in the end, turned out to be someone they didn’t even know.”

“Stop blaming yourself, Zach,” Noah whispered. “You told me I couldn’t blame myself for all of Moretti’s shit, so you can’t blame yourself for something beyond your control. You aren’t that person, babe. You’re the man who saved my life.”

“The club was into human trafficking. I didn’t know it—it was one of the many things my father kept hidden from me. One of the girls was stolen right off the streets only a few blocks over from where the clubhouse was located. The other girl was brought in from New York City—a runaway trying to survive on the streets because her stepdad had been raping her while her mother turned a blind eye to her torment. The little boy was from a wealthy family in Massachusetts. He was their only child, and while I didn’t know it at the time, they’d been moving heaven and earth trying to find their baby boy. He’d been missing for four days as the different clubs passed him from state to state until he finally made it to my dad’s club.”

Zach could still see the fear in that little boy’s eyes. Tears streaked down his dirty face and his tiny hand trembled as it hung lifelessly at his side. The girls glared at Zach, one of them looking faintly familiar. He’d just sat his ass right there on the sofa and watched as the enforcer and a couple of soldiers hauled them toward the back rooms.

“It took some digging on my part, but I finally realized what was going on. I went to my dad and demanded he let them go and stop the human trafficking shit. He’d always given me everything I wanted, so I never expected he wouldn’t bow down to me on this. I’d been wrong, though. Dead fucking wrong. The next thing I knew, the

three of them disappeared and it sure the fuck wasn't because they'd been set free."

"It's okay, babe. You aren't that man anymore," Noah said quietly.

"I went straight to the cops, Noah. I went straight there and told them everything. Every. Fucking. Thing. I turned on my father and the club, the only family I'd ever known. One day I'd woken up the prince of my own world, and the next day I was completely alone. Their love hadn't been much, but it had been all I'd ever known. I threw it all away, Noah. I threw my family away, sent them to prison, and do you know what for? Nothing, Noah. The one girl I thought I recognized was recovered. As it turned out, she was Connor's cousin. That's why I thought I recognized her—she was in some pictures at his house. Connor was my one and only friend outside of the club, and I have no fucking idea why we were even friends. More than that, I have no idea why we remained friends after what happened. The other girl, the one with the fucked-up shitty life? They'd found her dead. She'd been bought as a party favor, and they'd raped her until she died."

"They never found the little boy." Zach laughed bitterly. "Hell, to this fucking day Connor still looks for him. He looks for him because that's the type of guy Connor is—the good guy. He also looks for him because he knows I lost a part of my soul over that little boy. I could've saved him, but I didn't, Noah. I just sat there, drunk and high as a kite as they led him away."

"You were a kid, Zach," Noah responded in what would have sounded like an angry growl if he hadn't been so damned weak. "You did the best you could and I know of one family who really appreciates you stepping up when you did. Let it go, Zach. Don't keep blaming yourself for something beyond your control."

Noah's words helped, but Zach would never really be able to remove all the self-loathing and self-hatred he'd acquired on one fateful day. Hell, not just that one day. When all the facts came out during his father's trial, he'd learned what a monster his

father truly was. The man he'd loved and thought loved him; the man who had been his hero right up until the moment Zach had locked eyes with that little boy.

"It is what it is," Zach answered in an empty voice. "If I could change it, I would. I'd give anything if I would've had the courage to save all those kids that day. I changed after that, Noah. I turned my life around, mostly with help from Connor and his family, but we turned it around. I tried my damndest to become the man who would be considered the complete opposite of my father. The education, the job, the clothes, the wealth...everything. I never saw him again after the trial, after I testified against him. He received a life sentence without the possibility of parole. He's dead to me."

"I love Connor even more now," Noah said. "I'm glad he was there for you before I came along." He smiled. "Anyway, I kinda like the new Zachary Meadows. I think I'll keep him."

Zach laughed. "I told you all that because there's something else you need to know, Noah. I vowed there wouldn't be any more secrets or lies between us and I mean it. I'm going to give you all of me because that's what you deserve."

"What? You're scaring me, Zach. Contrary to popular belief, I'm not fond of being scared."

"Every single day since that afternoon, when I came face-to-face with what my family really was, I've hated every damned thing about my past. Every. Damned. Thing. I wanted to ignore the tattoos covering my body, forget the skills my father had taught me, and pretend I was a nice, normal, contributing member of society. I chose the medical profession, because in my mind, it was about as far from what my father did as I could get—other than being a cop, but that was Connor's dream, and I didn't want to bring my darkness to his world."

