



Xtasy

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Description: Atlas is young, gorgeous and has his world under complete control. He lives in a nice apartment, has a great best friend and an awesome job as a graphic designer. He loves his life, and it's almost perfect...even if it is boring and utterly predictable and stale. When he sees an ad that can change his life, he decides to step out of his comfort zone and straight into the world of glitz, glamour, sex and sin. It just so happens to be occupied by the sexiest, best-looking man he's ever seen. Hawk broke one of his own rules when he opened his door to the handsome young man looking for a top modeling job...without an agent. From that moment on, Hawk wanted Atlas even though he'd never wanted to keep anybody for himself before. He just can't help himself. When an unseen enemy threatens their happiness, and the blissful future they're trying to work out is in danger of shattering around them like a broken dream, they have to do whatever it takes to keep their love strong and alive.

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CHAPTER ONE

“Don’t forget who you’re talking to, A. I know you. We grew up together. Best friends since kindergarten. Surely by now you’ve learned that you can’t bullshit a bullshitter. Be honest. You won’t do it because you’re chickenshit.” Megan laughed. “Everybody’s got to be good at something, love. If you want to spend your entire life being chickenshit, who am I to question you?” Megan plopped the pamphlet down on the table—the one she’d brought home, suggesting Atlas give erotic modeling a chance.

Atlas rolled his eyes and tried to remember what exactly had been going through his head when he’d agreed to let Megan, his dearest friend that never ever knew when to shut her mouth and mind her own business, move into his apartment. Had he been drunk? Could he plead temporary insanity and have her evicted? No, Megan was right, he was terrified of confrontations, changes, or anything else that interrupted his normal routine. Anyway, he couldn’t be nearly as bad as she was letting on.

“I’m not chickenshit.” Atlas checked his watch. “Where is that stupid Chinese food? I’m starved to death and maybe, just maybe, you’ll stop griping at me if you have food in your mouth.”

“Should get here any minute,” she answered. “Tell me, did you order the chicken?” Megan batted her fake eyelashes and grinned at him.

Thankfully, Atlas was given a short reprieve when the doorbell rang, announcing the arrival of their dinner. He jumped up and made a dash for the door—anything to get away from Megan’s never-ending judging him over his, in her words, total lack of

spontaneity or stepping out of his comfort zone. His best friend was crazy. He was the most spontaneous person he knew. Not.

“Thanks for the order, Mr. A,” the delivery guy said as soon as he opened the door. “I love Mondays and Fridays because I can always count on your order. My girlfriend lives in one of the lower-level apartments and I get to sneak in a few kisses, thanks to you!”

Ouch. He didn’t order Chinese every Monday and Friday...did he? He did. “Good for you, man,” he answered because the kid was so damn excited. “Hey, they didn’t forget the edamame, did they? I’m not crazy about it, but Megan loves the stuff.”

A look of horror crossed his face. “Uh...there’s no edamame,” he stammered. “You never order that, Mr. A. For the past two years, it’s been the same order. I bet the cooks never even checked it. I’m sorry, man. Do you want me to go pick some up and bring it back to you?”

“No, that’s okay. Shit happens.” Atlas looked back to see if Megan was listening. She seemed to be engrossed in whatever she was doing on her phone. Not to take any chances, he slipped out into the hall and eased the door closed. “Listen, Tanner, do I seriously order the same meal every Monday and Friday?” Surely, he didn’t? He remembered scouring the menu before placing each and every order.

Tanner laughed. “Like clockwork, Mr. A. We wished all our customers were like you. Same days. Same meals. Same time.” He laughed even harder. “Hell, your Prius is always parked in the same spot when I pull in for delivery. You’re the easiest customer we have! At the restaurant, they refer to you as a VPP.”

“Do you mean VIP?” Atlas asked in confusion.

“No, VPP—Very Predictable Person. We love those.” Tanner blushed before adding,

“I mean, you’re a VIP, too!”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks. Here’s your tip. Go show your girl a good time but stay safe.”

“Dude, you and I are both in our twenties! We aren’t supposed to worry about staying safe, we’re supposed to focus on having a good time. Lighten up, Mr. A! See you on Monday!”

“Monday, my ass,” Atlas muttered as he grabbed up the bag and let himself back into his apartment. He was twenty-seven years old. He lived in a luxurious penthouse apartment in Kips Bay, Manhattan. His savings account was nice and plump. He had a cushy job. It might not be his dream job, but it paid all the bills with some padding left over.

His life was good.

Empty.

Fuck, his life was empty. Boring. Stale.

“What’s wrong with you?” Megan asked with a frown as soon as she looked up to see him standing next to her, bag in hand. “Please tell me they didn’t fuck up your General Tso’s Chicken, white rice instead of fried, extra soy sauce, and an egg roll.”

“Nope. They fucked up your order. And it makes me happy,” Atlas growled in frustration. “I bought the food, so you go get the plates. And stop picking on me. I think my feelings are hurt.”

“You think,” she snorted as she went to gather the plates. “Wine?”

“Yup, please.”

“Red or white?” She giggled. “Wait, I know. White!”

“Asshole.”

“Honey, my ass sees more action than yours, and I’m not a gay man! That’s what I’m worried about. You need to step out on a ledge. Shake things up. Hell, A, you haven’t had sex with anybody other than your own hand since you graduated from college. I can only imagine how bad a lay Trevor was, but you can’t let him ruin sex for you. When it’s good, it’s really fucking good. When it’s mediocre, it’s still good. Give somebody else a try.”

“Not discussing my sex life with you, Meg.” He forked out his General Tso’s onto the antique china his grandmother had left him. Fuck, he had antique china. What kind of man served take-out on antique china? He looked around his penthouse, trying to see it through someone else’s eyes. No, definitely not a bachelor pad. Hell, not even a cool gay man’s pad. He thought about those commercials where the man tried to train people not to become their parents. While he would never admit it out loud to her, Meg might be right. He was a total bore.

“You don’t have a sex life. That’s what I’m trying to work on!”

“I thought you wanted me to audition for a modeling job, not become a prostitute.” His eyes narrowed. “What exactly does this friend of yours do, Meg?”

“He takes pictures. Provocative pictures. Nudes. He’s had two gallery openings, one in San Francisco and one in Canada, and they were both smashing successes. I know you don’t need the money, but it could be like a little Boy Scout badge of success for you. Atlas Mosley, sex with only a handful of partners at the ripe old age of twenty-seven, goes for the gold by stepping out of his comfort zone and taking a walk on the wild side for the first time in his young life.”

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Atlas popped a bite of General Tso's chicken into his mouth. "Don't be ridiculous, Meggie. I just joined a new gym the other day. I'm all over the wild side of life right now, taking it by storm, some might even suggest."

Megan rolled her eyes. "It's not a new gym, fuck-face. It's your old gym, they just changed the name when new owners took over."

"Clearly, you are exaggerating the boringness of my life," Atlas snapped playfully. Regardless of what Meggie said, he couldn't stay mad at her long. Anyway, she might be telling the truth. He would spend the rest of the week charting his days for comparison. Perfect plan.

Seven days later, Atlas determined he was, hands-down, the biggest bore in the world. Predictable. There were dog owners on his running track that swore their dogs wouldn't leave until he came by to pet them...and give them one of the dog biscuits he always carried in his pockets. Just to hurt him, they had to mention that they always knew exactly when he would be there because he was so punctual with his time. Fuckers—the owners, not the dogs. The girl at the coffee shop always had his latte ready when he walked in the door each and every morning. He could work from home but chose to go into the office most days. It helped him concentrate and stay focused on his designs. His scheduled work hours began at nine in the morning and ended at five in the afternoon. Because he didn't like to rush, he made it a habit to arrive thirty minutes early. The past week taught him that his boss now expected him to be there at eight-thirty instead of nine...or working from home. Every morning his boss handed him other people's projects that hadn't been completed.

Yes, his life sucked and he was tired of it. Changes were going to be made. Big fucking changes. Scary changes. Challenging changes. Bad ass changes.

Atlas stared at the massive structure before him. It looked like some sort of old textile mill—huge, brick, bunches of windows...with bars on them. No windows were broken out, so he guessed that was a positive sign. Looked to be about four stories high. It wasn't located in the safest neighborhood, so that was a negative sign. Was he really going to do this? A model, he was not. Determined to make a change...he was.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he strode to the big metal door and pounded on it. Was he terrified? Yes. Was he determined? Hell, yes. Goodbye comfort zone. Hello to the new Atlas Mosley. He pounded on the door again. It was the right address. He'd circled the block three times—checking, double-checking, and triple-checking. Shit, had Meggie gotten him mixed up with some serial killer? Just a random ad looking for men for nude pics? No, it wasn't that. She'd mentioned he'd had two gallery releases. That made everything safe, right?

The heavy door swung open and an absolutely drop-dead gorgeous, muscle bound, tattoo covered, blue eyed man stood there...scowling at Atlas. The dude's brown hair was pulled back in a messy bun, loose strands dangling around his chiseled face. Atlas wanted to speak, say anything to make the delicious man in front of him smile, but he remained utterly gobsmacked. Before he could stop himself, he leaned in for a smell. Holy shit—all man. A bit of sweat mixed with an enticing cologne. He was wearing some baggy sweats that left absolutely nothing to the imagination. The mystery man was packing.

“Well, cutie, you were banging down my door like there was an emergency out here. Now you are all frozen up. What can I help you with?” He glanced around outside and added, “I think you must be lost.”

“Oh. No. Not lost. I don’t think I’m lost.” Like a total dork, Atlas held up the audition paperwork that Megan had left lying on the coffee table. “I wanted to...you know...apply for the job.” Atlas wasn’t certain when he started stuttering, but stuttering he was. Stuttering impressed everybody, right? He also noticed his stupid hand was shaking as he held the paper in front of Mr. Tall Dark and Deadly.

“Sorry, kid. We sent out cancellations to all the local agencies.” He frowned. “Where did you get this and what agency are you with? I haven’t seen you around. They should have informed you of the cancellation.”

Agency? Oh, shit. Atlas snatched the paper back. “This was a mistake. I’m sorry I bothered you.” He felt his face glowing bright red. He’d sell his soul to Satan for the opportunity to simply melt into the concrete beneath his feet.

“Send him up, Hawk! I think he might work for my project!” Another male voice called from somewhere above them.

Atlas looked up to see yet another gorgeous, half-naked man leaning over some decorative iron railing that separated the ground floor from a loft on the second floor. He wasn’t as muscular as the man standing in front of Atlas but still perfect in his own way. Beside the dude next to him, Atlas felt like a dainty fairy...not a good feeling. He’d ran track and excelled on the swim team in high school and college. He wasn’t dainty...yet he was now.

“Well, it looks like it’s your lucky day, kid. You are definitely gorgeous—Ambrose’s type, for certain. You interested in hearing what he’s looking for?”

“Stop calling me kid,” Atlas growled. “And, no, I’m not interested.”

“Really? You look interested.” The man’s eyes traveled down to rest of Atlas’ crotch area. Atlas could feel his cock pressing against his pants. Yup, there was no hiding

his interest.

This was it. That moment in a person's life where they knew for certain that whatever decision they made, it would change everything forever. He could walk away and go back to the stable, but boring, life he knew and was comfortable with. Slow and steady, that was his normal way of operation. Or he could step out of his zone and try something new. Something exciting. Then again, like he'd thought earlier, these men could be serial killers.

"Listen, kid. I'm going to go around and open the garage door. No vehicle is safe on these streets, especially a yuppie Prius. Some of the people around here would destroy it just for shits and giggles. If you want to see what my client is offering, drive your car in, get out, and listen to his sales pitch. If not, get in your car and drive back to whatever white picket fence house you came from. It's your call." The guy looked Atlas up and down. "It just seems to me that white picket fences are an awful waste for a body as delicious as yours."

"There's no need to be such an ass about it," Atlas growled. "And I told you not to call me kid."

Hawk laughed. "Then prove you're a man."

The door closed in Atlas' face before he could respond...as if he could have come up with a snappy response. Fucker. He stomped toward his car, climbed in, screamed a few cuss words, and then started some breathing exercises to calm himself down. How in the world had he let Meg manipulate him into doing something so ridiculously out of his norm? He'd made a fool of himself—so damn bad that his face still burned with shame. He could just imagine the two hot men inside, laughing at him for even thinking he could pull off modeling—showing up like a fool without an agent. How was he supposed to know agents were required?

Atlas pushed the button to start his car...at the same time that a huge garage door on the far side of the manufacturing plant slid open. Well, maybe they weren't laughing at him. Or maybe they were. Shit, he felt like a cat trying to decide whether to go outside or come inside, or outside, or inside.

His decision was made when Mr. Hottie Hawk stepped out and propped his hands on his hips, causing the sweats to dip even lower. Atlas wasn't certain there was a word in the dictionary to describe how incredibly hot the guy was. He put his foot on the gas and edged his way into the garage. The door closed behind his car, locking him inside.

When Atlas stepped out of his car, he realized it wasn't really a garage. The bottom floor of the old manufacturing building was wide open. There was some workout equipment at the far end of the room. In the middle was a huge television hanging on a wall, with a giant leather sectional around it. To the side of that was a bar that would put any local club to shame. What he could see was impressive, but nothing compared to the vehicles littered about on the side where he stood. He didn't have to be a motorcycle expert to recognize that the three parked in the garage were top shelf. There was also a Hummer, a Mercedes convertible, and a Rolls Royce.

"The Rolls belongs to Ambrose. I wouldn't be caught dead in such a pretentious car." Hawk whispered in his ear. Atlas jumped two feet in the air. How the fuck did he get so close to him without him knowing it?

When he gained his composure, or what was left of it, Atlas answered, "I'm pretty certain all the vehicles in here are pretentious."

Hawk peered over his shoulder at the Prius and said, "Not all of them. Little man, we've got to get you a better ride. Isn't that a middle-aged person's choice of vehicle you're driving?"

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Atlas whirled around to face Hawk. “Most definitely not! It’s very economical and good for the environment! And, for your information, little man isn’t one damn bit better than kid. My name is Atlas. Call me that or don’t address me at all.”

Atlas heard Ambrose clapping from his perch above them. “This one is feisty, Hawk. Better watch yourself, he just might clip your wings!”

Hawk laughed good-naturedly. “He probably could if he’d put any effort into it. As it is, though, my wings are feeling safe and sound. This little pup doesn’t bite. Only snarls and scratches, I’d bet my life on it.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m going to hate you,” Atlas snapped irritably. He glanced up at the other man and added, “Both of you, probably.”

“Nope. You’ll love me. Everybody always does. As Hawk told you, I’m Ambrose. I can’t wait to meet you. Come on up and show me what you’ve got.”

“What is this place?” Atlas asked Hawk as he looked around. “It’s located in a shitty area and doesn’t look like much on the outside, but it’s pretty damn luxurious on the inside. I’m guessing it was some sort of manufacturing plant...uh, back in its day...a million years ago.”

“Don’t be a smartass, little man. It’s such a bore when I’m not able to punish you for it.”

And that was a fucking strange thing to say....

“And, again, little man doesn’t work for me.” Atlas retorted.

“Too bad.” Hawk waved his hand around, indicating the structure. “You’re right, this was an old textile mill. My grandparents and my parents worked here when I was a kid. It didn’t pay worth shit but it was stable and, from what I can remember, they were always good to their employees—kinda like a family. See that little squared-off partition area over there? My grandmother worked there, in that exact spot, from the time she graduated from high school until she retired at the age of seventy-two. She welcomed guests and worked the switchboard. Come look at it, it’s cool as shit.”

Was this guy seriously taking him down memory lane? How could he pull off snarky one minute and jackass the next?

“Look at all those buttons. I bet there’s over a hundred. It’s a reminder of how technology has changed. She’d let me come in with her sometimes, especially around the holidays when I was out of school. I’d sit under the desk and beg for nickels to get gum out of the gumball machines up front.”

Atlas couldn’t help but chuckle out loud. Just to imagine the man beside him fitting underneath a desk or begging for anything was unbelievable.

“Stop laughing. I know what you’re thinking, and I have you know I fit nicely under the desk. It was some of the happiest days of my life, so when the place shut down and went up for auction, I had to have it. After a couple of years of busting my ass with renovations, it’s now my home, office, and, well, recreational space.”

“And garage,” Atlas added under his breath.

“Yes, and garage. Okay, let’s get upstairs and see what Ambrose has to offer. He’s told me a bit about his current project but not everything. We can both learn the details at the same time. Follow me.”

Atlas followed him up a metal spiral staircase, trying not to fall while maneuvering the odd steps and watching Hawk's tight ass at the same time. The man had to spend hours working out on the equipment he'd seen downstairs. When they reached the top of the stairs, Atlas could tell this was Hawk's living area. It was almost as big as the lower level—only not as wide because it looked like part of the floor had been taken out to create the balcony that Ambrose had been leaning over. Speaking of Ambrose, he'd put on a shirt and was lounging lazily on an oversized sofa, drink in hand.

“Well, look at you,” Ambrose drawled. “Even prettier up close. Yes, you will do nicely for my project.”

“He's not interested,” Hawk said. “I asked him.”

“He looks interested.”

Atlas rolled his eyes. “What is this? Bad cop/worse cop? Jeezus, you two are weirdos. Is there a real job available, even for someone without an agent, or is this a bullshit prank? Contrary to what both of you obviously think, I'm not an idiot, a kid, or a little man.” Atlas huffed in frustration. “Just forget it. I'm out of here.”

Hawk plopped down on the couch next to Ambrose and said, “Lighten up, Atlas. You came for a job. Ambrose has a job. I take the photos. Sit down and let's talk about it. You are wound very, very tight. Loosen up some or you'll end up with wrinkles before wrinkle time.”

When Hawk's arm draped casually around Ambrose's neck, Atlas felt a wave of disappointment wash over him...which was absolutely ridiculous. As if he'd ever have a chance with a guy that looked like those two did. Confidence and arrogance oozed from them while he was merely Mr. Predictable.

Hawk waved his hand toward the other couch. “Have a seat and let's talk business.

Need something to drink? If you want alcohol, I can call a car for you and keep yours safe until somebody can bring you back to pick it up.”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Okay, Atlas, let’s ask the most important question. Do you know what kind of photos I take?” Hawk asked. “I think we need to get that out in the open first thing.”

Atlas took a deep breath. “Erotic nudes, I believe.”

“And you’re comfortable with that? Taking your clothes off and allowing me to take pictures. Touch you? For positioning, of course. I never get romantically involved with any of my clients.”

That was disappointing but, again, as if Atlas would ever have a chance. “I can do whatever is necessary.”

Hawk leaned forward. “Listen, if you’re here just for the money, like you’re in trouble financially and would do anything to get out of it, this isn’t the place for you. We don’t take advantage of other people’s hardships. It won’t be art if it’s forced.”

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“Speak for yourself,” Ambrose muttered. “I hope he needs a place to spend the night.”

“He’s kidding.” Hawk said. “He thinks he’s being funny. Okay, erotic nudes. Have you ever had your photo taken in the nude before?”

“No.” Atlas realized he probably needed to stick with one-word responses, or he’d really make a fool of himself. His palms were already sticky with sweat. Worse than that, his dick was plumping again. The picture Ambrose and Hawk posed together made him jealous with envy and horny as hell.

“Been nude in front of a crowd?” Hawk continued.

“Locker room.”

Hawk looked at Ambrose and then back at Atlas. “Listen, it’s apparent that you are shy. Why are you wanting to do this? What’s your motivation? Things aren’t adding up.”

“I’m not desperate for money. I have a comfortable savings account and my job is secure.”

“And that didn’t answer my question, did it?”

Fuck. “I want to be something I’m not. I’m a bore. Predictable. I’m tired of my life being that way.” Yep, he should have stuck to one-word answers.

Hawk laughed. “There’s nothing wrong with being predictable and I seriously doubt you’re a bore. Don’t let insecurity push you into something you aren’t comfortable with. Be yourself, kid.”

“I told you not to call me that.” Atlas snapped, feeling his face burning with embarrassment.

“And I obliged when I thought we would be working together. Now we aren’t. Anyway, there’s nothing wrong with being called kid, little man, or boy. It’s a compliment in mine and Ambrose’s lifestyle.”

Atlas knew there was no lifestyle where those words would be complimentary. They were fucking with him. Again. “Thanks for your time. Can you please open the garage for me?” He stood up. “I’ll be on my way.”

He hadn’t taken one step when Ambrose said, “Stop. Turn around. Remove your clothes and show me if you have what I’m looking for. I own several BDSM clubs and I’m planning to open another one in Dallas that will be exclusively for gay men. The photos will not show your face, but they will be explicit. Bondage will be involved, so you’ll need to be willing to allow Hawk to touch you in ways you might not be comfortable with. Oh, and when I say explicit, I mean explicit.” Ambrose smiled. “You’re still dressed. Did I scare you?”

Atlas was trembling as he reached for the hem of his shirt. BDSM? Was this what he wanted? Could he do it? He folded his shirt and placed it on the couch. Toed off his Vans and, without thinking too long and hard about it, removed his pants and underwear at the same time. When he was completely naked, Atlas forced himself to raise his eyes defiantly to both men. What he saw there, was shocking. Both men stared at him like a predator would stare at prey. Yet, he didn’t feel threatened at all. It made him feel powerful.

Atlas had never felt powerful in his entire life. It was intoxicating.

“You are absolutely gorgeous, Atlas.” Ambrose said. “You’ll be perfect if you want to take a chance. Hawk is the best out there. He’ll take very good care of you.”

Fucking intoxicating.

CHAPTER TWO

Fucking terrifying.

What in the hell had Atlas been thinking? He couldn’t take his clothes off and let a complete stranger touch his junk or tie him up into strange positions...no matter how gorgeous the man was. He simply couldn’t do it. Atlas was too unworldly. Hawk would toss him out on his ass within the first fifteen minutes.

All those thoughts and many more raced through Atlas’ head as he waited in front of Hawk’s building...waited for the garage door to open. By the time it finally slid open, he had almost talked himself out of it. He was biting his bottom lip when Hawk stepped outside and motioned him to come in. The very object of all his fantasies over the past three days was right in front of him—fully dressed, unfortunately. Today he had on comfortable looking jeans, a black shirt, and black boots that looked like they’d been in his family for several generations. In other words, hot as fuck. Hair was hanging free today. Fucking sexy. There were leather braided bracelets on his tanned arms and a long necklace around his neck. No rings. Too bad, Atlas liked rings. Well, he liked wearing rings...or the idea of wearing rings. He never wore jewelry of any type. There was a really good chance he should have started with wearing jewelry as a way to take a tiny step out of his comfort zone instead of just launching himself straight over the Grand-fucking-Canyon. Yes, jewelry would have been much more in tune with his level of taking a walk on the wild side.

Atlas jumped out of his seat when a hard knock to his window interrupted his thoughts. Dazed, he turned to see Hawk standing next to the door, motioning for him to roll the window down. With shaking hands and a red face, he obliged.

“You okay?” Hawk asked. “You realize you don’t have to do this, right?”

“One-hundred percent. I understand. I want to. I just got...distracted for a second.” Atlas looked up at Hawk and thought about swooning just like he’d read about in his grandmother’s old historical romance novels. “Just pull into the same spot?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry I kept you waiting before opening the door. I thought we’d said eight o’clock.”

“We did. I’m early. I’m always early.” He put the Prius into gear and eased carefully into the garage. The Rolls was missing. Atlas guessed Ambrose must be out. Maybe he left to give Hawk privacy when he was working? No, that was stupid, he’d never be at home if that was the case. He had spent some time researching Hawk Pentress. The man was a god in the art world and in very high demand.

“That could be a problem.” Hawk answered as Atlas climbed out of the car. “I’m always late. I’m sure you’ll be ready to kill me before this is over. I get easily distracted.”

A bubble of laughter burst from Atlas’ lips before he could stop himself. “I seriously doubt that. You look like you are in complete control of every situation, all the time.”

“Follow me. You’re right, I do like control.” He winked at Atlas. “As a matter of fact, you could call it my superpower.” He punched a button to access an elevator. “I had a rough workout this morning, so it’s elevator day. My work area is on the third floor. Ambrose sent some props over to help with the photos. I’m sure he’ll send more as we continue working over the next few days. He might act laid back, but he’s a

perfectionist. He won't settle until everything is perfect...in his eyes, of course."

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Hawk was different today. Professional, but chatty—probably trying to ease the tension he had to feel radiating from every pore of Atlas' body.

“Don't be shocked when you see some of the stuff.” He looked over at Atlas as the elevator dinged a notice that they'd reached the third floor. “I'm guessing it's safe to assume you've never been to a BDSM club?”

“You'd be correct. I did some research after talking, though. I'll be fine.” Atlas wassooooonot going to be fine.

“Great.” He waved an arm for Atlas to go before him. “Welcome to my studio. Go ahead and get undressed while I finish setting up a few things. We're going to start with some playful photos and then move into working on Shibari photos. Both Ambrose and I were obsessed with your eyes. I know your face won't be in the photos, but I still had to buy pale blue rope to work with. It'll work perfectly with your skin tone, as well.”

Ropes. Okay, Atlas could do this. Nothing bad was going to happen. It was nothing more than one fully clothed man tying up another completely naked, vulnerable man...with colorful rope. What could go wrong?

Atlas was deathly quiet as he undressed. Hawk was making enough noise for both of them, setting up and talking to himself while he moved about the room. As Hawk continued to work, Atlas studied some of the props Ambrose had chosen. He didn't know the real names of them, but there was some sort of cross, something he thought they called a spanking bench, a huge bed, a cage big enough for a grown man, and a sex swing. Yeah, he needed to quit looking.

“You ready, Atlas?”

Atlas turned to see Hawk standing next to the bed, holding the pale blue rope and a furry purple blanket. Hawk was correct, the rope did match his eyes. There was a chance he was going to puke from fright. Instead of puking, though, he answered, “Yes, Sir.”

Hawk’s eyes darkened instantly. “Don’t call me that. Call me Hawk...or asshole...anything exceptthat, okay?”

“Sure, asshole. You’re the boss.” Atlas tried for a teasing tone in his voice. It must have worked because a huge smile spread across Hawk’s face.

“I like your feistiness, Atlas. Do you want me to wear surgical gloves when touching you? I can if you prefer it, but I work better without them.”

“Did you shower after your earlier workout?” Atlas teased again. “No need for the gloves.”

“Very funny and thank you. Okay, I want you on your knees at the foot of the bed. Be as relaxed as you can be, but, uh, I need you to get yourself hard for me. There will be some photos of you soft, but these call for an engorged cock. If you want me to look away, I will. I know you’re shy.”

Okay. Wow. He really hadn’t thought this through. Of course, they would want his dick to be hard, but he was terrified and couldn’t thicken on demand. Sure, he was still young and should be able to pop a boner with a soft breeze but fear really messed with a guy’s head. Both of them.

There was no doubt in his mind that Hawk would never have a problem getting his cock to perform on demand. He had said control was his superpower, and Atlas didn’t

doubt it. Hawk, with all his muscles and confidence, could probably control wild beasts if he put his mind toward the effort. Atlas could picture a naked Hawk wrestling a lion into submission. His muscles would flex. His eyes would blaze. He would move like a machine. Most notable, he would do it all without actually hurting the lion. The lion would beg to submit before Hawk—to kneel before him.

“Hey, nice job, Atlas. Most guys have to stroke it into action. You must have some serious mind control over your cock.” Hawk remarked, jolting Atlas from his latest fantasy featuring the man in front of him.

Atlas looked down and sure enough, his cock was standing at attention, dripping precum like a Trojan horse. Hell, he couldn’t remember ever feeling as hard as he did now...as aroused as he was...how desperate he was for Hawk to touch him and not in a simply professional way.

“Like I said, we’ll start with some playful pics before moving to any ropes or bindings,” Hawk said while handing Atlas the furry blanket. “Place the blanket across your lap, making sure your cock is displayed on top.”

Atlas followed Hawk’s request and tucked the blanket across his lap, cock and balls on top. The lavender fur on the blanket tickled Atlas’ cock, causing his breath to hitch. Fuck, his body had never been so sensitive in his life. Since his cock was hard, it wasn’t wanting to lay quietly on the blanket—more of a stand-up and look around stance. Atlas tried pushing it down and his cock popped right back up.

Hawk came over. “Here. Bunch the blanket up so that it’s in line with where your cock feels comfortable.” He watched as Atlas worked with the blanket until everything was perfect. “Now, don’t be alarmed. This is perfectly safe, and we’ll wash it off immediately,” Hawk said as he showed Atlas a large bottle of dark purple glitter. “I want to sprinkle this on your cock. When I’m finished, we’ll have some photos of our first glitter cock.”

“First?” Atlas squeaked. “I thought you said this was perfectly safe...like you’d done it many times before.”

“No. I researched it extensively to make sure to purchase the correct product and ensure no harm to your skin. I’ve wanted to do it forever but never found the perfect model for the job, so I waited. You’re the perfect model.”

Atlas frowned. “For glitter?” Glitter certainly didn’t make him feel very badass, but he couldn’t argue that he thought the photo would be not only unique but sexy as hell.

“For a photo I’ve wanted to do for a very long time.” Hawk answered in a sultry voice.

Atlas could never...would never...say no to that voice.

“Glitter me up,” Atlas answered. “Give me a unicorn dick.”

Hawk grinned. “That’s a cute nickname for it. I like it.” After that Hawk began to generously sprinkle the purple glitter up and down the length and sides of Atlas’ cock.

Atlas felt each and every tiny sprinkle, it was like itty bitty explosions of pleasure on his cock.

Much sooner than Atlas wanted, Hawk finished the photo—taking at least fifty photos from all angles—and then gave Atlas a warm wet rag to wipe away the evidence. As Hawk had predicted, everything cleaned up nicely. No burning or itching. Atlas missed the glitter the moment it was gone. When he finished tidying himself up, Atlas looked up at Hawk and found him loading the photos onto his computer. Quietly, Hawk studied them. Atlas held his breath.

“They are amazing.” Hawk whispered in awe. Turning to Atlas, he added, “You’re amazing. That’s been a fantasy of mine for a while and you made reality even better than my fantasy. Thank you.”

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Embarrassed, yet feeling like the cock of the walk, Atlas quipped, “Just call me a unicorn!”

Hawk studied him for a moment and answered, “Yes, I think I will. Okay, for the next set of props we are moving to a more serious level. Ready unicorn?”

Atlas rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t serious about the unicorn.”

Hawk laughed. “I was.” Leaving no room for argument, Hawk gathered up the items for the next scene. “Since you’ve never done this before, things are going to feel and seem weird. If it gets to be too uncomfortable, physically or mentally, tell me immediately.” Hawk said as he walked toward Atlas, holding some pale blue leather cuffs with metal rings attached and the infamous blue rope they’d discussed earlier. “The cuffs go on your wrists and the rope will make several wraps around your cock and then will be tied to the cuffs. When I’m finished, your hands will be restrained in front of you, in line with your cock. Sound too terrifying?”

“Not at all.” Atlas lied. He was terrified, but mostly that his cock would erupt the second Hawk’s hands touched him. He was that hot for this man—this man that already had a partner. Hell, as far as he knew, they were married. No rings, but that didn’t mean anything.

“This is art to me, Atlas. If I compliment you, will you be offended?” Hawk asked as he locked one of the wrist bands around Atlas’ right hand.

Fuck, Atlas would literally beg for a compliment from Hawk. Before long, he would be following him around like a puppy or kitten. “No, not at all. Everybody loves

compliments, right?”

The other wrist band snapped shut. “You have a beautiful cock. Long but not too thick. Beautiful veins.”

The rope started winding around Atlas’ cock, causing him to suck in a breath. He dug his fingernails into his thighs to try and distract himself from the wave of pleasure that threatened to take over and consume him. Atlas looked down to see Hawk’s fingers working magic with the rope. It wasn’t simply wound around his cock, there were knots on each side before the blue nylon slipped into the metal rings attached to the cuffs on his wrists.

Hawk had worked quickly and efficiently and didn’t appear to be the least bit distracted by the fact that he’d just handled and roped another man’s package...hard package. While Atlas, on the other hand, seemed to be burning from the inside out. Sweat dripped from his forehead, slipped down his face, and coated his upper lip. He swiped at the sweat and desperately tried to think of the most horrible thoughts he could conjure—anything to distract his mind for the eroticism around him.

“Gorgeous—just like Ambrose and I knew you would be. I’m taking the photos now. Spread your legs as wide as possible. I need to have your balls in the shot, too. Now, just relax and let me work my magic.”

Fuck, if Hawk didn’t call what he’d just done to Atlas ‘working magic’, Atlas couldn’t imagine what else there could be. He kept his eyes closed, head bowed, and imagination running amok. He could hear Hawk moving around, the camera’s continuous clicking, but in his mind, Hawk was bending him over, positioning his ass in the air, and pounding into him. His breathing hitched. Heat flooded his veins as his mind created the carnal images of Hawk’s huge dick sliding in and out of his tight hole. His heart pounded harder with each powerful thrust.

There was no stopping it. Cum shot from his cock. Loads of cum. He bit down on his bottom lip to keep from screaming. He was ashamed...and exhilarated. The camera continued to click. Hawk continued to move. There might be ringing in Atlas' ears after his explosive orgasm, but he could still hear that Hawk's breathing had changed as well. Atlas may have ruined the shot and they might end up doing it all over again, but Hawk didn't sound disappointed, he sounded aroused.

Atlas opened his eyes and watched as Hawk continued moving the camera around and snapping photos. His eyes, once again, had the predatory look to them. Atlas found that he enjoyed that look very much. Very much, indeed.

"Sorry. I think I shouldn't have done that, huh?" Atlas commented quietly.

"Cum? Absolutely, you should! Cum shots are sexy as hell. Ambrose will be well beyond pleased when he sees what we got with that one pose." He finally set the camera down and jogged over to grab a towel to clean Atlas up with. "We'll focus on a few chest shots with the leather harnesses and then turn the eye of the camera on your gorgeous ass before we go back to any more ropes. It looks like those will be difficult as hell...for both of us. Watching you lose it like you did? With no touching or kinky talk? Trust me, it tested my professionalism." His nimble hands began untying the beautiful work he'd done earlier.

Atlas was disappointed to see the ropes go away but instead of saying so, he blurted out, "How long have you and Ambrose been together?"

A small smile whispered across Hawk's lips. "Ambrose and I have been friends since we were teenagers. Shit, the trouble we've gotten into together. The stories would embarrass us both, I'm sure. We aren't together as a couple, though. Our...preferences and personalities really wouldn't allow that." He scooped up some sort of straps of leather connected together and handed it to Atlas. "Do you know how to put this on? It's a chest harness."

Preferences? Atlas had been certain both men were gay. Which wasn't? Shit, he hoped to hell it wasn't Hawk that was straight. That would make his orgasm even more embarrassing than it already was.

"No, I don't have any idea what a chest harness is or how to put it on but I'm sure I can figure it out." Atlas answered as he took the thing from Hawk and studied it like it was some sort of alien creature. "Sorry about the question, man. I guess that was really rude of me. I shouldn't have made assumptions the way I did."

"Here, let me help. They are difficult to work with if you've never worn one before." Hawk said as he took the harness from Atlas and began strapping it into place. "What assumptions did you make about the two of us? That we were a couple? That we were both gay? Do tell."

"Both of those, I guess. Sorry about that. I hope you aren't offended."

"Why would I be offended?" Hawk asked as he finished the last buckle on the harness. Atlas looked magnificent. His body was perfect for a chest harness. Hell, Atlas' body was perfect for every damn thing.

"Because you fastened this thing really damn tight. I must have pissed you off about something." Atlas joked because he didn't know what else to say. Had he been having wet dreams about a straight guy? Those situations rarely ended well.

"It looks good tight," Atlas answered quickly. "As for the other, Ambrose is my best friend and mentor. We are both gay but not together. Both available. Should I say something to Ambrose about you finding him attractive?"

Hawk's lips were tight when he asked the question, and his eyes were narrowed with what looked like irritation.

“No, thanks. He’s very attractive, but, uh, not for me.” Fuck, had that practically screamed that he was interested in Hawk? He hoped not because the man had made it plain that he didn’t get involved with anyone he worked with. Hawk might send him packing before his first day was finished.

“Oh, I can’t wait to tell Ambrose that one. He thinks he’s foreverybody,” Hawk said with a laugh as he retrieved his camera. “With this shot, just move in ways that you are comfortable with. If I need something extra, I’ll ask you to do this or that.” Hawk grinned. “I’m glad your shyness seems to have eased up some. You’re beautiful and should be comfortable in your own skin.”

The camera started clicking again. It set the tone for the rest of the day. Hawk seemed to get lost in his work while Atlas focused on trying to follow Hawk’s words of advice and learn to be comfortable while being naked. Hawk would patiently wait while Atlas worked on figuring out the different costumes and all the leather thingies. Atlas had thought leather wouldn’t feel good next to his skin but whatever this stuff was made from felt as soft as warm butter. The cage turned out to be trickier than Atlas would have suspected. Come to find out, he was a bit claustrophobic. Atlas had thought it was going to be a bust but as soon as Hawk showed him where the escape trigger was, it had put his mind at ease.

Before Atlas knew it, Hawk called for a lunch break. He ordered pizza and, wearing nothing but a robe, Atlas kicked back and ate his fair share and listened to Hawk tell of the trouble he and Ambrose had stayed in during their twenties. After eating, Hawk suggested that Atlas spend some time in the hot tub, a huge motherfucker located in the gym area, while he worked on developing some of the photos. He mentioned that he had no doubt Ambrose would be by later in the evening and would expect to have something to look at. Hawk had told him they had one more intense rope scene to do before they wrapped up for the day. That tidbit had made it fairly difficult for Atlas to actually relax while the hot water bubbled around him, and the jets pounded into his shoulders. Instead of relaxing his muscles, he felt tight all over. Hot. Bothered.

Excited. All the things he probably shouldn't feel while working with Mr. Professional—Atlas felt far from professional where that man was concerned.

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Would he come again?

Probably.

The ropes seemed to trigger something inside him. Who the fuck was he trying to fool? It was Hawk that triggered something inside him—the ropes just added to the fantasies he'd been creating since the first night they'd met.

Should he jack off? Maybe that would help? How much longer would Hawk be upstairs working before he was ready for him? What if he called for him right when he finished up and he wouldn't be able to get hard again? At the moment, he was rock hard—his cock begging for a touch...just not by his own hand. His cock wanted Hawk to do the touching.

“You ready, Atlas?” Hawk called, looking over the railing at him.

So much for releasing the overwhelming horniness controlling his every thought and movement. “Sure! I'll be right up. Let me dry off.” Fuck, fuck, fuck.

A few minutes later, Atlas was back on the third level, cock hard, and his robe doing very little to hide the fact. Too late to worry about it. He was in for the long haul. Rope play was about to happen, whether he was prepared or not. “So, what's up with this one? You might have me a bit worried. You made it sound pretty intense.”

“Worried or intrigued?” Hawk questioned, a serious expression on his face. “Be honest. There's nothing to be ashamed of. This is art. Ambrose is going to fuck himself when he sees the work we've already done.”

Atlas thought about it for a few seconds and answered, “Worried and intrigued.” That was him being completely honest.

“Fair enough. This pose will be more explicit. I’ll explain it to you first and you can shut it down if it seems too much or we can give it a try.” Atlas nodded in agreement. “Okay, you’ll be on the center of the bed, on all fours. The ropes will be around your wrists, come up around your throat, but not tight at all. The two ends will go down the center of your back, between your ass cheeks, around your thighs, and then finish up at your ankles. It’s very intricate work, will take at least an hour, and when I’m finished, your, uh, hole will be very exposed. The way the ropes work once they are all tied together, when you move your ankles, the two ropes in your crease will open you up.”

“Shit. Shit. Shit. There’s no lying. That’s intimidating.” Atlas said as he tried to picture the final result in his mind. To be honest, he couldn’t even work out the details of what Hawk had just explained. Atlas laughed nervously. “You seem to know your way around the ropes.”

“It’s my other superpower. Control and ropes. A few others that I hope you learn about when our business relationship ends.”

Annndddd, that was all it took. Atlas was one-hundred percent in. “Yeah, me too. Okay, I can do this. Don’t laugh at me, though.”

“Laugh at you? There’s nothing funny about this pose. It’s one of the most erotic Shibari scenes ever created. I’m only hoping that I’m capable of doing my part of the job without crossing boundaries.”

“I don’t have any boundaries.” Atlas quipped before he could stop himself.

“Yes, you do and so do I.” Hawk answered, being the reasonable one. “If I get this

right, this will be prime real estate for Ambrose's new club. Everything's ready, just waiting on the art for the walls. With your body and my skill, we are going to rock his world."

Atlas climbed onto the bed, positioning himself in the center on all fours, just as Hawk had told him. Funny, he wasn't at all embarrassed by his nudity—not like before. If anything, he felt confident. Hawk had dropped him a bread crumb with his boundaries comment and Atlas, by damn, was going to gobble it up.

So, Hawk went to work, doing exactly what he had described. The ropes were soft yet firm, restricting but somehow gave Atlas a feeling of freedom. When Hawk carefully worked the two nylon ropes between his ass cheeks, Atlas actually felt like he was having an out of body experience. His body felt like it was soaring. With Hawk's first touch with the rope, his skin had burned. Then chills had set in as Hawk continued to work. But with each passing moment, his body simply warmed to the perfect temperature. His mind cleared. Atlas wanted to open his eyes, wanted to see how he looked and the look on Hawk's face as he worked the ropes, but his eyes were too heavy. For some strange reason, he felt more relaxed now than he had in the hot tub earlier. Everything was simply perfect. Atlas knew it wasn't possible, but he never wanted Hawk to stop winding the ropes around him. If he had his way, he would stay locked in Hawk's loft until the man didn't want to play with him anymore.

CHAPTER THREE

"Honey! I'm home! You better have something good to show me!" Ambrose's booming voice caused Atlas to bolt straight up and scream.

What the fuck? Where was he? He wasn't tied up. No pretty ropes. No warm feeling throughout his body. Well, he was warm but not in that same fabulous cocoon as before. Atlas looked around the room. He was untied and laying on the bed. Hawk sat in a chair next to him, holding a bottle of water. As soon as he saw Atlas' eyes open,

he opened the bottle and reached for him. “Here. Drink slowly and take deep breaths.”

Turning away, Hawk yelled to tell Ambrose to wait for him downstairs—not to come up. After that, all his attention was back to Atlas. “Slow sips.”

“What the fuck happened? Did I have some sort of panic attack and ruin the shoot? Please tell me I didn’t. I’m so sorry. I knew I would fuck it up.”

Hawk grinned. “My dear boy, you far from fucked it up. The photos will be fabulous. It’s just...well, I’ve never witnessed anybody go into subspace just from being tied. I’m going to be honest, it was the sexiest, most erotic, most satisfying experience I’ve ever had in my life, and it didn’t even happen to me. Fuck, you were beautiful.”

“Sub-subspace?” Atlas asked, confusion all over his face. “What in the hell is that and how do I do it again?”