"Do you enjoy it now?" Noah asked. His eyelids were getting droopier and droopier,

but he was being a real trooper and trying to stay focused on what Zach was saying. In truth, Zach wasn't being exactly fair to Noah, dumping all this on him right now when he was still barely able to suck in his next breath. But Zach couldn't stop the words. Noah needed to know. Everything.

"I enjoy helping people, but I'm not sure it's how I want to spend the rest of my life." He shrugged like it was no big deal. "Maybe I'll try something different down the road." He would most definitely try something different down the road. He wouldn't have any choice. Even if he managed to survive and not go to prison when he killed Dante Moretti, there was still that medical oath to do no harm—he took that shit seriously. After he finished what Moretti started, he would need to walk away from medicine.

"If I had any money, I could pay you to just hang around and fuck me," Noah teased, trying to lighten Zach's dark mood.

"I told you all this, Noah, because you need to know I'm going to kill Dante Moretti. I'm going to finally put my father's training to good use, and I'm going to kill the son of a bitch for what he did to you." When Noah opened his mouth to argue, Zach silenced him with a kiss—a soft, gentle touch of his lips to Noah's. He explored his lover's mouth like they were touching for the first time. The union of their lips had nothing to do with sex, but everything to do with love. When they finally broke apart, Zach whispered, "I'm going to kill him, babe. You'll never have to live in fear again."

"I can't let you do that, Zach," Noah argued. Pain and sorrow drenched his eyes in the form of tears. "I won't let you do that. It isn't you. The FBI will protect me. This time, I know who the real enemy is. He won't get an opportunity to get close to me again."

"I'm sorry, Noah. This isn't something I can leave to the FBI. If it's up to them,

they'll take you away from me, and I'll never even know where you are...if you're afraid and lonely. This is something I have to do myself." Zach kissed Noah's forehead. "No, this is something I want to do."

"Please, no, Zach," Noah pleaded. "I won't ever be able to feel the same again. Please don't."

It was the words Zach had most feared. Noah wouldn't be able to love him after he took another man's life. He'd known it was a possibility, hoped it wouldn't be reality, but he was prepared to walk away if he had to...if that was what it took to keep Noah safe. The FBI couldn't protect Noah—they'd done a bang-up job of it so fucking far. No, he couldn't rely on anyone else.

With a courage he didn't really feel, Zach answered, "I was afraid you wouldn't be able to feel the same about me if I killed another man. I know your gentle heart, Noah. It's okay. I'm going to do this for you, and then I'll walk away. I can't let Moretti live. I just can't."

Noah reached up and grabbed both sides of Zach's face and gripped him tightly. "I wasn't talking about how I would feel about you, Zach. I'll love you until the day I draw my last breath, and there's not a damned thing in this world that will change that. There's not a fucking thing you can do to change that," he vowed. "I was talking about how it would make me feel, knowing my stupidity and dumb-ass decisions forced you to veer off the path you'd chosen. I would hate myself, Zach. I would blame myself, and there wouldn't be a thing you could say or do to change that. Please don't do this. Please don't put this burden on my shoulders. I've been doing so well, improving every day. This will destroy all those improvements and steps forward, Zach. You know it will. I'll hate myself."

Zach sucked in a breath. Well, fuck. Zach hadn't been prepared for that argument. He'd been more than willing to throw his own life away, but he wouldn't do anything

to jeopardize Noah's mental and physical health.Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

From the opened doorway, Connor cleared his throat, drawing their attention to him. Wayne stood next to him, looking exhausted and rejuvenated at the same time.

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“Sorry to interrupt, but I think now’s the perfect time,” Connor said as he and Wayne walked into the bedroom. Wayne sat down on one of the chairs around Noah’s bed so they could all be together while he recovered. Connor walked over to the bed, leaned down to kiss Noah’s cheek, and said, “I’m going to kick your sweet ass for knocking me out, making me look the fool, and getting this guy pissed at me.” He kissed his other cheek. “Just giving you a head’s up, little man. I’m talking turn you over my knee and blister your ass.”

Noah blushed. “I had to, Conn. He threatened to kill Zach if I didn’t do what he said. You know I couldn’t risk Zach’s safety. Anyway, I needed you out of the picture so you would be around to take care of Zach after I was gone. Dante will come for him, too. It’s gonna be your job to keep both of us safe, and I have no doubts at all that you’ll be able to do it.”

Connor grinned. “Stroke my ego, why don’t you, little man,” he teased. “Did you see my chest puff out with each word you said? Yeah, you may have just gotten yourself a reprieve. Of sorts. How ’bout I let Zachary blister your ass...and I’ll just watch? Sound fair?”