Hawk laughed a low husky laugh that was much more sensual than humorous. “Lots of people play the scene and never reach subspace. I’m not sure I have the words to describe it properly, but I’ll try. It’s a natural chemical high. It affects the person mentally and emotionally—calms everything by balancing the chemistry in your brain and calming your state of mind. It’s different for everyone. Some people feel very strong effects, like you did. Others have only mild effects. Both are good but yours is definitely the best. Hotter than hell.”

“I’m getting bored down here by my little lonesome, boys!! Come down and play with me or at least show me some photos that will knock me on my ass!” Ambrose yelled.

“Pour yourself a drink, get in the hot tub, and shut the fuck up!” Hawk called back with a grin. To Atlas he said, “Don’t worry about him. He’s such a fucking push-over

unless he's in total Dom mode." Hawk brushed Atlas' hair away from his face and tucked it behind his ear. "You're special, Atlas. I hope you might consider going to the opening of Ambrose's new club and seeing BDSM in action. I think you might enjoy the lifestyle." Hawk gave Atlas a grin that could only be described as a bit shy. "I also hoped you might enjoy my company—when the job is over, of course."

Atlas basked in the warmth that flowed rampantly through his body as Hawk's words sunk in.

"Pouring myself a drink and getting in the hot tub but I'm not shutting up!" Ambrose yelled back. "Show me what you did today!"

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“You think you’re steady on your feet? I won’t be able to hold Ambrose off much longer. He’s used to getting his way. Spoiled fucking brat.” Hawk teased.

“Yeah, I feel great. A little droopy but it’s about to pass. Go ahead into your dark room and I’ll get dressed and meander down to keep Ambrose company...unless you want me to leave, of course. I should probably leave, right? You’re finished with me for the day?”

“I’m not sure I’ll ever be finished with you, Atlas.” He walked away and began digging in some drawers. “Here’s some swim trunks. Put them on and get into the hot tub with Ambrose. Tell him Hawk said, ‘no-no’ if he comes near you.”

Another thrilling sensation shot through Atlas’ body when Hawk indicated he was off limits to Ambrose. He hoped that meant he was going to be able to cross the boundary line with Hawk. Atlas slipped on the trunks, a smile on his face. He started to walk toward the stairs but stopped and looked back at Hawk. The man was watching him with an intensity that matched his namesake. “I, uh, really like that you said that. I mean, I like Ambrose but not...not the same.” He finished with a stammer, worrying that he may have said too much.

“I’m bored!” Ambrose yelled, unknowingly interrupting an important moment. At least Atlas thought it was important and he hoped Hawk did, as well.

Hawk stepped closer to Atlas. Not close enough, but closer. “Think about this, Atlas. I know you’re shy and I’m guessing you are somewhat inexperienced in the bedroom and know probably nothing about BDSM. To be honest, I’m not into the lifestyle nearly as deep as Ambrose, but I do like control, tying people up, and very rough sex.

I'm a top. And, again, I'm rough. I want to be upfront about everything. When I said you might be sexually inexperienced, I should have added that I'm one-hundred percent inexperienced when it comes to relationships—never been interested in learning. Until now, of course. I think there's something between us that needs to be explored. Well, I sure as hell want to explore it, that's for certain. You just need to know what I'm like...what I like before this goes any further."

Atlas' heart was pumping at a frantic pace. He was excited and scared. Rough? How rough, he couldn't help but wonder. Atlas did have very limited experience in the bedroom and those experiences had been with people just as inexperienced as he. Moreover, why did the word rough excite him so damn much? Why had the ropes sent him into the mysterious subspace he'd never heard of before?

"No worries. I'm good with rough. I think." He took a step and stopped again. "I'll let you know if I'm not."

"That's all I ask." Hawk answered with a sly grin.

Atlas moved down the stairs slowly, wondering if it would be weird to be around Ambrose. What if the guy did hit on him? Ambrose was great, but Hawk was in total control of Atlas' every thought and fantasy. He giggled softly when he thought about what Meg would think about what he was currently doing—posing for erotic nudes and spending time with two different men in a hot tub.

"Well, look at my prize boy! I'm confident your photos are going to make my new club absolutely perfect!" Ambrose eyed Atlas up and down. "So, let's talk about those nifty trunks you have on, babe. Hawk is really trying to stake a claim on you if he sent you downstairs with those on." Ambrose burst out laughing. "I love it! It's about time somebody brought him to his knees. I absolutely can't wait to watch him struggle, fail, struggle, fail some more, struggle, and finally get it right."

Atlas climbed into the hot tub. “I’m one-hundred percent certain I’m not the type of person to bring any man to his knees, much less one like Hawk. I’m afraid you are going to end up very disappointed if you keep those thoughts floating around in your head.” Atlas shrugged. “I’m a total bore.” He might as well admit it because there would be no way to hide that part of him. The study he’d done on himself had proven it to be factual.

Ambrose took a sip of whatever alcohol he had perched on the edge of the hot tub and then lit a small cigar. “I’d like to know who or what fucked with your confidence, boy. You’re drop-dead gorgeous, have a body to kill for, butterfly wing lashes, puffy lips, plump ass, and long legs. What in the hell could you think is wrong with you?”

Since Ambrose appeared to be serious, Atlas answered, “I’m plain...at best. I act awkward around people. I don’t take chances, so people aren’t interested in taking chances on me. There’s nobody to blame for me being a bore except me, myself, and I.”

Ambrose shrugged. “Probably because the rest of us see what you refuse to see. For some reason, you don’t think you’re worthy. I don’t have a clue who could have done that to you. Let me ask you something and, before I do, I want you to know I’m not bragging—just putting it out there.”

“Okay, you have me interested.” Atlas answered, wishing he’d thought to grab himself a beer before climbing into the hot tub.

“How much money do you think I’m worth?”

Atlas laughed. “Not a fucking clue. The only thing I’m sure of is that you have more than me and all my friends put together.”

“How many businesses do you think I own?”

“Again, not a clue. I’m not sure where this is going. I thought we were trying to make a man out of me—get rid of my insecurities and shit.” Atlas teased. “Comparing me to you isn’t helping with that at all.”

“Getting there,” Ambrose answered with another one of his sexy grins. “Next question, how much do you know about Hawk? Net worth? Popularity in the art world? Relationship history?”

Atlas looked around the refurbished textile plant. “Clearly, he’s wealthy. I did some research about how popular he is in the art world, so I know he’s at the top of his game. As for relationships, I hear he’s virginal.”

“You hear that from him?” Ambrose asked quietly.

“I did.” A horrible feeling washed over Atlas. “Was he lying?”

“Absolutely not. The only relationship Hawk has had was with me and, no, it wasn’t and never will be sexual. We’re like brothers. He doesn’t let anybody else inside his world. He has friends but keeps them at arm’s length. When he opened the garage to let you in, I nearly shit my pants from the shock of it. So, I’m wealthy. Really wealthy—again, not bragging. I’ve been blessed with wealthy parents that died early and give me no pity because I don’t miss them—never saw ‘em. Nobody could ever accuse them on being the ‘hands-on’ type of parents.” Ambrose took a deep breath. “To be completely honest, I’m confident they were bad people...really bad people.”

“I think I’m getting confused,” Atlas said. “Where were we going with this conversation? We started with my insecurity and somehow got here...where-the-fuck-ever here is.” Atlas wasn’t mad or frustrated the way the conversation was going—just confused. Very confused. Ambrose had him on the hook when the man confirmed that Hawk didn’t usually consider relationships, but Hawk had mentioned the possibility to him earlier.

“Yeah, I do that a lot—get lost with stories instead of going straight for the kill shot. Here’s the deal kid. I don’t work with models who don’t have agents or aren’t notoriously popular in the business. Hawk’s restrictions are even worse than mine. When I saw you that night, I knew I wanted you...as my muse and model, of course. Even without experience, you have it, the look that every model strives to have. Regardless of the fact that in that particular situation, I was his boss, and Hawk worked for me, he still wouldn’t have allowed you into his place if he didn’t see in you the same beauty I do. He would have shut me down instantly, slammed the door in your face, and that would have been the end of it. Let your insecurity go, boy. You’ve got it. All of it.” He grinned. “Maybe even Hawk if I’m not mistaken. Baby boy, if you can tame that tiger, you are the fucking ring master.” Ambrose looked around the huge room, took another hit on his cigar, and said, “You know, kid, Hawk had already done my photos for the club when you showed up that night. Framed and everything. Before seeing you, we were both over-the-moon pleased with the results. After you, neither of us could have been happy with what we had. Hawk and I both knew it had to be you.”

Atlas laughed nervously. “I can’t imagine my clumsy photos are going to beat out a real model. Don’t worry, it won’t hurt my feelings if you end up choosing what you had over me. I’m a novice. Whoever you had was a professional. Do what’s best for your club.”

Ambrose grinned. “I always do, love. I always do.”

They were silent for a few moments before Ambrose scooted a bit closer to Atlas. It immediately made Atlas nervous—not because of fear of Ambrose. The man was a total flirt, that much was obvious. No, Atlas worried about sending out the wrong message to Ambrose. More importantly, he didn’t want Hawk to come down the stairs and find them sitting close together in the hot tub.

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“Listen, kid,” Ambrose started with a whisper. “Hawk will get mad if he finds out, but I have to at least give it a shot...tell me which props he used for the photos. Hawk always keeps everything top secret until he can show me photos. I’m not a man who is used to not getting what he wants, when he wants it.”

Relief flowed through Atlas. “I will not spill any secrets,” Atlas answered. “Remember, this is the man tying me up for the photos. I don’t think making him mad would be in my best interest.”

Ambrose laughed loudly. “My sweet boy, Hawk is a teddy bear compared to me, I’m a sadist. He just dabbles in ropes and some rough stuff. I feel like I should be the one you fear, not him.”

“What’s a sadist?” Atlas knew that not knowing the term probably made him look as inexperienced as he was, but he still wanted to know.

Ambrose leaned his head back and puffed on his cigar. “It means I like to hurt people—really hurt them. I enjoy humiliating my subs and lovers. I think of myself as a cat, playing with a mouse—toying with it until there’s nothing left for it to give me...than I move on to the next mouse.” Ambrose’s emerald eyes met Atlas’ blue. “Now who do think you should fear, little pet?”

Atlas was saved from answering when he heard Hawk’s heavy step clumping down the steps. “Don’t let him scare you with that sadist shit, Atlas! He’s all talk unless you are down with what he likes.” Hawk climbed into the hot tub. “Not to ruin the reputation he’s trying to scare you with, I must reveal that he harbors twelve rescue cats in his majestic mansion.” Hawk winked. “Now does that sound like somebody

scary to you?”

“Keep my pussies out of this, Hawk!” Ambrose answered with a laugh. Turning to Atlas, he said, “I found all of them as tiny little kittens with absolutely no way they could survive in this mean world. Rescue was my only option. Sadly, they all turned into full grown cats—bossy little creatures they are. I’m not stretching the truth when I say they run the entire household.”

Atlas loved animals, all sorts as long as they had fur. Reptiles scared him. “Knowing that really does take some of the edge off the description of your sadist lifestyle,” Atlas told Ambrose, who answered by flipping him off playfully. Turning to Hawk, he asked, “How about you? Not much of a pet lover?”

“Why would you say that?” Hawk asked with a bewildered expression on his face. “Of course, I love pets. I’m more of a dog person, but Ambrose’s cats climb all over me like I’m a cat tower when I visit his home, so cats are cool too.”

Atlas looked around. “Why don’t you have any?”

“I travel quite a bit for my work, so it’s tough. I’ll probably still get one before long, though.” He leaned over and whispered, “Just don’t let me turn into an Ambrose when I do. It’s very annoying.”

“Whatever are you talking about, you fool? I’m never annoying.”

“I get at least five damn cat pics messaged to me on a daily basis. Annoying, as hell.”

Atlas was a nervous wreck-an absolute nervous wreck. When Hawk had first mentioned Atlas attending the opening of Ambrose’s club, he thought seeing nude

pictures of his junk plastered all over the walls would be the most unnerving thing of the evening. Oh, how wrong he had been. While Atlas had enjoyed spending time with both Hawk and Ambrose the past week as they continued to work on the photos, he'd almost forgotten how far out of his league they were. When they'd taken a private jet to Texas, it had been an ugly reminder that his fairytale was about to end—even though Hawk was being extra attentive to him, even touching him from time to time and whispering reassurances of how awesome it was going to be. As soon as they'd landed, an extra posh limousine had picked them up at the airport and driven them to the club. Ambrose had gone straight in to make sure everything was ready for opening night while Hawk and Atlas had hung out in the bar of the hotel where the club was located on the rooftop level.

A fucking private jet.

Just when Atlas' nerves had calmed enough for him to hold his drink without sloshing the contents because his hands were shaking, a gentleman came to tell Hawk that Ambrose was ready for them. His anxiety attack started all over again...until Hawk grabbed his hand and held it as they followed the man who'd come for them.

“Calm down, little unicorn. Your pulse is fluttering like a tiny bird. The Doms in the club won't be able to control themselves when they see you,” Hawk whispered, adding a sexy grin to the words.

“Haha. Very funny. Stop making me even more nervous!” Atlas countered, holding even tighter to Hawk's hand, whether the man wanted him to or not. Minutes later, they stepped off the elevator, went through a small lobby, and walked into the club. Atlas looked around, blinking as his eyes tried to adjust to the strobe lights flashing. The décor was beautiful, all black and red, with chandeliers hanging over each booth area. Everything, it appeared, was leather, the expensive stuff. Since the explicit photos adorned practically every space of every wall, it didn't take Atlas long to turn a bright shade of red. “Oh. My. God.” He whispered. “I can't believe I allowed you to

take those photos of me. It's so...notme."

"Oh, doll, it's all you and they are sheer perfection." He paused. "Are you disappointed?"

After a few seconds, Atlas answered truthfully. "Not at all. You made me look so sexual." He turned to look up at Hawk. "Thank you."

"There are my boys!" Ambrose's voice boomed from somewhere behind them, interrupting the moment they were sharing. Atlas was beginning to realize Hawk's bestie really excelled at popping up at the wrong times.

Before he knew what was happening, Ambrose had picked Atlas up and swung him around and around. Finally, he sat his feet back on the ground and kissed both of his cheeks. "I knew you would be perfect, Atlas. It was simply a large, empty room until your photos arrived. Gorgeous, my boy! Absolutely gorgeous! So far it seems that everyone's favorite is the picture where Hawk had your dick coated with glitter. It's simply a masterpiece."

"Hey! What about me? I get to take some credit, don't I?" Hawk teased.

Ambrose's eyes narrowed. "If I'm not mistaken, you've already taken everything, haven't you, my dearest friend?"

"Absolutely not," Hawk answered quickly. "Atlas and I have been business partners. My usual rules apply."

Atlas felt his heart plummet, in spite of the fact that Atlas had made it clear from the beginning that he didn't mix business with pleasure.

"And now?" Ambrose questioned with a smirk.

“And now we aren’t,” Hawk answered in the most seductive voice on the earth. Hawk practically dismissed Ambrose by turning and leading Atlas to a corner booth, close to the center stage. He leaned in to whisper into Atlas’ ear. “You do realize when this opening of the club is over, you no longer work for me, right?”

Atlas couldn’t stop his grin or the way his cock jumped in his jeans. “That’s exactly what I was hoping.”

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“The club is open. Do you want to stay in Texas tonight or fly back home? The choice is all yours. The bottom line is that your ass belongs to me. I plan on fucking you all night and all day tomorrow, too.” One of Hawk’s hands wrapped around the back of Atlas’ neck and tightened the grip. “I’m going to start out by tasting your delicious ass, eating it until you’re screaming my name and fireworks are going off in your balls. Ever had anybody eat your ass, Atlas?”

Atlas pushed his own fist against his cock to try and calm down the huge erection growing with every word that came from Hawk’s lips. “Uh...no. I haven’t had that pleasure yet,” Atlas managed to stutter.

“Good. I want to be your first. After I get you nice and loosened up with my tongue and fingers, I’m going to fuck you so hard that you’ll feel like I’m ripping you into pieces, and you’ll be begging for me to go harder and faster...and I will. How about milking? Ever had your prostate milked good and proper?”

“You’re going to have to stop talking.” Atlas warned. “I’m seriously not going to be able to hold my shit together. It will not be cool if I come in my pants and I’m close. Too. Damn. Close.”

Hawk gave another one of his predatory smiles. “You want me to take care of that right now? It’s dark. Nobody’s watching...or maybe they are. I don’t give a fuck who sees. You’re mine and I want everybody to know it. I’ve had to hold back while we’ve worked together. Tonight, our business relationship has ended and something else has begun. I’ve fantasized about what you taste like—your cum and your ass for far too long.”

“Okay. That’s it. We’re out of here. I can’t wait any longer.” Atlas answered. Hell, he could barely catch his breath, much less hold it together if Hawk followed through and sucked him off right there. He’d blow his load faster than every teenage boy’s nightmare.

Before he could grab Hawk’s hand and start his getaway, a large man crowded their space, knocking Atlas back onto his seat and causing Hawk to go into protective mode.

“Well, well. If it isn’t Ambrose’s favorite pet. Why am I not surprised to see you here, Hawk? I should have known you would be following Ambrose around like a homeless puppy.”

Atlas heard Hawk growl. His body tensed and his grip on Atlas’ hand tightened. Hawk’s body switched position, just enough to place himself between Atlas and the intruder. It was a subtle movement. Atlas might have never noticed it if he hadn’t been so in tune with all things Hawk.

“You know you aren’t welcome in any of Ambrose’s clubs, Blaze. Show yourself to the door before I call security. The last thing you want to do is let Ambrose see you here.” Hawk grinned. “You know me—always looking for a reason to kick your sorry ass. Stay another minute. Give me a reason. Go ahead. I dare you.”

Blaze looked past Hawk, his eyes closing in on Atlas. “Oh, my. This must be the model for your photos! He is simply delicious, Hawk. What agency did you pull him from?”

“This is my guest, Blaze,” Hawk hissed. “Mine.” Hawk didn’t like the idea of any of Blaze’s attention being focused on Atlas. The man was a stalker at the least—probably much worse if given the opportunity.

“Does Ambrose know he’s yours? We both know how our man loves to trade things in when something else tickles his fancy.”

Hawk turned to Atlas. “Stay here, please. The security team knows you’re with me and they’ll take care of you.”

“Let me show you the door, Blaze.” Hawk said as he gripped the other man’s upper arm and then proceeded to manhandle him across the busy floor, before both of them disappeared through the black curtains that led to the exit. At the door, he said, “Don’t start something you can’t finish, Blaze. He’s finished with you. It’s been three fucking years. Let. It. Go.” Hawk turned to Roan, the head of security, who’d been following them the entire time, and said, “Make sure every member of your team recognizes this man’s face. He is never allowed into any of Ambrose’s clubs. No exceptions and no room for mistakes. He shows up again and somebody loses their job. Understood?”

“It won’t happen again, Hawk. I apologize. We weren’t aware.”

“Of course, you weren’t,” Hawk answered. “Ambrose had hoped Blaze had finally grown into a man and disappeared from his life.” Hawk looked Blaze up and down. “Apparently, he’s still a spoiled child. It’s not your fault he got in but make sure it doesn’t happen again.” As the other men escorted Blaze out, Hawk pulled Roan aside and whispered, “Let’s not share this with Ambrose until morning. I don’t want to ruin his night.”

Roan nodded. “What’s the deal with this guy? Is he dangerous or a nuisance?”

“He’s somebody that doesn’t know how to take ‘no’ for an answer. Ambrose tried to let him down gently, but the idiot wouldn’t have any of it. Personally, I see him as a potential threat. Ambrose thinks he’s harmless but annoying as hell.”

Roan nodded. "I'm with you. Anybody that carries a torch for three years is fucked in the head. Was it a super bad breakup or what?"

"They were never together." Hawk scratched his chin. "Shit, I know this sounds crazy, but I think he wants to be Ambrose. It started out with him simply mimicking everything Ambrose did during scenes. Then he started showing up in places he had no business being. He reached out to Ambrose way too many times, trying to set up meetings, dates, or anything else he could think of. All I know is that he's creepy as hell and doesn't need to be anywhere near Ambrose."

"It won't happen again, Sir." Roan assured him. "If you're okay with it, I'll also discuss this with his personal security detail...or are they aware already?"

"I doubt Ambrose has mentioned it. You know him, he thinks he can handle everything himself. Yeah, talk to him about it. I'll take the blame if Ambrose goes on a rage about us doing something behind his back."

"Got it boss," Roan answered.

Hawk, hoping the potential of ruining opening night had been averted, turned to go fetch his man and put the club behind him and Atlas beneath him. He'd made some serious sex promises he intended to keep. Nobody, absolutely nobody, had ever rocked his world like Atlas...and they hadn't even kissed, much less fucked.

He skidded to a halt, barely stopping before plowing into the very man he'd been fantasizing about. "I thought I asked you to stay where you were."

Atlas grinned. "And I thought I told you I was ready to leave." He looked around and asked, "Did you get rid of the weirdo?"

"Weirdo is being escorted to his vehicle." Hawk answered. "Now where shall I escort

you, my naughty boy. I told you to stay where you were in order to keep you safe. You might need a spanking for disobedience.”

“Closest hotel room.” Atlas answered quickly. “And maybe you need a spanking for trying to be so damn bossy.”

Hawk closed in on Atlas until the smaller man’s body was trapped between Hawk’s solid muscle and the wall. “Tell me, doll, who do you think will end up receiving the spanking between the two of us?”

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Atlas shoved his groin against Hawk's. "Promises, promises."

"Fuck me," Hawk hissed as he leaned down to nibble on Atlas' bottom lip. "You, my pretty boy, are the full package." Hawk tossed Atlas over his shoulder and headed toward the exit.

"Roan, tell Ambrose if he needs me, I'll be at the penthouse on 7th. Make certain he understands to only call if it's an emergency...like if he's dying, or something in that category."

Roan grinned. "Copy that, Sir."

CHAPTER FOUR

As Hawk locked the door, Atlas took a moment to enjoy the magnificence of the penthouse. It wasn't the largest he'd seen, but the panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city were breathtaking. The furniture was expensive...hell, everything about Ambrose and Hawk was top shelf. Atlas, on the other hand, was mid shelf. He felt his insecurities start to creep back in. The old Atlas, the boring one, was begging to take things slower, not to take any risks with his heart or body.

"Whatcha thinking?" Hawk, who'd snuck up on him, whispered in his ear. "Second thoughts? It's okay if you are. I don't want you to feel pressure to do anything. If tonight's not the night, we'll go up to the rooftop and take a swim, just enjoy the view."

Of course, there was a rooftop pool.

“Just how much money do you and Ambrose have?” Atlas finally asked. “I’m way out of my league here.” He struggled for the right words. “I don’t want to be played with and thrown away and, to be honest, that’s about all I’d be good for when playing in your sandbox.” Atlas hung his head. “I shouldn’t have let it go this far. I’m sure you are used to hooking up with guys all the time. I’m not a hook up kind of guy.”

“You are making me angry right now.” Hawk said through gritted teeth. “I’ve already told you this wasn’t a hook up type of situation. That pisses me off.” Hawk caught Atlas beneath the chin and forced him to look up. “You know what pisses me even more than that? I’ll tell you, that dumbass bullshit remark about you only beingworthsomeone to play with and throw away. Where does that shit come from? You’re gorgeous. Funny. Smart. You act like a fucking adult when everybody else your age is still behaving like high school kids! Hell, Atlas, you are as close to damn-near perfect as I’ve ever encountered in my life. Just because I have money doesn’t begin to make meworthyof you. Fuck!”

They hadn’t spent a lot of time together, but Atlas had never seen Hawk really upset about...well, anything. When he was intense with work, he was laid back and a bit of a jokester. Well, shit. He’d done it again.

“Stop!” Hawk said in frustration.

“St-stop what?” Atlas whispered. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to say anything. You got that lost look on your face that you get when you’re overthinking or underthinking things.” Hawk leaned down and placed a soft kiss on Atlas’ lips. “I’m falling harder for you than I’ve ever fell for anybody. I don’t intend to let it get fucked up over money, the lack of or too much of, or rushing sex. Let’s go for that swim. I’m a funny guy. I’ll keep you laughing all night.”

Atlas felt his life snapping back into place—like he was emerging from a brain fog.

Those fogs tended to happen when he found himself exceptionally worried about something. He wasn't worried about Hawk, the man was worth the risk of getting his heart broken!

"I'm sorry. I don't know what makes me overthink every damn thing." Atlas leaned in, hoping he hadn't turned Hawk completely out of the mood for the night. "You made me some promises back at the club. I'd like to see you put your, uh, dick where your mouth is...like money where your mouth is. Get it? Just a joke." Atlas took a deep breath. "Shit, I'm doing the nervous chatter thing again."

Hawk pulled Atlas into a hug. "I'm smitten with everything you do, including the nervous chatter...excluding the negative things you say about yourself. I want that to stop. I have awesome taste, and in my eyes, you are deliciously perfect." Hawk placed a quick kiss on Atlas' forehead. "Now, let's go for that swim. It'll help us both relax."

Atlas didn't want to relax, he wanted to fuck. He'd jacked off countless times in the shower to the Hawk fantasy, but now he was more than ready for the real deal. Atlas dropped to his knees in front of Hawk, reaching for the button and zipper to his leather pants in the same movement. Atlas felt Hawk's entire body go rigid...all except for a soft caress to Atlas' cheek.

"Are you certain?" Hawk asked quietly.

Atlas' tongue swiped his bottom lip before answering. "No doubts at all. I want this more than I've ever wanted anything."

The very second Atlas finished answering Hawk, the bigger man reached down, picked Atlas up, and tossed him over his shoulder. "That makes two of us, unicorn." Hawk carried Atlas up some floating steps that were in the center of the penthouse. At the top, there was a grand bedroom, with a bed larger than the usual king-sized.

All of the walls were windows from floor to ceiling. Outside, a balcony wrapped around the room. Well, that was what Atlas thought it looked like but since he was still hanging upside down, he wasn't certain. All he knew for sure was that Hawk's back was packed solid with muscles that rippled with the man's every movement. Atlas had never pictured himself as the type that enjoyed being manhandled, but he loved how powerful Hawk was. The man made him feel safe and sexual at the same time.

Suddenly, Atlas felt himself being launched through the air. Thankfully, he wasn't able to shriek in fear before he landed safely on the massive bed...that would have been embarrassing. Atlas looked up at Hawk. He looked like a predator...which made Atlas the prey.

Looking back at Atlas, Hawk asked, "Do the windows bother you? If you're afraid someone from another building will see us, I'll lower the blinds."

Atlas' eyes darted towards the windows and noticed for the first time that there were penthouses in other buildings directly across from them. It would be simple enough to watch their every move, especially if they had telescopes like Atlas had seen on countless television programs and movies. Voyeurism...another thing that Atlas didn't realize would turn him on, but the idea of someone watching them...yeah, his dick could get really hard with the images dancing around in his head. "Leave them open," Atlas answered softly.

"That's my unicorn," Hawk cooed. "Now, this is how I'd like things to go tonight. I'm going to give you some commands and I'd like you to follow them. You strike me as someone who feels safer following rules. If anything makes you uncomfortable, you say...glitter. How does that sound?"

Atlas rose up on his knees. "You like giving commands, eh?"

Hawk nodded. “I do.”

“Well, lucky for both of us, I like obeying commands.” Atlas countered. “And following rules.” He grinned. “I’ve always been a stickler for the rules.” Sure, it was always good and safe rules that Atlas followed, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be good at following bad and naughty rules. If the hardness of his cock was any indication, Atlas was going to be on upper management level of naughty rule following.

“Good.” Hawk crossed his arms over his magnificently sculpted chest and spread his legs, striking a very intimidating pose...that caused pre-cum to leak from Atlas’ cock. “Take your shirt off.”

Atlas couldn’t help but be thankful that Hawk was starting with an easy command. When the man had been doing Atlas’ photos, touching every inch of him in very sexual ways, Hawk had been nothing short of professional, almost playful at times. That playfulness didn’t dance in his eyes now. No, it was something far more predatory. His eyes held threats—threats of delights Hawk’s body could offer. Feeling cocky and incredibly sexual, Atlas unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it aside. He was no professional stripper, but he thought he did a damn good job of making his moves look sexy.

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“I love your body,” Hawk praised. “Everything about it. Hold your arms out to your side, palms facing me.”

Atlas obeyed but couldn't help but think the pose didn't appear very enticing.

“Play with your nipples for me. Show me what you like—what feels good to you.” Hawk dropped his crossed arms and slowly started unbuttoning his own shirt, watching Atlas like the bird of prey he was named after. “Show me.”

Okay, things ramped up really quickly, Atlas thought to himself. He could do this. He could do this. Atlas chanted inside his head. Embarrassed, he lowered his eyes away from Hawk and allowed his fingers to caress his nipples. It was a new feeling. When he jacked off, all his attention was usually focused on below his waist. His fingers whispered across his nipples again...not good, not bad.

“Look at me,” Hawk commanded softly. “Eyes on me. I see this as us sharing passion. I want to see pleasure flare in your pretty blue eyes, and I can't see it when you're hiding from me.”

Fuck. Atlas' cock pushed against his jeans, wanting to be released. Slowly, Atlas raised his eyes to meet Hawk's piercing gaze. Hawk might think that Atlas' eyes would flare with passion, but the bigger man's eyes...they blazed with hunger. He's shed his shirt. His muscles rippled. His long hair hung to his shoulders, making him look like an untamed stallion. Yes, Hawk rocked a man-bun like a motherfucker, but Atlas preferred it wild and messy.

“Twist and pinch them,” Hawk ordered, knocking Atlas out of his fantasy. “Hard.

Make yourself feel some pain, just the right amount. Not too much but definitely not too little.”

Locked in Hawk’s gaze, Atlas obeyed. He started with a soft pinch. Moved to pinch harder. Harder. He felt like electric sparks sizzled as his nipple stiffened with each pinch, tug, and twist. His breathing quickened. Heart fluttered. How had he missed out on this? What a stupid fucker he was to never even try, Atlas thought as he continued to obediently fondled himself. His cock begged that he stroke it, but he knew Hawk wouldn’t approve. There would be a command, and he would wait for it.

“Lick your fingers, get them good and wet, and then play again,” Hawk said as he placed one knee on the bed so he could be closer to Atlas. “I’ll put clamps on those one day—make you wear them out in public. Clamps on your nipples and a plug in your ass, my toys marking you as mine.”

Atlas’ breath hitched as he envisioned it...how it would feel...how exposed and vulnerable...how sexy and adventurous. Hawk leaned in to blow on his wet nipples.

“I bet these taste delicious,” Hawk whispered seconds before his tongue swiped the hardened peaks. Each nipple received his devotion—so much devotion that Atlas started to whimper. He needed more.

“I was right, they are sweet,” Hawk said. “I bet you have a lot of sweet spots on this tight body.” He leaned back, grabbed Atlas by the back of his knees, and muscled him into a horizontal position in a quick motion and with very little effort. He picked up Atlas’ left leg and removed his shoes and socks, placing a feather kiss on each toe afterwards. The right foot followed the same pattern. After that, his fingers reached for Atlas’ belt. Unbuckled it. He opened his jeans next. His fingers were large but nimble and made quick work of the job. Gripping the waistband, Hawk tugged Atlas’ jeans and underwear down slowly before tossing them aside.

Atlas' cock bounced angrily against his stomach as soon as it was set free. "I...I need to touch myself," Atlas gasped. "Fucking foreplay is one thing, but this is borderline torture, Hawk!"

"Oh, unicorn, you haven't seen anything yet," Hawk answered, his lips forming an incredibly sexy and naughty grin. "I'm still hunting for sweet spots." Hawk flipped Atlas onto his stomach. "Move closer to the edge of the bed and get on your knees. Ass high in the air. If I'm not mistaken, I promised myself and you that I would feast on your gorgeous ass tonight, didn't I?" Hawk ran a finger along Atlas' crack until he found the rosebud of ultra-sensitive nerves. He pushed against it—not hard enough to enter his lover, but with enough pressure to cause Atlas to moan in desperation. "I wonder, will this beautiful hole be your sweetest spot?" Hawk reached around and gave Atlas' cock one firm stroke and whispered, "Or will this be the sweetest of all?"

Atlas moaned again. "You're killing me. You know this, right? If you're trying to start a fire, I can tell you the entire forest is about to burn to the ground. I'm turned on. Full-on desperate to be fucked. My heart might explode...or my cock. Or both."

Hawk chuckled as he opened Atlas' perfectly shaped ass cheeks apart, revealing his puckered opening. His eyes narrowed with desire as he watched the hole twitch impatiently, silently demanding to be serviced. Hawk was happy to oblige. He inhaled deeply as he dropped to head closer to the prize. Atlas smelled like a man and Hawk savored the aroma. Using the tip of his tongue, he tickled the outer edges of his prize—loving that Atlas' moaning ramped up a notch.

His new lover was correct about one thing...it was time they both reached some satisfaction. As much as Hawk wanted to playfully torture Atlas, his own passion threatened to consume him. His own cock had hardened the instant Atlas had given consent but with the scent and sounds coming from the boy, he feared he might come before he could give Atlas a taste of heaven. That would never do. Atlas' pleasure would always come first...

Shit, when had Hawk ever considered theforevermode? Never...not until this boy.

Hawk's hands massaged Atlas' firm globes while his tongue tickled, tortured, and plundered his hole. Atlas was tight...very tight. Hawk heard a growl build in his throat. Hawk might not be Atlas' first, but there hadn't been many before him. If he had his way, there wouldn't be any after him. The very thought of someone else touching and tasting Atlas made his blood boil.

Hawk stretched the puckered hole the best he could, using his tongue and fingers. A sweet mixture of curse words and whimpers tumbled from Atlas' mouth as Hawk worked his magic.

"I...I can't hold off anymore," Atlas gasped. "Gotta cum."

"Not without me inside you," Hawk ordered. "Give me a minute," he urged as he ripped his pants open, grabbed a condom and a large bottle of lube from the bedside table. As quickly as possible, he slid the condom on and coated it with the slippery lube. "Fuck, I need to be inside you, Atlas. You're mine." He smacked Atlas on the rump playfully. "Feet on the floor. Legs spread wide. Bend over the bed. I'll go as slow as I can. Glitter if it's too much." Shit, Hawk realized he was rambling, talking too much...too fast. He was too excited. Too desperate.

Hawk lined his engorged cock against Atlas' pucker and slowly started pushing inside. Atlas' body involuntarily tried rejecting his cock, but once the head was inside him, his body gradually accepted him. Inch by inch. Tighter and tighter. Hawk felt like he couldn't catch his breath, every nerve in his body was afire.

"Give it to me, Hawk," Atlas pleaded. "I need it. I need you." Thinking of nothing but pleasure, Atlas pushed his ass against Hawk's cock, impaling himself on the stiff rod. Pain caused flashing lights behind his closed eyes...but it didn't last long. Hawk's hand reached around to caress his balls and then stroke his leaking cock. The

deliciousness of the feeling caused all thoughts of pain to vanish.

Hawk pulled out slowly and watched with delight as Atlas' ass pushed back against him again. He watched his lover's hole stretch wider and wider. Atlas' moans grew louder, more impatient. Knowing what they both wanted, Hawk grabbed Atlas' hips and started pounding into him. Fast and hard. Slow and solid. Deep. Hawk angled his hips so he would nail Atlas' prostate with each thrust.

Within minutes, they both exploded—Atlas sending cum across the sheets and Hawk filling the condom. They were sweaty. Satiated. Exhausted...but wanting more. Needing more.

It was heaven.

Atlas literally felt like he was floating on air with each step he took. Sure, his entire body ached because he'd been fucked seven ways to Sunday...twice...at least, but it was the most fabulous feeling in the fucking world. He hadn't wanted to leave Hawk's bed. Hawk hadn't wanted him to. Fuck, he should still be there. Everything inside him told him that he belonged with Hawk—that he belonged to Hawk.

They'd smooched on the private jet coming home. Joined the mile-high club. Smooched more. Sucked each other off. Atlas hadn't really considered himself an overly sexual person but now he felt like a cat in heat.

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If he was moving too fast for Hawk, he could always just sell all his belongings, rent out his apartment, and sleep in a tent outside Hawk's textile mill home. There was a lot to be said about immediate access! Just as he started to slip his key into the lock, the door burst open. A very irritated Meg was glaring at him. Ha! Even she wasn't going to be capable of ruining his sex-high.

"Where in the hell have you been?" Megan screeched at the tip-top of her lungs. "You haven't answered your phone. You always answer your phone on the second ring. Always! You've been gone for two days! You are never gone! You've missed Mexican night and Chinese night!" She stopped screaming and yanked Atlas into a tight hug. He could barely breathe. She was tiny but strong. "Don't ever do that to me again! I was on the verge of calling 911 until the flowers arrived this morning."

"Flowers? I got flowers?" Atlas asked excitedly as he eased Meg out of his way. He stopped three steps into the apartment. "Fuck. I got flowers." On their dining table, big enough to seat six people comfortably, sat at least twenty vases of various colors of roses. Seriously, there had to be at least twenty.

For him.

From Hawk.

They had to be from Hawk.

Meg closed the door, and the next thing Atlas knew, she was smacking his already incredibly sore ass cheek. "You dirty dog!" She sniffed him. "You had sex. I smell it! You had lots of sex. Two days of sex!" Meg grabbed him into another hug. "I'm so

proud of you. It's about damn time! Is he gorgeous? Tell me he's gorgeous! Clearly he's got money to throw around. There are twenty-four sets of dozens! All colors!" She sashayed over to the table, grabbed a card, and then slammed it in his face. "Only one card. Read it. I need to see you read it. I hope it says something dirty. Read it. Now."

Atlas felt his face glowing hot, but it wasn't embarrassment. Shit, if he didn't know better, it could easily be mistaken for love...like the storybook kind of love that didn't really happen in real life. His hands shook as he took the card from her. Like everything Hawk did, the card felt thick and expensive. He opened it.

Blinked quickly as he read the words.

Blinked again...as the words adjusted inside his brain.

Meg tried to snatch the envelope from his hand but luckily, he stashed it behind his back before she could get her claws on it. Ambrose? Why would Ambrose send him roses? Even more important, if roses were to be sent, why hadn't Hawk been the sender?

Meg placed her hands on her hips. "You've got exactly eighteen minutes to explain this situation to me, Atlas Mosley."

"Eighteen minutes? You have my cave-in time narrowed down to the exact minute?" Sure, Atlas knew he would reveal the truth to his best friend, he'd just hoped to have some time to digest the disappointment before having to admit it out loud.

"No, silly. I have eighteen minutes before the car picks me up to take me to the airport. We've got a problem with one of our customers in Mexico, and they're sending me to fix it. As usual. When you've got it, you've got it! Now, tell me about these roses and why your beautiful face dropped when you read the note."

“How long are you going to be gone?” Atlas whined. He had a feeling he was going to need Meg’s support if the roses were any indication.

“I’ll be in Mexico for about a month. The CEO decided I should include all our customers in that area to make the trip as productive as possible. Now, for the important shit. Who are the roses from and why did you look sad?”

Atlas plopped down in the nearest chair. “Remember that pamphlet you gave me about posing for the photographer?”

Meg squealed with delight. “You did it? You honestly did it? I’m so proud of you! Goodbye comfort zone, hello exciting new world. I told you there would be a great chance they would pick you! Oh my God, you’re going to be famous!” She frowned. “Why the sad face, though?”

“Well, the photo shoot you gave me had been cancelled. Had I been with a model agency, I would have known this...thanks a lot for making me look like a fool. You’re forgiven, though. When I showed up at the photographer’s place, there was another client there looking for, uh, something, uh...special. He liked what he saw, and things went from there.” He held up his hand to stop another one of her squeals. “Before you go crazy, I won’t be famous. It was very specialized. No face shots and they will never be seen out in public. They were for a club...a BDSM club.”

“Are you lying to me?” Meg asked, amazement written all over her face. “You actually did naked shots? For a BDSM club? In front of the most popular photographer in the art world right now?”

A wave of pride washed over Atlas. Pride for Hawk and pride that he’d been brave enough to do it. Then he remembered the roses and the note. Maybe it was no big deal? Ambrose had flirted with him, but everything had felt totally innocent. The man had practically thrown Atlas and Hawk together during their talks. Surely the roses

were something he did for all his models?

Surely.

It had to be.

“Yep, Meggie. I did all that.” Atlas answered with a huge smile. “You would have been so proud of me.” He started counting off on his fingers. “First, I had the courage to try out for something that was so outlandishly not me. Second, when I realized the mistake had been made but a different client was interested, I didn’t run away...even if I thought really long and hard about it. Third, I met with the two most gorgeous guys in the world and didn’t totally lose my shit. Fourth, I posed completely nude, up close shots, and very fucking erotic. Fifth, I went to the club opening and sat calmly while huge poster pics, beautifully framed, of course, covered the walls.” His grin grew even wider. “Oh, and I left the club with Hawk and we just spent the last twenty-four hours fucking like...shit, I don’t have words for it!”

Meg started jumping up and down with excitement. “My baby’s growing up! I’m so excited! Is he as hot as his pics on the internet? Is he good in bed? He has to be good in bed. Of course, he is. You stayed for a twenty-fucking-four-hour fuckathon!” Meg stopped jumping long enough to Atlas in for a tight, bone-cracking hug. “I’m so damn mad that I have to leave before hearing each and every libido-boiling detail! I have to know everything...and I mean everything. Please promise that as soon as I get back, we have a wine drinking all night party discussing it all.”

“I promise.” Atlas answered. “I mean as long as Hawk’s okay with me oversharing. I’ll ask him first.”

“You do that, my little sex god.” She answered as she grabbed her rolling luggage and gave Atlas a huge kiss right on the lips. “Wait. Why were you upset about the card? That many roses after a night of fucking? That’s as good as him giving you a

standing ovation after ejaculation. Get it? I made a rhyme.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” Atlas answered. “The roses weren’t from Hawk. They were from Ambrose—the guy who chose me for the job. Hawk’s best friend. They’re like brothers.” Atlas looked over at the rose-covered table. “I don’t want to do anything to fuck up their relationship. Is it weird that Ambrose sent the roses? Maybe it was just a thank you?”

Meg nibbled her bottom lip. “I know absolutely nothing about the art world and how those creative type act. It makes sense that he would send you something...but it also doesn’t make sense. Listen to me, while I’m away, I’m going to do some digging on this Ambrose guy—see if this is something he’s done before. Hopefully, it’s just normal procedure for a man with a bunch of money. What’s his last name? I have friends in the art world. They’ll be able to help me. Discreetly, of course.”

“McKenzie.” Atlas answered. “His last name is McKenzie but please make sure everything is discreet. I don’t want to fuck this up. Hawk is...well, he’s perfect. Way too perfect for me, but he’s who I want.”

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Meg saluted him. “Discreet. Got it. Ambrose McKenzie. Don’t ever say someone is too perfect for you. If I hear you do it again, I’ll whip your perky ass until it is blood red. Not pink. Red.”

Atlas smiled. Meg and Hawk were a lot alike. “Yes, dear.” He winked. “Stay safe and come home quick. Luv you, girl.”