“Deal,” Noah answered with a weak grin.

Connor gave Zach’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze and then he went to stand behind Wayne, massaging his shoulders one second and then caressing his cheek the next. Zach wasn’t sure he would ever truly trust Wayne, but it was plain to see his best friend did. They were in love. It should have warmed Zach’s heart but, instead, made him feel queasy. Why couldn’t he trust Wayne? The man had been nothing but supportive during this entire ordeal.

Something still felt...off.

“So...we couldn’t help but overhear some of what you guys were talking about,” Connor said from his protective perch behind Wayne. “Noah, it isn’t right for you to have to pick between letting the FBI relocate you to some unknown place and you either leave Zach behind and break your heart or take him with you and break my heart. It just isn’t fair.”

“Thank you,” Zach agreed wholeheartedly. After their recent talks, he wasn’t surprised Connor was on his side, was going to allow him to kill another man. If anybody could help him pound the necessity of him killing Dante Moretti into Noah’s head, it would be Connor. Hell, he’d even take Wayne’s help at this point—Noah liked the other man. If it took him sucking up to Wayne to get Noah to go along with his plan, then he’d be the best damned sucker this side of the Mason-Dixon Line. “That’s what I was trying to tell Noah, but he’s too stubborn to see the facts right now. Me killing Moretti is our only way out of this fucking mess, and I’m more than willing to do it.”

Noah’s bottom lip literally puckered in a pout. Too bad. Zach couldn’t risk anything happening to the man he loved.

Wayne looked at Zach and said, “Zach, it isn’t right for you to do something that’s completely opposite of everything you’ve vowed to live your life for. You save people. You don’t kill them. Killing Dante Moretti, while the man deserves death more than Satan deserves hell, would kill a part of you...no, it would kill the best part of you. On top of that, it would destroy Noah. He would have to live the rest of his life with the guilt of knowing if your paths had never crossed, you wouldn’t have ended up taking another man’s life. Don’t get me wrong. Noah would be completely innocent, but nobody would ever be able to convince him of that.”

“Thank you,” Noah yelled with more life than he’d shown since they’d pulled him

out of that tomb.

“Mind your own fucking business,” Zach growled at the man he already didn’t trust. “This has absolutely nothing to do with you.” Turning his glare to Connor, he said, “Get your man in hand, Conn. I don’t need his bullshit right now. Actually, I don’t need him here at all. I still don’t fucking understand your sudden involvement with my life. I lived here for months and you barely said more than twenty words to me. The minute Noah comes into my life, I can’t fart without it blowing the hair out of your eyes.”

Connor grimaced. “Dude, that was just in poor taste. Not only was the visual disgusting, but you’re so going to live to regret those words.” Connor shook his head. “Did I mention you were going to regret those words?”

“I regret introducing the two of you,” Zach roared as he started to stand up. The moment he moved, he noticed Noah grimace, so he quickly stopped moving and hugged Noah tight.

“You’re being an ass, Zach. I’ve told you over and over Wayne’s a good guy. Why do you insist on believing the worst about him?” Noah’s blue eyes turned to Wayne. “You wouldn’t do anything to hurt me, would you, Wayne?”

“Never, kid,” Wayne answered. “Never.”

“Oh...well, that clears that up,” Zach replied sarcastically. “Let me set all my concerns aside. You’ve given your word, so all’s good, right?”

Wayne’s eyes flickered up to Connor and then returned to Zach. “No, brother,” he answered quietly. “I’ve given my solemn Demon Oath to protect you. By protecting you, Noah obviously came along with the package.”

Noah frowned in confusion.

Connor looked worried and smug at the same time.

Zach felt like somebody had just ripped the rug right out from under his feet, and he was tumbling ass over head down into a ravine that had no bottom. Brother? Demon Oath?

He couldn't be.

He had to be.

Why would a member of the Demons protect him? He was a traitor. When someone did what he did to the club, they disappeared off the face of the earth. For the first few years, he'd been certain they would come looking for him, determined to torture and murder him for his betrayal of the club. When that hadn't happened, he'd convinced himself he must have some sort of protection because of his father.

Never would a member of the club be sent to protect him—his father hadn't been that powerful.

“What are you saying?” he asked quietly. “Are you here to kill me, Wayne? Did my father send you?”

Wayne rolled his eyes in disbelief. “You are one stubborn son-of-a-bitch, Zachary Meadows. I just told you I'd taken an oath to protect you. That hardly puts me into the enforcer or sergeant-at-arms category.”

Zach couldn't begin to understand what he was hearing. “I think you need to explain what's going on,” he told Wayne. Another thought dawned on him and he turned to Connor. “Did you know this? Did you know who Wayne was associated with?”

Connor didn't look the least bit contrite. "As soon as I saw him without his clothes on, I had a damned good idea. His tattoos looked awfully familiar. I questioned him on it, gave him a chance to explain, and then verified what he told me." He glanced down at Wayne and grimaced. "Sorry, babe. Verifying is my thing...especially when it involves the people I love." When Wayne didn't look too upset, he leaned down and placed a quick kiss on his lips. "Which includes you now," he said. "You're one of the people I love now." He winked. "Just in case you weren't clear on that."

"What? You just called up the local chapter of Demons of Riot and asked them to verify Wayne was who he said he was? It doesn't work that way, Connor." He turned and eyeballed Wayne. "Talk to me. Convince me I'm not a dead man. It's been a few years since I reviewed the by-laws, but I'm pretty damned sure I remember you died for doing what I did to the club. You sure as hell didn't get an order of protection."

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Wayne drew in a deep breath and met Zach's gaze. "Like you, Zach, I grew up in the club. My dad was an enforcer for the Georgia president. Unlike you, my dad never wanted me to be a member of the club, fought me tooth and nail when I joined. He insisted on things like completing high school and, hopefully, moving on to college. He wanted better things for me, but I was too dumb or too stubborn to open my eyes and see how right he was...and how wrong I was. I'd created this glamorous version of the club in my mind, and nobody could pry it out of my head, not even my own father. The day I took the oath was one of the saddest days of my father's life. I was flying high, but he was crashing and burning." Wayne reached up to cover Connor's hand resting on his shoulder, appearing to gather strength from the simple touch. "Needless to say, it didn't take long for the glamor to tarnish and reality to set in. It was ugly. It was brutal. I saw and did things that blackened my soul. After the first year, I wanted out. O-U-T, out." He laughed bitterly. "As I'm sure you know, you don't just leave the brotherhood. Once a member, always a member. I was miserable and slowly started hating myself and, even worse, started hating my father—the very man who'd tried to warn me off the club. We fought. I rebelled. I barely existed and was headed down a path that would have eventually led to them making me disappear."

"Are...are you still a member?" Noah asked.

Zach knew Noah was exhausted, but he was wide awake, eyes glued to Wayne. He looked so worried about his friend. It was amazing that someone who had been betrayed over and over again could still put all their faith in a person. Zach wished his heart were that pure.

Wayne shrugged. "Yes and no. Like I said, once a member, always a member. You

never really get completely out of the club, no matter what. In my case, I ended up getting somewhat of a ‘free pass’ ticket.” His eyes turned to Zach as he added, “Kinda like what Zach got.”

“Your father?” Zach asked.

“Yeah. My father gave his life protecting the president of our chapter—literally took the bullet meant for Gabriel. I didn’t know it, but he had a written agreement with Gabriel that, if anything happened to him, if he gave his life for the club, his son would be given a pass.” Wayne took a deep breath. “I would be allowed to walk away from the club without any retribution. I hated him and made sure he knew I hated him for introducing me to that lifestyle. In return for that hate, he forfeited his life so I could have mine back.”

Noah was frowning. “But you said you’d taken a...a...demon oath to protect Zach. I assume that’s a biker club oath of some kind? If you aren’t a member any longer, why do that?”

Wayne laughed again, but this time, it sounded more genuine. “Well, kid, you never really leave the club. I may have been given my freedom back, but club freedom always comes with a price. Before leaving, I had to agree to be on call if the brothers ever needed me.” His eyes turned back to Zach. “When Zach and Connor moved into my area, I was suddenly on call. Gabriel visited me and let me know the club expected me to keep an eye on Zach and to make sure he stayed safe. I thought to myself that it should be a simple job. I mean, how much trouble can a good doctor get into, right?”

Noah blushed. “Yeah, that’s on me.”

“Well, I’ll just say that the good doctor turned out to be more trouble than I anticipated. Hell, I might have even considered going on the run from the club and

leaving Dr. Meadows to handle his shit by himself, but then I saw his bestie and I wasn't going anywhere."

"That's me," Connor piped up. "I'm the bestie. I'm the reason he stayed." He winked at Noah. "Yeah, that's on me."

Zach frowned. "I don't get it. Why would they care if I stayed safe or not? The club should want me dead. Hell, my own father should want me dead."

"Apparently not," Wayne conceded. "When Gabriel came to me, he said he owed your father a debt that could never be repaid and your father wanted him to make sure you were safe—to watch over his son when he couldn't."