“Luv you back!” Meg pulled in for another hug. “You keep having the awesome sex while I’m away. Promise me that you’ll have a good time and open yourself up. I want everybody to know the Atlas I love. Love means taking risks, baby. Now, I saw alarm bells going off inside your head as soon as I said the word risk,” Meg teased but meant every word. “Yes, risks are dangerous and painful when they don’t work out. But when they do? It’s a fucking awesome ride.” Meg leaned back, slapped Atlas’ ass, and said, “Now, go take that fucking awesome ride with your fucking awesome ass!” She darted for the door. “Love you, Atlas! Don’t forget to water my plants!”

As soon as his hurricane of a best friend closed the door to their apartment, Atlas felt an eerie silence fall over the room. Meg was so full of energy—the good kind of energy that everyone wished they had but few really possessed it. Her loyalty was without fault. Meg was the kind of friend that would stand side by side with you when you’d really fucked up, but then beat the shit out of you for being a dumbass when all the dust settled. Atlas hoped he was wrong about it being weird for Ambrose to send him the roses, or Meg would destroy him. He also hoped he was right about Hawk really caring for him on more than a sexual level, or Meg would destroy him, too.

Shit. His boring life of pre-Hawk/Ambrose was starting to look enticing again. It was safe.

His cell rang and he dug it out of his pocket, hoping it might be Hawk, anything to make him stop worrying. “Hello.”

“Stop overthinking everything, Atlas.” Meg’s voice sounded from the other end of the line. “I knew the minute I walked out of the apartment you’d start worrying about things that you don’t even know exists. Stop it! That’s all. Love you!”

Atlas smiled. If it wasn’t Hawk, Meg was the next best thing, and she was right. She’d nailed him on the worrying part. How could a tiny woman be both a hurricane and rock at the same time? There was no doubt about it, though, Meg was his fucking rock.

“Love you right back, doll.” Atlas answered. They both disconnected and Atlas turned to face the tribunal of roses. Ugh. One vase with a thank you card would have been more than sufficient. Hell, he shouldn’t feel like he needed to send anything...but there they sat—all, Atlas counted in his head, twenty-four dozen vases. What to do....

Two hours later and with the much-needed help of his doorman, Tanner, all the roses had new homes and any evidence of their existence no longer existed in his apartment. Atlas knew he was more than likely overreacting and reading more into the gift, but in all honesty, overreaction was his superpower. There was no sense denying it, so he owned the quirky weakness. While he knew he didn’t possess those supernatural spidey senses that Peter Parker had, but something was telling him that Ambrose’s responses weren’t something that would make Hawk happy.

He'd just logged onto his computer to do some work when there was a knock at the door, which was odd because people were supposed to be buzzed up. The top-notch

security was one of the reasons Atlas had chosen this complex. Quietly, he moved toward the small room with two security panels so he could see who was knocking. Tanner.

Opening the door, Atlas asked, “What’s wrong, Tanner? Please don’t tell me people are complaining about the roses?”

Tanner laughed. “Nah, I’ve heard that old saying about no good deed goes unpunished but so far, everybody has been tickled to find their roses. I’ve even caught a few men taking credit for sending them. Assholes.”

“Okay, great. I was afraid something had gone wrong.” Atlas looked at the small box in Tanner’s hand and a feeling of foreboding washed over him. “What’s in the box?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s why I’m here. A courier dropped this off for you. Maybe that whole pay it forward thing really works. Looks like you’ve gotten something back for the nice rose thing you did earlier.” Tanner handed him the box. “Hope it’s something awesome. See you later, Mr. Mosley.”

“I hope it’s not something awesome,” Atlas grumbled as he pulled out his wallet to give Tanner a tip. “Thanks again for all your help today, Tanner. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“No problem, Sir. I’ll see you in the morning unless something else comes up.”

As soon as Tanner walked away, Atlas closed the door and leaned against it. The small box, wrapped in sparkling gold paper and tied with a black ribbon, burned his hand—not literally but definitely figuratively. That same feeling of doom loomed over him. Could he get lucky and it be a small, inexpensive gift from Hawk? Doubtful.

Small steps carried him to the sofa. He plopped down and palmed the package. To be in such a small box, it was heavy. If it was from Hawk, maybe it would be a fun sex toy they could try out together? If it was from Ambrose, he hoped it would be nothing more than a lump of coal. Ugh. How could he go from having zero men in his queue to two...who were the best of friends?

His hands trembled and he untied the ribbon and unwrapped the package. Beneath the wrappings was a black box and the inscription of a very expensive jeweler in the downtown area—the kind he'd been afraid to ever walk in to because he knew there was nothing he could afford. Fuck. Double fuck. He opened the box.

A watch. An expensive watch, no doubt. He picked up the card attached to the watch. It was a Rolex Cosmograph Daytona. As carefully as possible, he sat the watch down and Googled the cost—approximately thirty-thousand dollars. There was a gift card tucked beneath the watch.

Atlas actually thought he might cry. They'd be tears of anger, but tears were threatening. Frustrated, he stuffed everything back into the box and crammed it into a container where he and Megan put shit they never really intended to do anything with. After placing it on the shelf, he started pacing back and forth. Ambrose had been so nice to him, so supportive of he and Hawk getting together as a couple. What in the holy fuck had gone wrong? Why would the man do this to him? More importantly, to Hawk?

He nearly jumped out of his skin when his cell rang. He stared at it in horror. What if it was Ambrose? Two rings. What if it wasn't? Three rings. What if Megan was stranded somewhere and needed his help? Four rings. Atlas raced over and swiped his finger up the phone. "Megan?"

Hawk's sexy chuckle sounded from the other end of the phone. "No, not Megan. Are you disappointed? Is this Megan someone I need to worry about?"

Just the sound of Hawk's voice caused him to begin to calm down. Hawk would make it alright. He could fix everything. Atlas felt a smile tug at his lips. Yes, he felt much better already. "Megan's my roommate and self-appointed protector against all things evil. She's traveling for business and since I overreact about practically everything, I automatically thought something was wrong." Atlas flipped off the container that held the expensive gift that he had absolutely no desire to keep. He only wanted Hawk. "Why did you call? Is something up?"

"Just missing you already," Hawk purred into the phone. "How busy are you today?"

Atlas looked at his open laptop. He'd been about to log into work when Tanner had arrived with the gift. Without a second's hesitation, he used his toe to close the laptop. "I don't have a thing in the world planned. What do you have in mind?"

"Lots and lots of things. Naughty things. Wicked things." Hawk answered. "All those things but I also want to take you out to lunch, meet some of my friends, and then a nice dinner. We are more than sex, Atlas. At least I hope we are."

Warmth gushed through Atlas' entire body. "I hope we are, too. I'll be at your place in an hour?"

"Sounds perfect. Can't wait to see you again."

CHAPTER FIVE

Atlas hadn't been fully prepared to be swept off his feet on their first "official" date. As soon as he'd arrived at Hawk's place, they'd had sex. No, they'd made love. Their first night together had been wild and filled with a wickedness Atlas hadn't ever experienced in his life. Today had been something different and equally exciting. More fulfilling. Hawk had worshipped every inch of his body with tongue and touch. During sex, Hawk had kept his hands pinned to the bed, over his head, the entire time. His hands had itched to touch Hawk, but the man had forbidden it by keeping him trapped. Afterward they had showered together, gotten dressed again, and then hopped on Hawk's Indian motorcycle. Atlas had been tender in places that the motorcycle ride made all the more obvious, but he'd smiled the entire time—loving the reminder of what they'd shared.

They'd ridden less than an hour when Hawk pulled the motorcycle into the nearly empty parking lot of another abandoned industrial plant. Atlas couldn't help but chuckle. The dude really had a thing for abandoned manufacturing plants. Aside from the motorcycle, there were three Hummers, two Jeeps, and two Harley motorcycles in the parking lot. It screamed testosterone.

"I didn't scare you, did I?" Hawk asked as he helped Atlas off the bike before gracefully sliding off himself. Hawk pulled off his helmet and shook his longish black hair wildly while he waited for his lover to answer.

"No! It was fabulous! I never understood the desire to ride a motorcycle before today. You feel so free!" Atlas answered excitedly, all the while struggling to remove his helmet. It would take some serious practice before he could make it look half as sexy

as Hawk had. Atlas looked at the outside of the massive building. “You’ve really got a thing for abandoned workplaces, don’t you?”

Hawk laughed. “You nailed it, love. I love the old architecture and how sturdy the ancient bones are—they don’t make buildings like this anymore. Sadly, it’s hard to salvage much on the inside and make them livable, but we try to keep the outside as historically correct, as possible.”

“Plus, it looks like a dump and people will be less likely to try and rob you,” Atlas teased.

“Nailed it again!”

“So, what is this place? You said we were going to meet some of your friends and check out one of the businesses you own.” Atlas looked around again. “Friend hideout or business?”

Hawk grabbed Atlas’ hand and tugged him along toward the main entrance. “Both. You’ll love these guys but get ready for them to give both of us a hard time.” Once they were at the heavy metal doors, Hawk paused and turned back around to face Atlas. “Listen, I probably need to explain some things before we go inside and meet everybody. I’m not sure how much Ambrose told you about his parents and mine, their connection, and all that stuff?”

“Just that his parents died in a plane crash and for me not to feel sorry for them because they were never around anyway. It sounded like his childhood wasn’t awesome—like he had plenty of money but not love from his parents.” Atlas answered.

“That pretty much sums it up for poor Ambrose. His parents did suck at parenting. Our back story is that Ambrose’s father and my father started their own IT firm,

launched it, and made millions. Lots of millions. My dad was the IT genius. Ambrose's father brought the business brilliance."

Sounds like everybody had to make a lot of sacrifices. I'm sorry, Hawk. Were your parents the same? Absent?" Atlas asked softly.

"No, not really. They managed their time differently. Of course, what my dad did could be done from about anywhere and he preferred to do it from home. Walter, Ambrose's dad, was always out making the sale's pitch to potential buyers. He and Anna, Ambrose's mom, were the face of the company. My mom and dad preferred staying in the background." Hawk pushed a hand through his shaggy hair. "That's why what happened makes it so damn hard to accept and forget."

Atlas had a feeling he was about to hear something that would break his heart for Hawk. "What happened?" He asked quietly. Part of him wanted to know but the other part didn't want to hear it...didn't want to witness what caused the pain on Hawk's beautiful face.

"Like me...or me like her, I guess would be more like it, my mom loved photography. She had me holding a camera about as soon as I learned to hold a baby bottle," Hawk joked, without humor. "It was her passion, and she was my dad's passion. After the business took off and money started flowing and growing, when everything stabilized and it was obvious the company was going to be successful, my mom convinced dad to take her on a photo-taking expedition. They were going to travel the world. Dad could continue to handle his part of the business and mom's dream could be cultivated." His eyes stared past Atlas, like he was envisioning the past. "They wanted me to go...begged me to go." He laughed bitterly. "They used all the guilt trip shit that parents are given as a gift from God when they have their first child, but I wouldn't budge. It was in the middle of my Junior year of high school. I had a new boyfriend—my first serious...and by serious, I mean that we'd fucked more than once. In my head, the head of a stupid teenager, I thought that life would

go on without me and I'd be the weird kid when we finally got back home. I didn't want to stand out any more than I already did...so I didn't go."

"I can't imagine you everstanding out, except in a really good way," Atlas told him.

Hawk laughed. "I was tall, skinny, and had plenty of acne to go around. I truly looked like a nerdish vagabond. I didn't start working out until...well, until after...."

"After what, Hawk? What happened to your parents?"

Hawk plopped down on the gravel in the parking lot. Atlas quickly joined him. Not knowing if Hawk would be open to it but refusing not to at least try, Atlas grabbed his hand and held it tight.

"They'd only been gone for less than a month. They called me every day, updating me on what they were doing and begging me to fly out and join them. I loved listening to the tales but still didn't want to leave school." Hawk looked past Atlas again. "They called every day until one day they didn't. I missed talking to them but didn't really think anything about it. Second day, no phone call. I knew then, I knew something bad was wrong. To call them overprotective would be quite an understatement." Hawk said. "I was their pride and joy for some crazy reason." On the morning of the third day, Ambrose and his father showed up at the house. There was a caravan of government agents that arrived as they did." Hawk laughed—it was a harsh laugh, a disgusted laugh. "I locked the doors because I knew I didn't want to hear what they had to say. I knew." He shrugged. "Anyway, Ambrose knew how to get into the house, so my holdout didn't last long." Hawk took another deep breath and squeezed Atlas' hand in return. "They were in the jungles of Nicaragua. I'm sure mom was going crazy with all the photos she was taking. Ambrose's dad told me that they'd been abducted and were being held for ransom. Sure, it was a wicked amount of money, but I knew the company had it. That's when Ambrose and the government officials told me that the United States doesn't negotiate with terrorist. The ransom

wasn't going to be paid, but they felt confident that the abductors would release them when they realized no monies would be exchanged." Hawk bumped the back of his head against the brick wall behind him. "They lied. The fuckers sent footage of them killing my parents. Beheading." Hawk looked at Atlas. "That's something I'll never forget—something that's always made me not to want to get close to people." Hawk smiled softly...sadly. "Until you. With you, I want to drop all my guards and put my heart at risk."

"Me too," Atlas said as he gave Hawk a gentle kiss to his lips. Tears streaked down Atlas' face. He couldn't begin to imagine the horror a young Hawk had been forced to endure...the horror that Hawk still endured. "I'm falling and I'm falling fast. I don't want to scare you. We'll take things slow. I know you said relationship weren't your thing. I can see why now. I'm so sorry this happened to you." Tears kept dripping.

"Dad's half of the business went to Wallace, Ambrose's dad. The business documents had been drawn up that way in the beginning. My best friend's family took me in and raised me. If it hadn't been for them, I have no clue what would have become of me. After the plane accident that killed Ambrose's parents, he inherited everything—gave me half of it, told me that's the way it should have been in the beginning."

"Wow. That's...that's friendship. No, that's brothers, isn't it?" Atlas asked, all the while the picture of the flowers and the note from Ambrose danced around in his head. There was no way Hawk would ever choose Atlas over Ambrose...and he shouldn't want him to...but he still did.

"Yeah, he's my brother." Hawk waved his arm at the massive building around them. "As soon as I got money, I started investigating ways to help people when they are faced with the same problem I did with my family. I learned there were black ops teams, ex-military men, who did that kind of work already. I have no fucking clue why it wasn't offered to me, but it wasn't. I started this business, hired the people I

trusted, and the rest is history. When we hear of abductions, we reach out, no waiting for financial negotiations or the government to get involved. Sometimes we get paid, sometimes we don't. It's always worth it, though." Hawk stood up, dusted his pants off, and lifted Atlas to a standing position. "Come on, let's meet the guys. Remember, photography is my passion, just like my mother, but this is my calling, too. Hawk punched in a code and then scanned his palm print. "No more sad talk for the day."

"First of all, super technology for an old building. Second, why are they going to give us a hard time?" The door swung open, and Atlas followed Hawk inside. As they walked in, Atlas couldn't help but gape at how thick the doors were. They looked like they belonged in a military bunker. Following that lead, the interior walls were coated with the same thick industrial steel as the door. Odd. Like with Hawk's building, this one consisted of wide-open spaces but only two floors. There was a cluster of desks in the center of the room, a wall of security videos, and then a huge screen that was currently blank. All in all, some high-tech shit.

Hawk wrapped his arm around Atlas' waist in a possessive manner. "Super technology because of the work these guys do. Why would they give us a hard time? Because I've never ever brought another man home to meet my adopted family. They are gonna give me hell."

Warmth gushed through Atlas. So, he was a first?

"Well, look what the cat drug in!"

One of the men shouted as he made his way over to greet Hawk. Their huge bodies crashed together in a man hug. When they backed away, they did some sort of stupid handshake...which Hawk did with each man in the group. Atlas was beginning to think Hawk had forgotten he was there.

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“Where have you been, boss? We missed that ugly mug of yours around here. Between not having you and Levi’s team here, it’s been quiet as a nunnery.”

Atlas watched Hawk arch a perfectly shaped brow. “Very doubtful, Egypt. You guys never shut the fuck up.”

The man who’d jumped up to greet Hawk first zeroed his gaze on Atlas, making him feel like he’d just been placed under a huge microscope. Following the guy’s lead, the rest of the men looked at Atlas...and silence fell over the crowd. Atlas wanted to turn and run for his life.

The man moved closer to Atlas, a huge grin on his face. “Fellas, would you look at this? Our boy is finally growing up! He’s brought a suitor home to meet the family!”

The group of muscled men surrounded Atlas and Hawk. “Go on, little bird. Tell us who you’ve brought with you.”

Hawk laughed. “Listen guys, try not to be assholes. I know you all think it’s cute, but not everybody agrees. Give Atlas some time to get to know you before you reveal the true depth of your assholery.” Hawk moved to where he was standing next to Atlas. He did the possessive move of putting his arm around his waist again. Atlas felt better instantly. “Babe, I hate to tell you that these bunch of testosterone-laden idiots are my family.” Hawk leaned down and placed a soft kiss on Atlas’ lips. “I’ll drop em in a heartbeat if you ask me too.”

The one Hawk had called Egypt stepped forward. “Hell on fire, Hawk, you wouldn’t drop any of us any faster than you’d drop Ambrose. I can say that with all confidence

because you know we're gonna love your little dark angel. He's gorgeous and has the cutest shy smile. On top of that, he's tamed the beast! He's a hero in our eyes." Egypt shoved his hand toward Atlas for him to shake. "I'd hug you, but Hawk might try to rip my head off. Jealous, this one."

Hawk merely chuckled. "This mouthy one is Egypt—best sniper the military has ever had or will have. Don't dare tease him about his dimples because it makes him blush." Hawk grinned, leaned down and whispered, "Wait for it." Sure enough, a mere second passed before a blush crept up Egypt's gorgeous face, covering his cheeks with a color so red that it had to burn.

"Asshole," Egypt grumbled good-naturedly. "Anyway, Atlas, it's great to meet you. Take care of our man."

Another man stepped forward. "This is Roan, our computer expert. If it's on the worldwide web, our man can find it and destroy it."

The rotation continued until Atlas had met every man except one. He'd never be able to remember all their names or what their job was. Hell, he didn't even know what kind of business this was. There was a Journey, Jalen, Solomon, Maxwell, Titus, Wallace, and...and...shit, he'd already forgotten one. Before he had time to worry about it, the final guy moved forward, getting way too close before Hawk backed him further away. Hawk introduced him as Braxton, the team's demolitions expert. Atlas disliked him immediately but squashed the feelings away because the man was part of Hawk's family. He'd find a way to like him, regardless of the squeamish feelings he gave Atlas.

"You sure this one is yours, Hawk?" Braxton crossed his massive arms over his chest. "He's more like Ambrose's type."

Oh, hell, no! That fucker did not just say that in front of him. Atlas looked up at

Hawk, saw the anger on his face, and just went for it. “I would have thought demolitions people would be smart.” Atlas shrugged. “I guess I was wrong.”

Since all the other guys high-fived him and Hawk kissed him good and hard in front of everybody, Atlas guessed it had been an okay move. Braxton didn’t look like he could take a joke but that was too damn bad. Because of the stupid gifts, Ambrose was Atlas’ hot spot and Braxton had pushed it.

“Well, now that Atlas has put Braxton in his place, let’s head down to the war room...where we can really show off for your man!” Wallace, the team leader, said.

The war room was obviously a fun place, though it didn’t sound like it, because all the guys got excited. Hawk led Atlas, guiding him with a soft touch to the top of his ass, to a set of elevators. The rest of the guys went toward a stairwell. “What? You think I can’t handle the stairs?” Atlas teased Hawk as the elevator doors slid shut. “I may not be as muscular as they are but stairs...those I can handle.”

“Babe, you can handle anything,” Hawk said as he pulled him into a hug, both of his hands cupping Atlas’ firm ass cheeks. “I think you proved that by standing up to Braxton. I loved it.”

“I’m not sure I like him as much as the others,” Atlas remarked quietly.

“I’m not sure I do either. He’s new to the team, only been with us for a couple of years. He served with Journey on a couple of tours. Does good work but there’s something...off about his personality. Don’t worry, though. Wallace will ditch his ass if he’s a problem. He runs a tight ship.”

The elevator doors slid open, revealing another level Atlas hadn’t realized existed when he’d first entered the warehouse. As soon as they exited, Hawk started pointing things out to Atlas. “The far end has a state-of-the-art firing range—sound-proof so

they don't irritate the non-existent neighbors or the rest of the group while training. That's the gym area and the mats and cage next to it is where they'll spar and work on improving their fighting techniques." Hawk pointed toward the other end of the warehouse. "That big room is where they plan and work on targets. The weapons safe is down here somewhere but if I told you, I'd have to kill you." Hawk teased.

At least Atlas hoped he was teasing. Yeah, he was teasing.

"What is it exactly that these guys do? Gonna be honest here, it doesn't look really legal...unless you are the US Military, of course." Atlas looked up at Hawk. "Are you the military?"

"Nope," Hawk answered as he ushered Atlas toward the war room. "Sometimes we work with the military, but mostly it's the stuff the military can't handle because of restrictions. We deal with overseas abductions of American citizens, punching holes in the drug cartel when we can, protection for wealthy travelers, and on and on. Our boots on the ground men were all special ops or special ops rejects."

Atlas frowned. "Rejects? Why the rejects?"

"Good question," Hawk answered as he pulled out a chair at the conference table and indicated for Atlas to sit with him. "Have you ever heard the saying 'mine is not to reason why, but to do or die'? Some guys can't do that—blow up a village because some bureaucratic sitting behind a desk decided it to be so and doesn't care that these men have blood on their hands if things go wrong. Some men need to know the reason why, I'd be one of those men."

Atlas banged his head against the table three times before looking back up at Hawk. "Are you telling me that you are not only an obnoxiously popular artist, but you know special ops shit, too? I'm so far out of my league," Atlas grumbled. "I'm a graphic designer, for fuck's sake. What in the world do you see in me?"