"But why?" Zach couldn't begin to understand what was happening or why it was happening. "He should hate me. He's in prison because of me. He'll die in prison because of me."

"No, Zach," Noah growled. "He's in prison because of the crimes he committed. Because of the drugs, the weapons deals, the human trafficking...all of it. He put himself in prison, not you."

Noah was right...but also wrong.

"It must have been quite a debt, too," Wayne interjected. "The Demons really stepped up for your father, Zach."

"What do you mean? What else besides making sure Moretti didn't kill me?"

"Well, that's a pretty big damned deal, Meadows," Connor countered. "Keeping you and Noah alive turned out to be a full-time job." He motioned for Wayne to turn on the television. As Wayne held up the remote and started channel surfing, Connor

continued, “Wayne kept the brotherhood up to date on what was happening with you and Noah, who we thought the threat was coming from, and then, eventually, who was responsible for Noah’s abduction and attempted murder. All the while, Wayne was busy trying to keep yours and Noah’s asses safe, mine satisfied, and the club up to date. He was doing all of this while you were bitching at him and sending him the stink eye every chance you got. I bet you feel like shit now, don’t you, Meadows?” Connor scratched at the wound covering Zach’s heart but did it in a way that only a best friend could.

Zach did feel like shit. He didn’t like that Wayne had once been a member of the same clusterfuck he’d been involved with, but he totally understood where the guy was coming from. Their lives had been very similar but the exit from the club so very different. He still couldn’t begin to comprehend why his father would want to protect him. None of it made sense.

“Wait! There. What’s going on?” Noah yelled, startling Zach from his thoughts. His lover, as weak as a kitten, struggled to rise up into a sitting position so he could get a closer look at the television. Zach helped Noah up and then moved to sit directly behind him, offering a solid wall of muscles and love for him to lean back on since Zach knew Noah wouldn’t have the strength to hold himself up. Once Noah was situated, Zach glanced at the television to see the Moretti name flashing across the bottom of the screen while news reporters were gathered outside a huge mansion. Helicopters flew overhead and police tape decorated the background for the reporter as she talked into her microphone.

“Turn it up,” Noah yelled.

The four of them sat in silence, listening to the latest news on the Moretti crime family. Zach’s throat tightened up in fear for about two seconds before his heart exploded with joy and relief.

“Last night, while the FBI was busy investigating the possible murder of the senior Moretti crime boss in his prison cell, it appears some sort of vigilante justice took place at the luxurious home of Dante Moretti, the son of Donovan Moretti and the apparent next-in-line to rule the notorious Las Vegas crime family—alleged crime family. Our sources are telling us that during a meeting between Dante Moretti and his top advisors, to discuss the recent death of his father, someone—or several vigilantes according to unconfirmed reports—shot their way into the heavily armed compound and murdered every attending member, including Dante Moretti. Sources tell us the massacre may have been the work of a rival organization taking advantage of Moretti gathering his troops and convincing them of his ability to fill his father’s notorious shoes. While we haven’t received solid confirmation from the FBI agents on the scene, our behind the scenes informant verifies the deceased are only members of the Moretti organization. We will continue to update you as we receive details. Hopefully what happens in Vegas won’t stay in Vegas this time, and we’ll be able to shed more light on the gruesome details of justice...vigilante style.”

The reporter smiled into the camera like she was the funniest comedienne in the world, and Zach’s heart soared straight out of his fucking chest. Moretti was dead?

Noah was safe.

“Oh, my God! He’s dead, Zach. Moretti is dead.” Noah gushed and wiggled around for a hug. Before Zach knew what had happened, Noah straddled his lap and kissed him with reckless abandon. He was practically doing a lap dance while their lips tangoed. When he broke away for a breath, Noah said, “He’s dead and you didn’t have to kill him. Holy shit. He’s dead. I’m safe. You’re safe.” He leaned in and whispered against Zach’s ear, “I really want you to fuck me right now. I can’t promise I won’t pass out from weakness right in the middle of it, so I’m gonna tell you ahead of time that it’s the best I’ve ever had. He’s fucking dead, babe. No more worries.”

Zach couldn't help but laugh at Noah's enthusiasm. The smile on his face, spider bites and all, transformed him into an angel.

"Jeez, guys, get a room," Connor grumbled good-naturedly. "I'd hold out until Zach made an honest man of you, Noah. Let the well dry up until he puts a ring on it."

Noah looked over his shoulder at Connor and said, "This well ain't ever gonna dry up, Conn."