Without hesitation, Hawk answered, “Everything.”

Atlas felt his cheeks begin to glow, the way they always did when Hawk’s penetrating gaze, accompanied by seductive words, wove their magic around his heart. With his very limited dating history, he worried about the possible stupidity of falling madly in love with the first man to really pay him any attention. Atlas wanted it...oh, how badly he wanted it. The words, the I love you, were right on the tip of his tongue, ready to fall right out and make a fool of him, but a knock on the door gave him enough time to haul the words back in and tuck them safely away.

Wallace peaked his head inside the room. “Am I good to come in or do you love birds need some more nesting time?”

Hawk flipped him off. “Get in here. Trust me, Atlas and I are enjoying more nesting than all you idiots put together.” He teased. “Now, update me on where we stand with Indigo and Clay. This entire operation is beginning to feel like a total clusterfuck, Wallace. I hope I’ve made it clear to you how I feel about the misconceptions and blatant lies that we’ve used to try and get what we want. I know you think that Clay isn’t in over his head, but I beg to disagree with you. Again.”

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Wallace leaned forward on his elbows and massaged his forehead. “Hell, Hawk. None of us feel good about what’s going on with this shitshow. We don’t like that Indigo ghosted all of us when he was injured. We don’t like that he’s now blind, living in a fucking dangerous neighborhood with no protection other than Sky, and we certainly don’t like that Clay waltzed into his house and decided to pretend to be something and somebody he isn’t! I realize that the betrayal knows no bounds here...but I also realize that Clay, the straightest man I’ve ever known before Indigo showed up around here, has gotten in way over his head.”

Hawk jumped to his feet. “Over his head? Over his head, Wallace? He’s pretending to be somebody Indigo doesn’t know and he’s fucking him! I think that’s a bit more than him being in over his head.”

“Wow,” Atlas muttered quietly, shocked by what he’d just heard. He definitely had a hard time believing Hawk would be part of a lie so heartbreaking and potentially humiliating if this Indigo person ever found out the truth. Atlas knew such a betrayal would completely shatter him. Shit. He was sitting on his own potential time bomb at the moment with the whole Hawk and Ambrose situation.

“Wow can’t even begin to cover this clusterfuck, Atlas,” Hawk ranted. “I know I told you we were good guys doing good things, but this one thing is our horror show...and may end up being our undoing.”

“Clay is in love with Indigo, Hawk. I know he is.” Wallace said.

“And you somehow think that makes it better?” Hawk asked in disbelief. “In my opinion, it makes the betrayal even worse.” Throwing up his hands, Hawk added,

“And the last time I checked, Clay was straight.”

“Riigghhtt,” Wallace answered. “Just try and have some faith in Clay, Hawk. Trust me, this is driving me nuts, too. I’m worried sick about Indigo’s entire situation, not just what’s going on with Clay. The fact that he could walk away from all of us and try to face this on his own? That shit kills me. I love that kid and you know it. We all do. I don’t know why he left us or if he’ll ever come back. All I know is that I have to try. We have to try.”

Hawk sat back down and took Atlas’ hand. Studied it. Caressed it. Huffed out a breath of frustration that was clearly directed toward Wallace and not Atlas. “Tell me again how we ended up in this shitshow.”

“We had surveillance on Indigo and Sky, keeping a safe distance, giving him time he clearly felt he needed to deal with his injuries, making sure none of those fuckers in the drug infested neighborhood he chose to abandon us for, and, of course, hacking into all his technology...just in case he needed us and wasn’t sure how to reach out.”

“Bullshit,” Hawk muttered but gestured for Wallace to continue anyway.

“One morning, Indigo called for a male escort to come to his house. For sex.” Wallace whispered like there were children in the room.

“I’m certain both Atlas and I know the job description for many male escorts, Wallace—no need to explain it to us. Continue. You’ve yet to convince me that we aren’t the bad guys in this scenario.”

“I know it sounds bad.”

“It is bad. Keep talking.” Hawk requested, squeezing Atlas’ hand and sending him a wink.

“Well...uh...you know...Clay just wasn’t going to have anything to do with a strange man, somebody we knew absolutely nothing about, going into Indigo’s home...much less having sex with him.”

“Because Clay is Indigo’s legal guardian?” Hawk asked sarcastically.

“No, of course not.”

“Because Clay somehow owns Indigo?”

“Stop being such a smartass, Hawk. You didn’t see them together—their chemistry.”

“So, because Clay feels like he needed to protect a man who is trained to kill and has a military-trained police dog, he decided to, let’s say, take one for the team. You know, pretend to be someone he isn’t and fuck Indigo...and took money, I’m certain.”

Wallace frowned. “How could you be certain of that?”

“Because this is a worst case scenario, Wallace! If it’s bad, it has happened on this operation! To our own god damn people!” Hawk clarified. “What the fuck was Clay thinking? What were you thinking?”

“Clay thought he could change his appearance, well at least the parts that Indigo might touch, fake an accent—something we are all good at, dress up real nice, change his cologne, and when it came time for the, you know, act, he planned on not being able to get it up and leave. They’d planned to send a different guy in each time. Nobody was supposed to get, well, fucked.”

Atlas had had about enough. “Everybody got fucked, Sir. Especially this Indigo man. You should all be ashamed of yourselves!”

Wallace through up his hands. “We are ashamed! All of us, most especially Clay. He just...he couldn’t stop himself when he went in that first night. He’d expected to be turned off and didn’t figure keeping his dick in check would be an issue. As it turned out, Indigo started a fire that Clay hasn’t been able to put out.”

“So, he just keeps going back, stacking one lie on top of the other?” Atlas demanded, but then dropped his head when he realized, while not nearly on the same level, every time he didn’t tell Hawk about the gifts from Ambrose, he was, in a sense, pulling the same deception.

“Stop the visits instantly, Wallace. If Indigo wants a male escort, allow a service to send him one. This stops now. Dear Lord, Indigo may end up killing us all and I wouldn’t be able to raise an arm to defend myself.”

Atlas swiveled his head around to face Hawk. “You agreed to this?”

Wallace was quick to jump in. “No! Hawk had no idea what was happening, other than we were keeping an eye on Indigo after his injury. He only found out about this when he called me for an update on Indigo’s health progress.” Wallace focused on Hawk. “It has ended, Sir. Indigo fired Clay, aka the fake male escort, weeks ago.”

“Well, I can’t lie and say I’m not happy that Clay got his ass handed to him. That must have been a blow to his ego.” Hawk looked at Atlas and added, “And, trust me, Clay has a huge ego.” Back to Wallace, Hawk said, “What was it? Please tell me Indigo told him he wasn’t any good in bed. At least I’ll have something to laugh at when I’m serving my jail time for Clay’s stupidity.”

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Wallace answered. “Afraid not. Indigo ditched him because he was being “too clingy” for a male escort. Apparently when Clay falls, he falls fast and deep. Grocery shopping. Bodyguard. Cuddling.”

There was a knock on the door and Journey stuck his head inside once Wallace indicated it was okay. “Sorry to bother you, boss, but we’ve got a tie in the shooting range competition. Everybody knows what that means.” He smiled in Atlas’ direction. “I thought Hawk’s man might enjoy a good laugh.”

“What does a tie mean?” Atlas asked, not wanting to stop the conversation he was already involved in but unable to keep his curiosity at bay—Journey looked pretty excited.

“Dance-off, of course,” Journey answered with a laugh. “Egypt and Braxton.”

Hawk nodded toward Wallace. “You go get things set up while I catch Atlas up-to-date on what happened to Indigo—what led to the clusterfuck we are dealing with now. We’ll be out in a few minutes. Definitely don’t start without us.”

“Copy that,” Wallace answered.

As soon as the door closed, Hawk said, “Please tell me you don’t hate me for what’s going on. I wanted to bring you over to meet my friends, wanted you to like them the way I do. I didn’t get Wallace’s call until you were already on your way over.”

Atlas frowned. “Of course, I don’t hate you. I don’t agree with anything that’s happened, or at least the parts I heard, but it doesn’t reflect negatively on you.

Wallace said you didn't have anything to do with it, that you didn't even know what this Clay was doing."

"I didn't. I swear. Almost two years ago, the men were on a mission in the jungle—retrieving a diplomat's granddaughter that had been kidnapped. Things went wrong and Indigo ended up too close to a bomb Braxton had set as a diversion. Indigo lost his eyesight from the injuries due to the explosion."

"Shit. That's horrible, Hawk." Atlas whispered. "I'm so sorry. This makes me hate that Clay guy even more!"

"If you're going to hate him more, you have to level some of that anger at me. Hell, Atlas, I'm not blind. I knew Clay had the hots for Indigo—thought the kid felt the same way. It was fun to watch them dance around each other, testosterone flying everywhere. Indigo would get pissed at himself, because you know how every gay man gets accused of trying to "convert" the straights. Clay would get pissed at himself because he couldn't understand why he felt the way he did. Fuck, I've watched Clay rake Indigo over the fire for the slightest infraction just because he was too damn stupid to understand his own feelings."

"How in the hell does that make you responsible?" Atlas demanded.

"Because I allowed Clay to be part of the team to go after Indigo, Atlas. To be honest, I thought if anybody had a chance to bring Indi back, it would be Clay...and Clay only. I never once predicted the male escort scenario in any of my ideas, plans, imaginations, or wildest dreams. I guess I'm acting like both Clay and Indi—mad at myself for being foolish enough to accidentally set a trap that they both fell in to."

Atlas frowned and nibbled on his bottom lip, not sure how to ask his next question.

"Just ask me, babe. I can hear the wheels turning in your head. You ask me and I'll be

truthful, no matter how bad it makes me look.”

“Did...did you fire Indigo because of his injury? Surely there would have been something else he could have done? Looking at the rest of these men out there, if you took this away from them, they probably wouldn’t have much of a life. You can tell they eat this up.”

“Absolutely not,” Hawk answered quickly. “Indi fired us. Once he had healed enough to survive, he disappeared and completely ghosted all of us. The guys had hired a specialist to train Indi’s canine partner, Sky, to be a guide dog. We were doing everything possible to make him understand he would always have us, and we’d always be there to take care of him. Indi is our family—then and forever!”

“Did you even hear what you just said, Hawk? Would you want to hear your friends saying they’d take care of you for the rest of your useless life?”

Hawk opened his mouth and then slammed it shut. After a few seconds, he said, “You know that’s not what I meant. No way would Indi ever be useless.” He dropped his head. “Fuck, we coddled him too much, didn’t we? Made him feel fucking useless while we were trying to reassure him.”

“Bingo. You got it in one.” Atlas leaned in and kissed Hawk, a tender kiss that he hoped showed his lover how much he loved and trusted him. “I think if you all try a different angle with him, you might be able to bring him home...unless he decides to kill all of you. What in the hell was that Clay guy thinking?”

“Have you never thought with your dick before, pretty boy?”

Atlas laughed. “Every minute of every day since I met you, pretty boy.”

Hawk looked through the window of the conference room. “Come on. They are

ready. Neither one of these guys can dance worth a fuck. It'll be hilarious. After that's finished, I'm talking to Wallace about what you said. I'll make this right, Atlas. If Indi will let me, I'll fucking fix this."

Atlas paused in his chair while Hawk opened the door. When his gorgeous man looked at him, he asked, "Are you the jealous type, Hawk?" Ambrose gifts kept rolling around in his head...his own betrayal.

"Uh...I'm not the crazy, stalker, jealous type, but I'll fuck anybody up if they try to take what I consider to be mine, and as long as you agree to keep putting up with me, you're mine. Come on, babe. They're starting."

Of course, he would be the jealous type. That was just Atlas' luck. What in the hell would Hawk do when he found out about the gifts and flirtatious notes from Ambrose? Atlas didn't want to put him in a position to have to choose—not only was that unfair, he was certain he would lose. Atlas plastered on a smile and met Hawk at the door. It would work out, it had to.

CHAPTER SIX

"Honey! I'm home!" Ambrose called loudly as he let himself into Hawk's place. "What's for dinner?"

Atlas felt himself cringe as soon as he heard Ambrose's voice. They were both in the hot tub, recovering for a three-hour sex-a-thon. Hawk must have felt him tense because he looked at him immediately.

"Are you okay? I felt you tense." Hawk whispered.

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“I’m fine,” Atlas lied. “One of the jets hit a sore spot. That’s all.”

Hawk laughed. “I’m sorry for all the sore spots. That’s on me I believe.”

“I believe you are correct...and I love every ache. They remind me of what we’ve shared.”

Ambrose leaned against the hot tub. “You two are so cute together,” he cooed. “Now, what’s for dinner?”

“Whatever you brought, I guess,” Hawk answered. “Atlas and I have been working today—no time for cooking.”

“Working? Is that what you kids call it these days?” Ambrose joked. “Thankfully, I ordered Chinese, and it should be getting here any minute now. Dry off and let’s gorge ourselves to celebrate the huge success of opening night.”

As they climbed out of the hot tub, Atlas, careful to make sure Hawk’s muscular body kept his hidden as he hustled to get his lower half covered up, Hawk asked Ambrose, “What did you do to pass your day? Just sit around and bask in your glory?”

Ambrose turned back to face them. “No, I did a bit of shopping—something to help celebrate the success.” Then he winked at Atlas.

Atlas felt like he might pass out. There was going to be another gift. Ambrose had winked...right in front of Hawk. And, because of the friendship between the two

men, Hawk didn't mind at all, wasn't at all suspicious. Yep, Atlas was going to be sick. He couldn't be around both men and pretend nothing was wrong. "If it's alright with you, Hawk, I think I'm going to call it a night. I have some work to catch up on. I'm getting behind with my job."

"Sure, babe. Whatever you think is best. Don't let me keep you from things you need to be doing. If I have my way, you'll be with me twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. You have to learn to tell me when there are things you need to do." Then Hawk kissed him slowly and thoroughly. "Let me call a car to pick you up. I know you have to be exhausted, I am."

A bell chimed, letting them know the Chinese had arrived.

"No, I'm fine, Hawk. Let me grab my clothes and I'll be on my way." He stood on his tip toes and tried to answer Hawk's kiss with fire of his own. "Call me. Please."

"No doubt about it, babe. When do you think you'll be finished with your work? I'll call tonight if you have time."

"Midnight. I'll be waiting for your call." Atlas answered with a huge grin.

As soon as Atlas walked out the door and Hawk made sure to see that he was safely driving down the street, he went upstairs to where Ambrose was busy placing the Chinese onto serving platters. The table was already set for three. Ambrose looked up and frowned. "Where did your boyfriend go? Doesn't he like Chinese food?"

Hawk stood there, thoughts tumbling around in his brain. Something had been wrong with Atlas and his quick departure and he suspected it had nothing to do with Chinese food, but he had no clue as to what could have bothered him enough to make him run

scared—not after everything they’d shared. Fuck, what if he had changed his mind after he’d had time to think about what he’d heard today?

“Shit, Ambrose. I may have really fucked it up with Atlas today. I took him to meet the team, wanted to introduce him to some more of my friends. He, well, he heard some things that weren’t good. What if I’ve scared him away?”

Ambrose laughed softly. “First of all, I’ve never heard you be a whiney-ass before. It’s simply delightful—lets me know you are falling madly in love with this kid. Second, did you ask him if he was upset about what he heard? Did you try to clear things up?”

Hawk went over the conversations he and Atlas had while they’d been with Wallace and the rest of the team. If Atlas had been lying not blaming Hawk for a fucked-up mission, the boy was a damn good liar.

And Hawk didn’t believe for one minute that Atlas had a dishonest bone in his body. No, it had to be something else.

“Don’t look so devastated over there, my friend. Maybe he just doesn’t like me?” Ambrose suggested. “It was my arrival that seemed to send him running.” Ambrose worked to open a bottle of wine. “Did he maybe see me doing something at the opening that scared him? I am a sadist, Hawk—something I think your boy would have zero taste for.”

“Nah, it’s not that. We left before anything started. I needed to be inside him more than I needed to take my next breath.” He shrugged an unfelt apology toward Ambrose. “Sorry, but we ditched you in exchange for the best sex I’ve ever had in my life.”

“Was I obnoxious on the plane?” Ambrose asked.

“No. Was I?” Hawk countered.

“Obnoxiously smitten with Atlas, but that was all.”

“Maybe he just doesn’t like me?” Ambrose suggested. “Which would be weird because everybody likes me.”

Hawk rolled his eyes. “Nobody likes you, Ambrose. Just me.”

“That’s true,” Ambrose conceded, not caring at all. A sadist simply didn’t worry about such things as other people’s feelings...except for Hawk’s feelings, of course. He did love Hawk. Always had and always would and because Hawk was falling in love with Atlas, he would love the boy as well.

“Talk to him about it tonight. It’s best to keep everything out in the open...at least that’s what I’ve heard other people say about relationships.”

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“Yeah...I guess.” Hawk answered as he sought out the nearest clock. Four more hours until midnight. Surely he could go that long without losing his mind with worry?

“Speaking of keeping everything out in the open, when were you going to tell me that Blaze showed up at the opening?” Ambrose asked as he sipped his wine. He shoveled in a forkful of Lo Mein while he waited on Hawk to respond.

“Well, shit. I’d hoped you wouldn’t find out. I didn’t want anything to ruin your opening,” Hawk answered quietly. “I know you think he’s harmless, but the man is obsessed with you. I’m afraid one day he’s going to truly cross a line he can’t come back from. He’s a fucking freak.”

“I know I’ve frustrated you by allowing him to get away with his mischief in the past, but I’m with you now. I think he’s dangerous or could be potentially dangerous. I met with the security team this morning to ensure Blaze Alexander isn’t allowed anywhere near me or you. If that doesn’t work, we’ll allow your men to scare the life out of him. Deal?” Ambrose proposed.

“Me? I don’t need security from Blaze—it’s you he’s obsessed with.”

“Because Blaze knows that hurting you would hurt me. Don’t argue with me on this, Hawk. If you refuse my security, I dismiss it for both of us.”

“You are such an asshole,” Hawk grumbled. “You know you’re pushing me into a corner, making me agree with you.”

“Yes. I know. Now, let’s eat a bite and then find something to keep you occupied until midnight. I have a feeling you’ll drive me crazy before you get to call your sweet man.”

“No doubt about that one,” Hawk agreed. “I’m falling hard, Ambrose. If it didn’t sound stupid, I would say I was already in love with him. The minute he walks out the door, I want him to walk back in. I think about him constantly. Dream about him. Envision a future with him.” Hawk plopped onto one of the chairs and hung his head in defeat. “Hell, I already love him, don’t I?”

Ambrose laughed an evil Disney villain laugh. “Yes, my dear friend. You are in love. It’s all over your face. When you see Atlas, this silly grin instantly morphs your pouty lips into a schoolboy falling for the first time. I’m enjoying this so damn much.”

“Glad to be your entertainment, asshole.”

“Any time. Now tell me about this clusterfuck you have going on with your men. Wallace is normally extremely cautious. How did this happen?”

By the time the elevator doors slid open on Atlas’ floor, he’d convinced himself that he simply needed to confront Ambrose, let him know he wasn’t at all interested, and explain that he would appreciate it if he would back the fuck off. Regardless of the deep friendship between Ambrose and Hawk, Atlas was determined to not lose Hawk without at least putting up a fight. Anyway, what kind of friend would even do what Ambrose was doing? He’d waltzed into Hawk’s place like he owned the joint, brought the food, and assumed that Atlas would simply play along with his deceit. The very thought of what was happening between the three of them sickened Atlas—his biggest fear being that Hawk would pick Ambrose over him. Fuck, how

could he not? Ambrose had everything, was exciting, and there didn't seem to be one stitch of social discomfort in the man's body. Thus, the total opposite of Atlas.

As he punched in the code to his suite, Atlas tried to build his confidence back up—force himself to stop comparing himself to Ambrose and focus on what was developing between him and Hawk. And there was no doubting it, something beautiful was forming between the two of them. Atlas knew he was already head-over-heels in love with Hawk, he just had to wait for Hawk to return his feelings.

He'd wait as long as it took.

The second Atlas stepped across his threshold, he knew something was...off. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. Slowly, he pulled the small can of mace he carried in his jacket pocket because he was that extra cautious type. Someone had been in his apartment, he was certain of it. It smelled odd, like cigar smoke, and it was ice-cold. With as much stealth as he could manage, Atlas inched his way into the room, mace ready to go in case there really was an intruder.

He rounded the corner, bumped into a body, and did the opposite of everything he'd ever envisioned himself doing if he happened to find himself in a dangerous situation. First, he screamed like a girl. Maced himself. Fell...shrieking from the burning in his eyes. The intruder collapsed next to him, switching between begging him to be okay and screaming at him for scaring the shit out of her.

Megan.

When he could finally talk, he grabbed her in a tight hug and said, "I didn't think you were coming back home until next week! What happened? Good God, I could have killed you, Meg!"

"Uh...I'm pretty sure it would be the other way around. Which one of us has been

lying on the floor in complete agony?”

Atlas felt himself blush as visions of Hawk’s beefed-up friends floated through his mind. The complete opposite of him, of course. Not only would they not need mace, they most certainly wouldn’t end up macing themselves by accident. “Shut up, Meg. You know you are super strong for a woman,” he teased, already accepting the fact he had made himself look like a total fool.

“You stay here. Let me get some wet cloths for your eyes.” Meg said and then took off like a bolt of lightning to save the day. “I’ll grab a water bottle to flush your eyes, too. Don’t rub them!”

Atlas really, really wanted to rub them. They burned like a motherfucker. He knew she was correct, though, so he kept his hands flat on the floor and started counting to a hundred. Thankfully, Meg was back way before he reached twenty-five. After she mothered him, flushed out his eyes, cleaned every spot where the pepper spray had touched him, she gently eased him over to the couch. They plopped down together.

“When did you start leaving all the windows open?” Megan asked him as she twirled his hair around her fingers. “And, more importantly, when did you get involved in the BDSM scene? What has my boy been up to while I was away from you to protect you from all the booty wolves out there? It’s a dangerous world for my little inexperienced cub.”

Atlas gave a playful punch. “No need to rub in the inexperienced part! Your other complaints are definitely not me. I never leave the windows open and I’m one hundred percent not into BDSM. Hawk and I have dabbled with tying me up, but it’s not gone any further than that. Not sure where you’re getting your information from, but the source is unreliable.” Atlas paused before adding, “And why are you accusing me of opening all the windows when it had to be you?”

Meg's body froze. "It wasn't me, Atlas. When I got home, all the windows were open. The apartment was freezing, curtains blowing around like ghosts flying, and most of my plants were blown over." She gazed at Atlas, eyes blinking. "Who would do such a petty, ridiculous prank? Is your boyfriend weird?"

"This wasn't Hawk," Atlas answered solemnly. "Why did you ask me about the BDSM stuff? What led you down that path?"

"Ah, duh...your bedroom."

"What's in my fucking bedroom?" Atlas demanded as he scrambled to his feet. "Stay where you are, Meg. It might not be safe. Clearly, somebody has been in here, and I've got a pretty good idea who it is. I need to make sure we're safe." Atlas couldn't believe it. Would Ambrose never tire of the games? He acted so innocent in person but was seriously fucked up behind the scenes.

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“I’m coming with,” Megan whispered in his ear. “No way you’re leaving me alone. You’re really starting to creep me out.”

Together, they made their way to Atlas’ bedroom. He pushed the door open and, as with the rest of the house, all his windows were open. The worst of it, though, was the fact that his bed contained what appeared to be a rather raunchy display of sex toys, fetish tools, and an assortment of whips and paddles. They inched in further and Megan motioned for him to look at his pillow. Displayed beautifully in the center of the pillow was a Cartier diamond dog collar and matching leash. It had to have cost a fortune and made Atlas sick to his stomach. As with the other gifts, a notecard lay next to the collar.

“Oh, shit,” Megan whispered. “I only took a peek. I didn’t know it was a full-blown shit show displayed on your bed. Is this Ambrose again?”

“Yeah,” Atlas muttered in disgust. “It for sure isn’t Hawk. Dammit!” No longer afraid, he walked over to the bed and picked up the card.

Atlas crumpled the note and tossed it in the corner. “I honestly hate that man. He’s doing everything in his power to take away my happiness with Hawk!” Atlas growled. “When we’re together, he acts like he’s Hawk’s best friend and he supports us being together. Then he,” he flung his hand around, “pulls shit like this”! He looked at Megan. “What am I going to do, Meg? If Hawk has to choose between the two of us, I’m certain he’ll choose the man that’s been his best friend since childhood. Trust me, Meg, I don’t fit in their world. It’s all glamour and money. I’m a bore.”

“Shut your mouth!” Megan demanded. She grabbed him by the arm and tugged him out of his room. “You aren’t sleeping in here tonight. My room. We are building a bed fort and figuring this shit out.”

Good Lord, could the night get any worse? Atlas hated bed forts. They were hot, Megan’s perfume overwhelmed the small space, and unbeknownst to her, she snored. Loudly. He knew she meant well, though...and he needed her support to get through this...whateverthiswas.

“You get my bed ready, and I’ll gather us some food,” Megan ordered. Then smacked his ass to get him moving.

Reluctantly, Atlas went to Megan’s room and started digging through her closet for the thinnest sheets he could find. She had a king-sized canopy bed, minus the canopy part, so he used ribbons to tie the sheets to the top of the bed knobs, building them their completely enclosed bed fort. Ugh. Megan was going to bring them a load of sweets to eat as they bitched and moaned about their lives. Sweets made Megan poot...which didn’t suit a bed fort enclosure one bit—not one bit.

Atlas checked his watch. Hawk would be calling him in about an hour. What was he supposed to say? As brave as he’d been while in Hawk’s arms it always quickly evaporated as soon as they were apart. His fear of ruining a friendship or, even worse, having Hawk pick Ambrose over him was overwhelming to the point that it made him consider walking away first just to protect his own heart. That way, he’d never really know. A little part of him could whisper that Hawk would have chosen him without a moment’s hesitation.

Megan burst inside the room, skinny arms overloaded with cookies, chips, chocolate, and ice cream. Yep, Atlas was in for a very long night.

“We’ll definitely have to start with the ice cream. Climb into the fort,” Megan

ordered playfully. “I found some stuff out about Ambrose that I need to share with you. After that, you can decide how you want to handle the asshole.”

Atlas climbed in, immediately more interested since Megan had managed to do some of her promised research on Ambrose while on her business trip. Maybe, just maybe, she’d found out something that would make him better understand the situation. He grabbed his Rocky Road ice cream and climbed into the fort. He had to admit, being inside the fort did help knock the chill from where all the windows had been left open by who had to be none other than freaky Ambrose. How in the hottest part of hell was the man managing to get inside his apartment?

As excited as Atlas was to hear what Megan had found out, he suddenly realized what a shitty friend he was, he’d never asked her why she’d come home a week earlier than planned. “Hey, before we get started on Ambrose, why in the world are you home early? I thought this trip was one of those VIP things.”

Megan blushed. “I slept with my boss. I don’t want to discuss it right now. Let’s focus on you. When I’m ready to bring you into my own shitshow, I’ll let you.”

“You’ve wanted to sleep with him forever! Why the draggy face?” Atlas asked.

“Because I don’t know what it means. I could have just been a hit it and quit it, and I’m not sure how I’ll respond to that. Anyway, no talking about me until I have the crazy in my head settled down. We’re focusing on you.”

Atlas knew Megan enough to know there would be no changing her mind. She wouldn’t talk until she was damn good and ready. He also knew he would kick her boss’s ass if the man hurt his Meg. She’d been crushing on him since her first day working at his firm. If he bedded her for the hell of it, that was an abuse of power—a major sin the man would pay for.

“Okay, tell me what you heard about Ambrose? When you first suggested it, I thought it was a great idea because all he’d done at that point was send a bunch of roses. While you were gone things escalated to expensive gifts and breaking and entering.”

Megan frowned. “It doesn’t make sense, A. What kind of gifts are we talking?”

“A Rolex watch and that leash and collar in the bedroom? Yeah, that was Cartier diamonds. He’s a freak, Meg. He broke into this apartment to leave that shit—the shit and his creepy notes. What kind of person does that? Oh, and when I’m with Hawk and he shows up, it’s like nothing’s happening on the side. He’s friendly, doesn’t look at me weird, or try to touch me in any way. He definitely deserves an academy award for his acting skills.”

Meg frowned. “And you know it’s him?”

“Yep. Leaves a creepy note for me each time.” Atlas confirmed. “So, what did you hear?”

Taking a deep breath, Megan began, “I heard Ambrose is a sadist. He never uses the same submissive more than once. Everyone refers to him as polite but aloof. The only person he truly opens up to is Hawk...his only friend, if rumors are to be believed. He would never send a gift to someone. Ever.” Megan shoveled a huge spoonful of her ice cream. “Something’s off, A. Either he’s really head over heels in lust with you,” she paused before adding, “or he’s head over heels in jealousy over Hawk. Is there a chance he thinks Hawk belongs to him?”

Atlas thought back to all the times they’d been together, all the conversations he’d had with both Ambrose and Hawk. Never once did either of them act like anything existed between the two of them other than a best friend, brotherly bond sort of thing. Hawk had explicitly mentioned that the two of them wouldn’t be compatible in the

bedroom. Would he have lied? Was the attraction one-sided?

Atlas' cell phone buzzed. Holy shit! How had it gotten to be midnight already? What should he do? He wanted to talk to Hawk, to tell him what was going on behind the scenes, but he wasn't ready. Hell, the bottom line was that he wasn't ready to face Hawk's decision if he was forced to choose between him and Ambrose. That was the bottom line. His fucking fear. It was moments like this that Atlas wished he'd stayed safely tucked away in his old, boring life. It might have been a monotonous and predictable existence, but his heart had been safe. Now? He felt like someone was about to carve his heart out and serve it up for a midnight snack.

"Aren't you going to answer that? It's Hawk." Meg said. "I can see your caller ID."

It rang again. "What am I supposed to say, Meg? His best friend is stalking me? Hawk would never believe something like that about Ambrose. I think I should wait until I can show him proof—the notes, maybe."

"That's an excellent idea, but you need to answer him now. I assume the two of you agreed on this call or does he booty call you at all hours of the night on a regular basis?" Meg asked sarcastically. "If he does, I'm going to kick his ass myself."

The cell rang again. "I can't deal with it right now. I don't know what to say or how to handle the situation. Whatever I end up saying, I'm afraid it's going to break Hawk's heart because his best friend is going behind his back...then he'll turn on me." Atlas declined the call and then shut his cell off. "I'll deal with it tomorrow." Atlas felt his own heart shatter as his cell powered off. How had he gotten into this situation? Would he be able to recover from it?

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“I don’t have a clue what any of this means, Meg,” Atlas said. “We both know I’m not anywhere near an expert in the relationship department. My heart tells me that I love Hawk and I need to fight for him. My mind tells me to step away before things get worse. I feel...lost.”

Meg dropped her ice cream container on the bed and wrapped her arms around Atlas. “We’ll get through this together, A. If Hawk is the right man for you, he’s going to be yours, whether Ambrose likes it or not. You know I’m from Tennessee, right? I know people who would kill him for a six pack of beer.”

Atlas laughed...or tried to. He didn’t feel nearly as confident as Meg. Always the pessimist, he automatically pictured the worst ending—him alone and Hawk with Ambrose.

“It’s going to be okay, A,” Megan offered. “For both of us. We’ll get through this together.” She snuggled them both into a horizontal snuggling position. “I’m just sad that both our hearts are hurting at the same time.”

“Me too, Meg,” Atlas answered. “Me too.”

Neither of them slept, but they remained silent throughout the night. Atlas clutched his phone to his heart. When Meg’s phone alarm went off at five in the morning, they were both mentally and physically exhausted. “I’ll go start the bacon and coffee,” Megan whispered. “Call your man and then help me.”

As Megan climbed out of the bed fort, Atlas whispered, “He’s not my man, I’m afraid.”

Atlas lay there, just staring at the fake ceiling made of decorative sheets. His phone was still in his hand, but he made no move to call Hawk. He was terrified of what was going to be on the other end of the line when he did call. So, he just lay there, wallowing in self-pity and waiting to grow some balls. A sudden crashing sound in the kitchen reminded him that he was supposed to be helping Megan, who was a disastrous cook, with breakfast. Atlas slid out of the bed fort, brushed his teeth, and started making his way toward the kitchen. Since both he and Megan had slept in their clothes from the day before, he felt icky. His preference would have been showers and then breakfast but Meg hadn't asked. It was hard to understand how she could eat constantly and stay as skinny as she was. It was also hard to understand how she hadn't burned their kitchen down yet.

Tucking his turned-off cell into his back pocket as he wandered down the hall, Atlas tried to convince himself that in the light of day, things would look better on the Hawk front. When he rounded the hallway that led into the kitchen, he screamed in alarm and raced across the room. Megan was bound, hands and feet, to one of their dining chairs. Duct tape was wrapped at least twice around her mouth. Tears streamed down her face as she tried to scream, even though the tape prevented much noise from escaping.

Dropping to his knees in front of her, Atlas asked, "Who did this to you? Here, let me help. Don't panic, I've got you." He cursed when he saw the ties that held her hands and feet trapped to the chair were zip ties. It would take a strong knife to cut through them.

Just as he started to stand up to retrieve the sharpest knife they had in the kitchen, he felt cool metal rest against his cheek...and the sound a gun makes when a bullet goes into the chamber. He froze. Megan's eyes blinked wildly, looking at Atlas and then to the man behind him.

Fuck...would Ambrose actually hurt them? Was his infatuation that crazy?

“There’s my pretty pet,” a man’s voice cooed softly. “Your friend and I have been waiting for you to climb out of bed. I hope you aren’t the lazy sort. That characteristic is something I simply can’t tolerate in a person.” He laughed at himself, like the shithead he was. “Come on, love. Stand up. Slowly, of course. Let me see those beautiful pale blue eyes of yours.”

Atlas followed the man’s directions, patting Megan’s knee in what he hoped would seem comforting...an illusion because there wasn’t a thing he could do against a gun. As soon as he turned, a burst of confusion and then shock rushed through him. “Blaze?” It was the man from Ambrose’s opening night—the one that Hawk had gotten into a scuffle with. The man who was obsessed with Ambrose.

“In the gorgeous flesh, pet! Blaze Alexander, at your service,” He answered with another laugh. “Tell me, doll, you really believed those gifts and notes were from Ambrose, didn’t you? I knew you were silly enough to fall for it the moment I met you! So naïve. What in the world does he see in you?”

Atlas was beginning to get confused and even more frightened. Just looking into the guy’s eyes warned you he wasn’t playing with a full deck. “Ambrose?” Atlas asked.

“Of course not, sugar. Everyone has always thought it was Ambrose I wanted. Absolutely not. I’ve had my eyes on Hawk for years now...and with your help, I’m going to finally make him mine.”

Anger flooded Atlas’ veins. He would never allow this sicko to lay one finger on his Hawk. “You’re insane, Blaze. Hawk hates you. There’s nothing I can do to change his mind about that—not that I would even consider trying.” Atlas paused and then finally said what his heart had known all along. “I love Hawk and Hawk loves me. That leaves zero room for you. Get lost.”

“Don’t think so, lovey. Hawk will be mine, willing or unwilling.” Blaze grinned.

“I’m not real picky on making sure my subs are in agreement to the scenes I choose.” He peeked around Atlas and smiled at Megan. “She’s your best friend, eh? I’m certain her safety is of the utmost importance to you right now, correct?”

“If you lay a finger on Megan, I will not stop until I see you dead. That goes for Hawk and Ambrose, too! Get out of here, you sick fuck!”

“Let me explain how this is going to happen. You are going to willingly walk beside me to the parking lot, get into my car, and then you and I will figure out a way to lure Hawk to the love nest I have arranged.”

“And you are full of shit,” Atlas countered. “I’m not going anywhere with you, now or ever!”

Blaze stood up, making himself even taller. “I won’t ask nicely again. If you don’t go with me, without making a scene, I’ll kill Megan right now. End of story. I hate women. They are weak. I won’t even lose a wink of sleep over putting a bullet between her eyes. You? I think you’ll have nightmares about it until you take your last breath.”

Atlas was amazed at the coldness in Blaze’s eyes. There was no doubt in his mind that Blaze would kill Megan without the slightest hesitation. Of course, Blaze was probably going to kill Atlas and abduct Hawk.

“Three. Two.”

“Fine!” Atlas screamed, doing his best to place his body between Blaze and Megan—anything he could do to protect her. “I’ll go with you. Just leave Megan alone, she isn’t a part of any of this.” Megan was shaking her head wildly, trying to convince him not to go with Blaze, but Atlas didn’t have any other choice at the moment.

“She’ll be perfectly fine if you do as you’re told,” Blaze promised, almost looking sincere. “I know she shouldn’t pay for yours and Hawk’s sins.”

Scrambling for time, Atlas asked, “How will Megan get free? We can’t leave her here like this. She could die before anybody finds her. At least untie her hands. I promise I’ll go with you quietly.”

Blaze grabbed Atlas by the upper arm. “Your friend is resourceful, I’m sure she’ll find a way to release herself. Stop stalling. Let’s go.” With that, Blaze yanked him toward the doorway. “Remember, nice and quiet. If you try something, I’ll shoot you and get back up here to finish Megan off before anybody will have a chance to dial 911.”

A lot of things went through Atlas’ head as he obediently followed Blaze through the apartment building and down to the parking garage...but what bothered him most was that he hadn’t taken Hawk’s phone call last night. If only he’d been brave enough to have faith in himself and in Hawk, he wouldn’t be in this position. Hell, he should have had faith in Ambrose. The man had never been anything but friendly to him, but Atlas had been ready to believe the very worst. His damn insecurities were going to end up costing him everything.

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“You’re being such a good pet,” Blaze praised him. “It’s no wonder that Hawk found himself smitten. The lucky bastard finally found someone to love.” Blaze looked down at Atlas. “Unlucky for you, of course.”

“Hawk will never have you, even if I’m no longer in the picture,” Atlas snapped back. “You should have heard how he made fun of you that night. He thinks you’re pathetic. Weak. Crazy, even.” Atlas knew he should shut up but kept rambling anyway. “He told me how you spent your entire adult life stalking people, never having anybody for yourself because nobody, absolutely nobody, wanted you!” Hawk hadn’t said all those things, but Atlas didn’t think a tiny lie was any comparison to what Blaze obviously had planned. “Do you seriously wet the bed? Ambrose and Hawk laughed and laughed over that one.”

Blaze politely opened the car door for him and helped him into the passenger seat. As he closed the door, he said, “You might regret that mouth of yours before this is over.”

Atlas suspected he was going to regret a lot of things before this ordeal was over—as in he had serious suspicions that he was about to die. Blaze was definitely crazy enough to take it to that level.

The car was definitely a luxury vehicle, but Atlas hadn’t paid any attention to what model. Hell, if he did get out of this alive, he wouldn’t even be able to tell the police the color. Was he truly going to allow himself to be led, like a lamb, to the slaughter? That’s exactly what the old Atlas would do—not the Atlas that had been fucked and cuddled by Hawk Pentress.

Blaze climbed in next to him, all casual like his wasn't abducting a man to take somewhere and probably murder. Just as Atlas moved to make a grab for the door handle, he felt Blaze's hand grip the back of his neck and then a sharp prick pierced the skin beneath his right shoulder. Within seconds, he started to feel disoriented and incredibly sleepy.

"Now, now," Blaze said softly but followed the words with a hard slap across Atlas' face. "Don't drift off to visit Mr. Sandman before I tell you the best part. Ready? I'm going to leave you here for a few, walk right back to the elevator, go to your apartment and wrap a plastic bag around your friend's face. You were so naïve to think I would ever let her live."

The horror of Blaze's words didn't even have time to settle into his brain before his world went completely black.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hawk grabbed the small doorman around the neck and lifted him off the floor. "Tell me his apartment number right the fuck now!"

Ambrose had watched about all he was willing to witness. His friend was falling completely apart and over absolutely nothing. When Atlas hadn't answered his call last night, that had been the end of Hawk being anything that resembled normal. If he didn't love his best friend so much, he'd be laughing right in his face. Instead, Ambrose would save that for later, when they had confirmed that all was good between Hawk and Atlas.

He grabbed Hawk's arm. "Put the kid down, Hawk. Now! It's not this boy's fault that Atlas didn't answer his phone. Perhaps if you tried to speak to him in a reasonable fashion, he would be more apt to answer your questions," he admonished.

As soon as the young man's feet hit the ground again, Ambrose pulled out his wallet. Hawk was behind him, pacing and cussing. Ambrose pulled out a handful of hundreds. "Would five-hundred dollars help you turn a blind eye to company policy this one time? You have to see my friend is totally smitten with the boy, he'd never do anything to hurt him. He simply wants to check and make sure he's safe."

The bellhop rubbed his neck. There would be bruises. Ambrose tried not to take pleasure in that fact, but it was most difficult for a sadist.

Not willing to cave immediately, the bellhop eyed Hawk up and down and asked, "Are you the one that's been sending him the gifts? I would have thought Atlas would have better taste. You're a bully." Calmly, he took the money from Ambrose and said, "His apartment is on the fifteenth floor, number 15F. I believe both Atlas and his roommate are home this morning." With that, he stalked away...or tried to.

Hawk grabbed his upper arm and swung him around. "What did you mean by gifts? Has someone been leaving gifts for my man?" The anger had left him, replaced with a look of utter defeat. "Recently?"

"As recently as yesterday," he answered with a smile. "He paid me less than this guy to get into the apartment, but it was enough to get me a new jacket." The boy took off running after dropping that bombshell. It was probably for the best.

"He's cheating on me?" Hawk whispered in disbelief. "I wouldn't have thought Atlas had a dishonest bone in his body."

Ambrose stood silent for a moment before saying, "Do you still believe Atlas to be honest? Answer from your heart." Ambrose urged.

Hawk straightened up. "He's a good man. I want to hear his side of the story."

“Good idea,” Ambrose said as he punched his friend on the shoulder. “Let’s go, that kid is probably calling the police right now. You lost your shit, man.”

“Obviously,” Hawk conceded. “I’m crazy about him, Ambrose. I’ve never felt like this before—not even close.”

Ambrose punched the button for the fifteenth floor. “I’m afraid it’s love, my cute little duckling. You’ve fallen and you’ve fallen hard—got knocked right out of the nest before you realized you were ready to fly.”

“You’re an idiot.” Hawk grumbled. He tried to calm his nerves as the elevator carried them upward. Ambrose was right. He was in love with Atlas, no doubt about it. He sent a silent prayer up that Atlas did have a good explanation. If he didn’t, Hawk wasn’t certain he would survive a broken heart.

They quickly made their way to the door labeled 15F. Hawk knocked loudly on the door. Knocked again. Everything was eerily quiet...until a crash sounded from the other side of their door.

“Something’s wrong,” Hawk roared as he slammed into the door, knocking it down with the second wave of brute strength.

“Jeezus, Hawk! People drop things and they break.” Ambrose yelled. “You don’t need to overreact again and scare....”