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Zach eased Noah out of his lap, which wasn't an easy task since his lover saw what was going on and tried to lock his legs into a vise around Zach's waist. After a full minute of nips, bites, growls, and whimpers of disappointment, Zach had Noah lying on his back in the hospital bed they'd moved into their bedroom. "Don't make me strap you down," Zach warned playfully.

"Promises, promises," Noah whined. "Forty percent and not one percent higher. Understood?" he demanded with a bottom-lip pout that would have made any five-year-old proud.

"Understood," Zach agreed.

"Yeah, we're gonna go now," Connor said. "I suspect the FBI will be paying us a visit, and Wayne will need to disappear before that happens." He glanced at his wristwatch and added, "If I play my cards right, I might have time for a quickie before I send him on his way."

Noah frowned. "Why does he need to hide from the FBI? That doesn't make sense."

"The local authorities know me from my days with the club, Noah. They don't trust me, and I'm sure they wouldn't hesitate to share that with the FBI if they knew of any connection between me and you. I've got nothing to hide, but I'd rather not open a can of worms if it doesn't have to be opened." He shrugged and laughed. "Anyway, I've been getting a lot of quickies because of my hiding-from-the-FBI status. It's not like I'm really suffering."

Connor slapped his ass. "Let's go, big guy. I've got plans for you, and I think Noah

has plans for our sweet little Zachary.”

Before walking away, Wayne turned back to Zach and said, “Your protection was a gift from your father, Zach. He would love to talk to you if you could ever find it in your heart to visit him. Your call, man. I’m just delivering the message.”

“Moretti?” Zach asked quietly.

Wayne winked at him and answered. “Moretti was a gift from Gabriel. He said to make sure you knew it was his own personal gift. There wasn’t time to get word to your father about Noah’s rescue. Gabriel had to act with the information he had and didn’t want to risk Moretti fleeing the country before justice could be handed out.” Wayne shrugged. “I have no idea what he owed your father, but it must have been a hell of a lot. Either way, Moretti is dead and both you and Noah are safe.” He started to leave and then turned back around again. “Oh...and, of course, he said to tell you the club might have to call on your expertise one day and he hoped you’d be willing to assist the brotherhood if it called for it.”

With the dropping of that atomic bomb, he walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“Shit,” Noah whispered. “Is that bad? Do they like...ownyou now?”

“They’ve always owned me, babe. They always have, and it looks like they always will.”

“You gonna be okay with that?”

Zach smiled. “I’m more than okay with that, Noah. By killing Moretti and pretty much wiping out his entire family, they’ve given you the opportunity for a safe and normal life.” He kissed Noah softly and tenderly, showing as much love as he could

possibly show. “I love you, Noah, and I swear I’ll never hold those words back again. I’m sorry I was so weak and unable to give you my entire heart. You know you have it, right? You have all of me, babe. I love you with my good parts and my bad parts.”

Noah smiled sleepily. “The words are definitely nice to hear, Zach, but I didn’t have to have them. I knew how you felt about me. You might not have wanted to love me, but you couldn’t stop yourself.” He grinned. “I’m too lovable.”

“You are definitely that.” He kissed the top of Noah’s head and snuggled him tighter against his side until they were spooning.

“I feel fucking invincible,” Noah whispered. “I survived Dante, being alone in a place I didn’t know was safe, and didn’t have a massive coronary over the spiders. You’re in the presence of a fucking badass, Zachary Meadows. Open those curtains, Dr. Meadows,” he ordered as he pointed to the heavy black curtains that blocked out the outside world from his safe zone.

Zach grinned, pretty much knowing where this was going. He eased away from Noah, careful not to jiggle anything that didn’t need jiggling and started to stand up.

“What in the hell are you doing, man? If you touch those curtains, I’ll rip your arm off,” Noah chirped playfully.

“One day, Noah. One day,” Zach promised. “You’ll get there.”

“I know I will. I wasn’t kidding about that carnival trip. I want that more than anything in this world. With you by my side, I know I’ll get there.”

“Yep, and I promise to touch you inappropriately on the Ferris wheel. I love you, Noah,” he whispered, but Noah was already asleep.

Peace would do that to a man. Peace and love.

Epilogue

Both men were nervous as they waited for their guest to make an appearance. Noah because he was out of his safety zone and Zachary because he was about to see his father again for the first time in years. Zach held Noah's hand tightly and chose to ignore all the hateful glares and disgusting remarks the other inmates and their visitors were sending their way. He didn't give a fuck one way or the other what any of them thought. They should be so lucky to find the kind of love he and Noah shared.

"This sure the hell isn't the carnival, Zachary," Noah whispered playfully while his blue gaze, twinkling with excitement because he was damned proud of himself, skittered across the room and then back to Zach.

Zach smiled. "I've taken you to the carnival six times already, babe." And, just to provoke him, Zach added, "Anyway, I told you that you didn't need to come with me. I'll be fine facing my father alone. Holding your hand is fun, but not necessary." He and Noah had visited the carnival six times, but all in the last month. It'd taken longer than either of them hoped to get Noah where he needed to be mentally to find the courage to leave his safety zone. Nearly a full year had passed since Dante Moretti kidnapped Noah—two hundred and ninety-seven days since Moretti stopped wasting perfectly good oxygen and cashed in on his one-way ticket straight to hell.

Noah finally made it through their rooftop dinner about six months ago. It'd been endearingly cute and hilarious at the same time. What Zach planned to be a romantic repeat of their one month anniversary, this time with food for the two of them, had quickly turned into Noah so terrified he'd gotten sick all over the place, but he'd been

too stubborn to go back to their apartment until the dinner date ended. He'd been green the entire time—not so romantic. That night, however, was Noah's first big achievement with many more to follow behind it. More rooftop dinners, short walks to the dog park across the street, car rides to nowhere, ins and outs to the mall, the movies, and finally, the carnival. He grew more confident each time he crossed the threshold of their apartment building. Zach would have preferred flying to Texas to visit his father, but Noah nixed the airplane ride without a second's hesitation. Of course, being trapped in a car with Noah hour after hour had its perks. Because Noah was nervous but full of excess energy, Zach cashed in on one blow job after another. He might never fly again.

“Don't say shit like that,” Noah growled. “You know I would never let you do this without me. I might be ape-shit crazy, but I'm yours. There's no way you were leaving me behind.”

“You realize I'm going to punish you for the crazy comment, right?” Zach asked Noah.

Noah grinned from ear to ear. “That's what I was banking on, Doc. Maybe you could try some medical torture on me. I bet I'd hate that.” He blinked innocently as he gazed into Zach's eyes.

Yeah, not so innocent.

“I think that can be arranged, smart mouth.”

Before Noah had a chance to come back with another smartass comment, Zach's entire body tensed when he saw the guards lead Nathaniel Meadows into the visiting area. Zach wasn't sure what he'd expected, but he hadn't thought his father would look so...healthy. And happy. As soon as he'd made eye contact with Zach, a huge smile spread across his face.

Prison looked good on his father.

Zach also noticed the entire room grew respectfully quiet when everyone else noticed which prisoner they were bringing in. There were a few ‘oh, shits’ from people who’d made rude comments to him and Noah before they realized which inmate they were there to visit. Obviously, some things never changed. His father appeared to rule the prison the same as he’d ruled the club.

“Is that him?” Noah whispered. “If that’s him, he looks fucking scary, Zach. He’s huge.”

“That’s him,” he answered quietly and squeezed Noah’s hand reassuringly. Zach didn’t know what he should feel as he faced his father for the first time since he’d sent him to prison. He’d expected hate, anger, maybe even pity, but he hadn’t one time thought his heart would be happy to see the man that’d nearly ruined his life. Yet, he couldn’t deny the cartwheel his heart did inside his chest.

Nathaniel whispered something to the guard escorting him inside the room, laughed, and then turned his attention back to Zach. Slowly, he made his way across the room. When he got within a couple of feet, Zach stood. He needed to face his father eye to eye, man to man.

“Hello, son,” Nathaniel said when they were mere inches apart. “Thank you for coming. I’ve missed you.”

The physical distance between them wasn’t much, but in reality, they were miles apart. The silence between them was uncomfortable. Zach didn’t like it and wanted it to go away. Finally, his father stepped away and sat in the chair on the other side of their table. His eyes turned to Noah and he said, “So...is this the infamous Noah? The boy who won my son’s heart?”

Naturally, Noah's pouty lips formed a beautiful smile. "That would be me, Sir. He made me work hard for it, but it's all mine now." Noah reached his hand across the table and offered it to Nathaniel. "It's nice to finally meet you."

Nathaniel laughed as he shook Noah's hand. "I seriously doubt my son has said many nice things about his old man, but then again, I didn't give him many nice things to remember about me." Gray eyes identical to Zach's flickered back to his son. "You did well, son. I'm glad you've finally found happiness."

Zach's ass hit the seat with a thud. He was in the twilight one. This wasn't the man he'd grown up with. He wasn't the same man involved with every horrendous crime known to man...with human trafficking being at the tip-top of the list. No, this was the man who'd raised him when his crack-head mother had disappeared. This was the man who'd taught him to ride a bicycle and then a motorcycle. This was the man who'd taught him everything he knew...just all the wrong things.