Ambrose stopped talking. Hawk had moved instantly, but he felt his feet glued to the floor. A young girl, probably Atlas’ roommate, was tied to a chair. It had tipped over, maybe the crash they had heard. Worse than everything was the plastic bag covering her head and tied around her neck. She struggled and kicked as she tried to find a way to get oxygen.

Hawk ripped the bag away with a snarl. Atlas loved Megan, so he loved Megan. “Are you okay? Can you breathe now?” He turned to Ambrose. “Call 911!” He pulled out a pocketknife and cut the zip ties away from her feet and hands and then gently carried her to the sofa. “Please tell me you’re alright.” She was sucking in deep breaths of oxygen and trying to talk at the same time. Another minute and she would have probably suffocated to death.

“Some man took Atlas,” she gasped. “He forced him to go with him, acting like he would allow me to live if Atlas agreed to go with him, but then he came back and put the bag over my head. There...there was no sign of Atlas.” Her eyes, still wild with fright, drifted toward Ambrose. “Atlas...he thought the gifts were from you, Ambrose. He was terrified of coming between the two of you.” She forced herself into a sitting position. “Cancel the 911, we have to find Atlas. The first thing that happened were the roses, hundreds of them. There was a card with a note and signed with an A. I had to leave for a business trip, but when I got back, he said that he also got a Rolex with another note, that note a bit more suggestive.” Megan struggled to stand up and made it with Hawk’s help. “Then there was this from yesterday.” She led them both to Atlas’ bedroom. The kink gifts were still on the bed, but the card was missing. “The note is missing. It was there when Atlas and I went to bed last night.”

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Hawk picked up a paddle and flung it across the room. “We’re wasting valuable time. I’ve got to find Atlas before this crazy person hurts him!” He whirled around to face Megan. “What did he look like? Give me something. Anything.”

“About your size but not quite as muscular. Lots of tattoos. Gap between his front teeth. Short black hair.”

Ambrose gasped. “It’s Blaze. That son of a bitch! I upped the security on us and never once thought Atlas could have been in danger from the freak.” Ambrose turned to Hawk. “This is my fucking fault, Hawk. You warned me that his affections were abnormal and beginning to reach a dangerous level, but I was too arrogant to listen!”

Megan frowned, a confused look on her face. “It isn’t you he wants, Ambrose. It’s Hawk. That’s one point he stressed—he wants and intends to have Hawk.”

“What. The. Fuck.” Hawk hissed. “The freak knows I hate him.”

“I don’t think he cares,” Megan answered. “Why would he take Atlas? As bait? Please tell me he won’t hurt him,” she begged. “He’s going to use Atlas to lure you to him. If you don’t go, he kills Atlas. If you do go...he kills Atlas anyway, doesn’t he?”

Ambrose stepped forward. “We aren’t going to let him hurt Atlas. He would kill Atlas without blinking an eye, like he tried to do with you, but Blaze isn’t as smart as he thinks. We’ll get to Atlas before any harm can be done to him?”

“Not to be negative since this is the man I’m in love with, but how are we going to manage that, Ambrose? We don’t have a clue where Blaze is or what he has

planned.” Hawk grabbed his phone out of his pocket. “I’m calling Wallace. We need all the help we can get.”

While Hawk filled Wallace in on the details, Ambrose wandered to the bed and carefully picked up the Cartier collar and leash. Just as he’d expected, he knew who these belonged to. They certainly weren’t gifts Blaze had purchased himself. As soon as Hawk hung up from Wallace, Ambrose said, “I know who these belong to, Hawk. Blaze didn’t buy them, he stole them. Maxwell Bodine hired Cartier to make this for his sub, Michael, years ago. He designed it himself and the agreement was that they could never produce another like it. This has to belong to them...the Rolex, as well.” Ambrose pulled out his cell, scrolled through his contacts, and called Maxwell.

Hawk moved closer so he could hear every word. His heart felt like it was about to pound straight out of his chest. It was a mixture of adrenaline, pain, and fear. If anything happened to Atlas...Hawk couldn’t even begin to imagine life without Atlas in it.

Ambrose frowned and Hawk leaned in closer, trying to hear but failing. When Ambrose cancelled the call, Hawk quickly asked, “What? Why didn’t you leave a message? Is there a chance they could be helping Blaze?”

“No,” Ambrose answered. “Maxwell and Michael are good people—an older couple and they’ve never “played” socially in this area, so they aren’t well known in our groups. Maxwell’s voice message just said that they were taking an extensive vacation and wouldn’t be back for the remainder of the year.”

“Okay...so what does this mean for us?” Hawk asked. He was trying not to become irritated with Ambrose. Everything inside him was demanding that he move, hunt for the man he loved...rescue him and bring him home.

“What it means to me is that I know Maxwell and Michael don’t enjoy traveling.

They rarely leave their home. They entertain there quite often but aren't comfortable with travel." Ambrose stroked his chin. "This is what I think it means for us. I believe Blaze may be staying at their home, which terrifies me about what he's done to Maxwell and Michael. I know this collar and leash is theirs."

"Do you know where they live? We need to get there now!" Hawk urged. "Blaze can't be that far ahead of us. We got to the apartment before Megan suffocated."

"Agreed. Let's go." Ambrose looked at Megan. "You need to see a doctor—just to make both Hawk and I feel better. Atlas will kick our asses if we didn't take care of you properly."

"But I want to help find Atlas!" She frowned. "I know I'd get in the way, though. Bring him back to me. Please."

"We'll bring him back to all of us," Hawk promised as he and Ambrose ran toward the door.

Atlas felt someone slapping his face, but he was so groggy, it was a struggle to make his eyes open. When he did, a wave of nausea washed through him. Everything was a blur. His stomach rolled and there was the most horrible stench in the air. He closed his eyes quickly, before he puked. Another smack, this one harder, forced his eyes back open again. Memories flashed through his mind. Fuck, he was with Blaze—the Blaze that intended to use him to get to Hawk.

"Open your eyes, birdie." Blaze whispered in his ear. "I'm having a party, and thanks to you, Hawk will be the guest of honor. Come on, let me see those pretty blue eyes you used to bewitch my man."

“He’s. Not. Yours.” Atlas growled in fury. “Hehatesyou.”

Blaze made a tscking sound. “I almost felt bad for going back to kill your pretty little roommate but after that ugly comment, I realize it was the right thing to do.”

“Noooo! You son of a bitch! You’d better be lying to me. If you hurt Megan, I’ll kill you myself!” Atlas vowed.

“Baby, birdie, you aren’t going to do anything...except die, of course.” Blaze moved around until he was sitting across from Atlas.

His head still throbbed, and nausea caused his stomach to roll, but Atlas vowed to not show any weakness in front of Blaze. He worked to focus his eyes so he could glare at Blaze. Instead of sending hate waves in Blaze’s direction, though, he noticed where he was...what was truly happening and how horrific the situation was. Atlas had hoped Blaze’s comment about Megan had been a bluff. Now, he knew better.

Atlas was tied to a chair at a huge dining room table. He and Blaze were seated across from each other in the middle. At each end of the table, two men were seated. They were tied like he was, but there was no need—they’d both been dead for quite some time, their throats slashed open from ear to ear. The stench had been the smell of death. Before he could stop himself, Atlas felt all the sweets he and Megan had eaten the night before come gushing out of his mouth. His mind went blank. Never in his life had he even thought to encounter someone capable of such acts of violence and horror, much less be in their clutches.

He was going to die, there was no doubt about it. He would never see Hawk again. Atlas had finally found love, learned how wonderful the feeling was, and Blaze was about to take it away from him. Hawk wouldn’t be in danger, though. Atlas’ phone was password protected and Atlas wouldnever send the text to lure Hawk into this hell.

“Here’s the only question we have to answer, birdie,” Blaze said. “How are things going to end for you? Quickly or are you going to force me to make the pain linger? I don’t enjoy torture, but I’m not above it.” He pointed to one of the men at the end of the table. “See this fellow? His name is...well,wasMaxwell Bodine. I needed access to his house, his jewelry, and all his money. He didn’t want to share, which is simply unacceptable because we are taught from childhood that sharing is caring. When he refused to give me what I needed, I wasforcedto torture his beloved husband, Michael. Did I enjoy it? No, of course not, but I did it anyway.” He laughed that delirious laugh Atlas had grown to hate. “Oh, who am I fooling? Of course, I enjoyed it! Poor Michael screamed like a girl while Maxwell roared with fury. That roaring, little birdie, turned to sobbing and begging. He pleaded for the life of his lover, promised me anything. It was too late, though—much too late for that. I was in the middle of a bloodlust. I already had the information I needed, so I was in it for the fun.” Blaze leaned back in his chair and spread his arms wide. “And now...here we are. Our own little dinner party.”

Atlas jerked at his zip ties. “You’re sick, Blaze. You need help.”

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Blaze grinned, slid Atlas' cell phone across the table, and said, "Yes, I do need some help. Be a good baby bird and unlock your phone for me. I'd like Hawk to join our dinner party, as well."

"It will never happen, Blaze. I love Hawk, and I would rather die than let your filthy hands touch him."

"You little sentimental fool. Love is ridiculous. What we do, the games we play in our world, have nothing to do with love and everything to do with pain and humiliation. That's just one more reason why you aren't good enough for Hawk—you'd break way too easily." Blaze stood up and casually made his way around the table until he was standing behind Atlas.

This was it, Atlas thought to himself—the do or die moment of his life...or the do and die anyway moment. His life of predictability no longer existed. Both he and Megan had agreed he needed to take more chances. This was a chance, nothing more and nothing less—Atlas tried to convince himself as Blaze moved closer and closer.

"Do you know, little birdie, what Ambrose is? You were at his club opening that night, your magnificent nudes displayed so provocatively, but did you stick around to meet the real Ambrose? The one that enjoys hurting people?"

Atlas took a deep breath. "The Ambrose I know doesn't enjoy hurting people unless it is consensual."

"That's cute. You've been studying the lifestyle. Ambrose is a sadist—one who derives his sexual pleasure from the pain of others." Blaze's hands suddenly rested on

Atlas' shoulders. "I'm worse than that. To be perfectly honest, I'm not certain there's a word that describes my wants and desires." He leaned in and whispered against Atlas' ear, "Perhaps serial killer?"

Atlas felt like his heart was about to burst from his chest. "Serial killer. Sicko. Pathetic." He paused and then added, "Not nearly good enough for Hawk, or Ambrose, for that matter."

It happened faster than Atlas could have ever imagined. Blaze's hands were on his shoulders one second and in the next, the man had punched him in the face hard enough that his ears were ringing, and his vision blurred. His right jaw. His left jaw. Blaze scooted him further away from the dining table and continued to punch him—his face, his chest, his stomach...every spot Blaze could hit while he was in a seated position. The man kept punching, not pausing for a second—punched so hard that Atlas feared he would lose consciousness before Blaze could stop long enough to ask him to unlock his cell again. Blood ran down his face, nearly blinding him if he tried to open his eyes. Ribs were cracked or broken, there was no doubt about that. The entire time Blaze punched, Atlas pictured Hawk in his mind, it kept him strong and determined.

Finally, Blaze stopped. The man changed in an instant. He went from something feral back to his fake calm self in the blink of an eye. Blaze grabbed a linen napkin and said, "Here, little birdie, let me wipe the blood off your face. You look a mess. Have you ever been hit before? Tell me, how does it feel? Does it make you feel more vulnerable...more desperate?" Blaze asked the questions as he gently cleared the blood from Atlas' face. He knelt in front of Atlas, "Does it make you more agreeable to my demands?"

"Y-y-yes," Atlas whispered weakly, wincing as the pain of moving his mouth swept through him. His stomach rolled with nausea. One eye was already swollen so badly, he couldn't open it.

Blaze plopped the cell phone on the edge of the table, directly in front of Atlas.
“Unlock it and I’ll make all your pain go away.”

Atlas dropped his head forward in defeat. “You’ll...you’ll make it quick?”

“Of course, I will, little birdie.”

Atlas frowned...well, tried to frown. He wasn’t certain what his face looked like.
“Why do you call me that?”

“Because Hawk is my bird of prey. You’re just a tiny little birdie...maybe a cute hummingbird—flittering around, catching the attention of my bird of prey.”

Oddly enough, Atlas thought, it made some sense, at least.

“I need one hand to unlock it,” Atlas told Blaze, head hanging.

Blaze laughed. “Oh, little birdie, I’d cut both zip ties if you asked me to.” He reached for a large knife on the dining table. “There’s absolutely nothing scary about you,” Blaze said as the knife slit through the zip tie strapped around Atlas’ right wrist.

Atlas didn’t wait for Blaze to move to the second wrist. The second one hand was free, he jumped from the chair, picking it up in the same movement, and swung it around to crash into Blaze’s face. The chair broke into pieces, releasing his other wrist. Blaze, however, didn’t break. Hell, it was if the wood connecting to his face and upper body hadn’t even phased him, physically or mentally.

Actually, Blaze grinned and said, “What now, little hummingbird?”

“If Blaze has hurt Atlas, I’m going to kill you myself, Ambrose!” Hawk hissed as the two of them and Wallace moved stealthily across the darkened lawn, toward the front door. Wallace’s team had scattered and were surrounding the house. “How in the fuck could you have forgotten Maxwell had two fucking houses? We’ve lost over an hour!”

Ambrose, already terrified that they were too late to save Atlas, kept his voice as calm as possible in an attempt to not throw fuel onto Hawk’s burning flame of fear. “Stop threatening me, Hawk. I’m never late for anything. Atlas will be fine, and we’ll take care of the Blaze situation for the last time. Remain calm and focused on what we’re trying to accomplish here. Kick my ass later.”

“Would you two please shut the fuck up?” Wallace growled quietly. “Hawk, I know you know better than to be running your big mouth and not having your undivided attention on the job. Keep quiet. When we get to the door, I’m busting it down and going in after Atlas. The two of you stay behind me at all times. The rest of the team will be making entrance from other areas,” Wallace whispered as they finally reached the front door. It was a heavy door, clearly meant to keep people out.

Wallace grimaced. Of course, it was. He reached for his gun and aimed for the locking mechanism.

“Now, Wallace,” Hawk ordered.

Before Wallace could pull the trigger, the door burst open, smacking Wallace in the face and launching him through the air and to the ground.

A figure, too small to be Blaze, sped past them, racing toward the dock on the lake. Hawk felt relief consume him—he recognized that absolutely perfect figure to be the man he loved. Alive. Safe, now that he was here. He took two steps forward so that the next person to come through that open door would have to come through him.

Blaze did—slammed right into him. Hawk was prepared for the impact. Blaze wasn't. Off balance, he staggered backward.

He never really had a chance after that. Hawk knocked him to the ground, jumped on him, and began the beating. He punched him for every minute he'd spent terrified that he wouldn't get to Atlas on time...for every time his heart had missed a beat...for whatever the man had done to make Atlas run for his life. Hawk only stopped when Ambrose stepped in and struggled to pull him away from Blaze's broken body. "That's enough," Hawk. "Leave some for the men he'll be rooming with on his cell block in jail."

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Hawk roared and tried to shrug Ambrose off of him. He didn't want to stop until Blaze was dead. Nobody harmed what belonged to him.

Ambrose leaned close to Hawk's ear and whispered, "Atlas is here, Hawk. Your boy needs you...and doesn't need to see this."

The bloodlust that had overtaken Hawk fled away. He shrugged Ambrose off and spun around to find Atlas standing a few feet away. He'd been beaten. Badly. He looked at Atlas, down at Blaze, and then back to Atlas. He tried for a grin but knew his lips were trembling with emotion. "That's my boy," he whispered as he reached for Atlas and pulled him into his arms. "I should have known you would find a way to escape him."

Atlas snuggled as closely as he could, wincing from the pain of his cracked ribs but wanting Hawk's touch more than anything. "Yes, you should have. I wouldn't have even needed you guys at this point. I was on the track and swim team." Atlas looked up at Hawk. "I would have made it to the water, and he would have never caught me. I wasn't going to let him have you." Atlas paused a second before saying, "You're mine, Hawk Pentress. I'm in love with you. I think I have been since that first night when I knocked on your door. You don't have to say anything back, I just wanted you to know how I felt."

"I love you," Hawk quickly countered. "How could you have ever doubted it?" Hawk drew Atlas close and kissed him. Softly. Gently, careful not to hurt Atlas damaged lips. "Move in with me. Now. Tonight. After we take you to the hospital. You can bring Megan if you want. I...I just can't imagine my life without you in it. I'm going to be overprotective for a while. Get ready for it."

“Oh...so you want me to stay while I recover?” Atlas asked, trying to hide his disappointment.

“Of course! You’ll stay in my bed while you recover. I never want you to leave my home, though. It’s ours. It feels empty when you aren’t there.” Hawk tucked Atlas’ head beneath his chin. “I should have already confessed my feelings. I told you I would suck at this relationship thing. I knew how I felt and didn’t tell you...almost didn’t get to tell you. Never again.”

Atlas looked toward the door. Ambrose walked out, his face deathly white. Atlas had never seen anything other than playful emotion on Ambrose’s face. His look now was despair. Atlas stepped away from Hawk and moved toward Ambrose. “I’m sorry, Ambrose. I should have never fallen for Blaze’s tricks. You’ve never been anything but good to me, and I answered that with distrust.” Atlas looked through the opened door one last time. “Were they your friends?”

Ambrose cleared his throat. “Yes. They were good men and had the same love for one another that you and Hawk share. Like them, you both have been blessed to find your soul mate.”

“Are you angry with me for believing the notes?”

“Never! It was actually a fairly good plan. I didn’t think Blaze had the brain power to think of it. Add his deviousness to the fact that you have a kind heart, and it led to where we are. I’m sorry you were hurt by anyone from my and Hawk’s life. This will weigh heavy on our hearts forever.” Trying to lighten the mood, if at all possible, considering what had happened to all of them, Ambrose said, “Your man has threatened to kill me more than once this evening.”

Unable to be away from Atlas a second longer, Hawk moved in and wrapped a protective arm around him and said, “What’s Ambrose complaining about now? That I threatened to kill him?”

“Yes. That. Exactly.” Atlas answered. “That’s rude, Hawk.”

“Yeah, well, desperate measures called for desperate rudeness. We would have been here an hour ago, but Ambrose forgot that Maxwell and Michael also had a country home.” Hawk reached around and popped Ambrose on the side of the head. “I think Ambrose must be getting old. Who could forget something like that?”

Wallace sauntered over and answered, “Maybe somebody that was being threatened with death every few minutes.” He swiped at his bloody nose. “Who has a fucking front door that opens outward? That’s just stupid.”

They were all joking around but the mood turned somber in an instant when Wallace continued talking, “I went inside, Ambrose. I’m sorry. I know they were your friends.”

Blaze chose that moment to make a moaning sound. Hawk started to kick him again, but Ambrose shook his head. “Please don’t do that, my friend. I’d appreciate him being alert for our chat. Maxwell would never forgive me if I didn’t address what Blaze did to Michael.”

Atlas’ head snapped up. “Are you going to kill him?” He swiveled around to look at Hawk. “We don’t kill do we?”

Ambrose smiled serenely. “Of course I’m not going to kill him, boy. I’m not a murderer.”

“I’m taking Atlas to the hospital,” Hawk said as he surprised his boy by picking him up and cradling him against his chest. “Do what you need to do, Ambrose. Make certain he understands to never come after us again.”

“My pleasure,” Ambrose answered. As Hawk walked away, holding Atlas gently in his arms, Ambrose turned to Wallace and said, “Give me twenty minutes and then

call 911.”

“Copy that.”

EPILOGUE

Atlas growled when Hawk reached behind his head to fluff his pillow for the hundredth time that day...and it was only noon. Never in his life had anyone babied and protected him the way Hawk had since that horrible night. Atlas had spent three days in the hospital. He ended up having three cracked ribs and a broken wrist. Thankfully, the damage to his face had healed on its own—nothing too serious, although he’d looked like the walking dead for several weeks.

“Stop babying me, Hawk,” Atlas pleaded. “I know you have work you need to be doing. I’ll be perfectly safe—you’re only one floor away if I need you. Blaze is in the hospital with a guard at his door and will head straight to prison once he recovers. I’m fine. I promise.”

Hawk arched a brow. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

Grinning mischievously, Atlas answered, “While you are the best and hottest nurse in the entire world, you’re pampering me so much that I’m beginning to feel useless. Bring me my laptop and I’ll catch up on some work while you finish your project.” Atlas hadn’t gone back to his apartment since the attack. Hawk had moved all Atlas belongings into his building and set Megan up in one of the guest rooms while she hunted for a new place. Neither Atlas nor Megan was interested in going back inside their old apartment—the one they’d loved so much pre-Blaze.

Over the years, any time Atlas had moved from one place to the next, beginning with when he moved from his childhood home to his first apartment, there had always been a two or three week phase where nothing felt...right. He couldn’t sleep. It would take forever for a place to feel like home. Not this time, though. As soon as Hawk had

brought him home from the hospital, Atlas had snuggled into the bed they shared and had instantly known he belonged right there, with Hawk.

“I’ll go work for a bit when you say it again,” Hawk promised.

“I love you, Hawk. I love you with everything I’ve got in me.” Who would have ever thought Hawk would have any insecurities about anything? The problem was that Hawk couldn’t stop blaming himself for what happened, no matter how many times Atlas gently explained that Blaze was the only person to blame for what happened.

“I love you too, baby. I’m better with you. You’ll marry me one day, right?”

Atlas felt like his heart exploded. “Uh...yes. Definitely. I-I wasn’t certain you were going in that direction. I didn’t want to push, and I definitely didn’t want you to do something because you feel guilty over what happened.”

Hawk grinned like he’d won the lottery. “When you are healed good and proper, I’ll ask you the right way—down on one knee, looking up at you with puppy-dog eyes begging you.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Atlas whispered back and gave Hawk a kiss that promised all sorts of delights.