"Why?" Zach demanded. "Why are you acting like this? You can't go from being an arm's dealer one day to father-of-the-year the next. What kind of sick game are you playing with me? What's with the club protection and fatherly bullshit, Dad?"

"Calm down, babe," Noah coaxed from the seat next to him. "You came here to talk to your father, not jump down his throat for past sins. Remember? We talked about it."

"No, he has every right to jump down my throat, Noah," Nathaniel interjected. "I wouldn't trust me either. Hell, I'd be disappointed in my son if he did. I taught him better than that." He smiled at Noah and then turned his full attention back to Zach. "Listen, son, I know I fucked up the whole father thing. That failure doesn't surprise me in the least. I'm not cut from the father mold. The thing is, I did the best I could. I taught you the things I knew, not the things you needed to know. I tried turning you into a man like me instead of the man you could be. Thankfully, you walked away

from all my bullshit and turned yourself into a real man. I'm sorry, Zachary. Sorry for lots of things. I'd like to say I'd do it differently if I had it to do over again, but I wouldn't. The club...the lifestyle...it's all I knew. Do I regret it? Hell, yeah. I regret so many things. If I got out today, would I change? Hell, no. I'm not capable of being the man you are, son."

Zach's stomach tumbled. A part of him wanted to believe his father meant well but simply fell short over the years. There was plenty of evidence to back that claim up. Nathaniel's father had raised him in the club, teaching him the same things Nathaniel had tried to teach Zach. When his father had said it was all he knew, the words rang with total honesty. On the other hand, he'd done bad things...many, many bad things. Did Zach want that kind of influence in his life again, even if it was just letters and occasional visits?

Noah squeezed his leg beneath the table.

Looking at his father, Zach said, "I don't agree with the club's lifestyle. I never will."

Nathaniel nodded. "I would be disappointed if you did, son. I've followed your career. I know what kind of man you are now. I'm fucking proud of you, Zachary. You turned out to be good, honest, and kind, even with my genes mixed in your body. I've done a hell of a lot of bad things in my life, but I look at you and know I did one damned good thing, too."

The three of them talked for over an hour. Nathaniel staying mostly quiet unless he asked Noah or Zach questions about their lives. Either he was an excellent actor, or he was truly interested in what they had to say. Noah, as always, was animated and fun, making them laugh if things started to creep toward the dark side again. Zach might not know everything about his father, but he knew him enough to know Nathaniel Meadows was smitten with Noah.

Yeah, he could join the crowd.

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When it was time for them to leave, Zach promised another visit soon. Noah vowed to Nathaniel that he'd make Zach keep his word. Zach shook his father's hand. It was the best he could do for now. As Nathaniel turned to leave them, Zach asked, "Why did Gabriel...help me? My friend simply said he owed you a favor." Zach tried to be careful with anything he said, knowing people were always listening.

"He did owe me a favor," Nathaniel answered slowly. "In my world, Zach, people always repay their debts. I did something for him, so he kept you safe for me."

"What about the other?" Zach asked, unwilling to leave it alone, even when he knew he probably should.

Nathaniel paused and Zach could tell he struggled with his answer. Finally, he said, "I would assume the favor he asked of me was very important to him. He felt obligated to move ahead and do something that needed to be done without waiting on me to issue the request." His gaze flickered to Noah. "I believe we are all in agreement that we're glad he was so appreciative of my favor...yes?"

Don't ask. Don't ask. Don't ask.

"What was the favor?" Zach asked.

Nathaniel remained silent for several brutally long minutes, and Zach could see the battle waging inside him. When his gray eyes met Zach's questioning stare, he answered, "I delivered a very important package to him years ago, Zachary." Quietly, he added, "It has ended exactly where it all began."

Without another word, Nathaniel walked away from Noah and Zach, never looking back.

A very important package. Zach darted his gaze over Noah. Fuck.

In that moment, Zach understood—the little blond boy the club had abducted, the one who'd caused Zach to turn his back on his own father... That child had been the package delivered to Gabriel. But why? Zach shook his head. There was more going on than Zach could decipher from his father's cryptic words, and he vowed to figure it out at some point.

But for now, he took Noah's hand in his, feeling a contentment course through him at the simple touch. A contentment he had never experienced before meeting this amazing man. When Noah smiled up at him as they left the visiting area, Zach knew...whatever information they learned, wherever the clues led, they'd handle them together.

The End