



A Little Campfire Blues (Pride Camp 2025 #10)

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Category: Romance

Description: Three friends torn apart by jealousy and carelessly spoken words.

Only one has ever held on to the hope of them reuniting, and with a few well timed suggestions and a whole lot of luck, he'll finally have them in the same place together after eight years.

Eight long years of pining and wishing for a wand he could wave to put things back to the way they used to be. When the fireworks that burst forth at their reunion are sparked by a passionate embrace, he begins to hope that the two weeks that lay ahead of them at Pride Camp were going finally fix what was broken between them.

Especially when they meet a man interested in not one, or even two of them, but the trio they'd always been, and the potential is as limitless as the fireflies they chase along the banks of the lake. When the past rears its ugly head, can he find a way to lay it to rest forever, or will he lose them all as they lose themselves to bitter and angry grudges?

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Chapter One

Axis

The wind in my hair felt amazing as I pointed my royal purple Jeep Wrangler towards the highway, tendrils of twilight blue hair fluttering past my face where they had escaped the messy bun I'd tied it up in.

Cranking the radio up at the first tones of Godsmack's Unforgettable, I settled in as the music washed over me, nodding to the beat as I maneuvered around slower-moving vehicles one-handed and leaned back in the seat.

It was a three-hour drive from Portland, where I'd lived since graduating high school eight years before, to Redmond, Oregon, the site of the camp I'd let an old friend talk me into joining him at.

Okay, so he wasn't just an old friend; he'd been more, once, not that we'd gotten to explore all the possibilities with my abrupt departure and him shipping out for basic training following his enlistment in the Coast Guard.

Our dreams had always meant that we were destined for different paths, but texting and email had allowed us to maintain the bond of friendship we'd shared since we were little and ran around the neighborhood together getting into shit with Ezzy.

Damn, I missed them both.

When I'd left, I hadn't been thinking about how much I'd miss them or the way we'd

grown to the point of being able to finish each other's sentences, knowing, with just a look, when one of us was pissed off about something or scared.

Maybe I'd taken for granted what it meant to have bonds that close, or maybe I'd just been too eager to exchange what we'd had for a different kind of family.

One with the band members I'd loaded up with that fateful May morning, choosing to skip walking the stage at graduation for the series of bookings Rory had set up for us at his uncle's dive bar.

Talk about old school: dim lighting, wooden paneling on the walls, and air thick with profanity, body odor, and the scent of beer.

Long as my hair was, even back then, I always had to wash it twice after a show, just to get the lingering stench out at the end of every night.

Duncan McKaggan, Rory's uncle, took a liking to us early on and put us up in the apartments over the place where I still lived to this day, even after the others had moved on.

Rory and I had roomed together on one side of the building, Bowie and Duce on the other.

They used to joke about how we should have switched, so Bowie, the band's lead guitar player, and I were rooming together, since we could always be found in one another's apartments working on music, but beyond the music, we'd had little in common.

It didn't help that there had always been a not-so-healthy rivalry between us, stemming from the early days of the band, when we'd been dueling over who was gonna play lead.

He'd won, and I'd always resented him for that, even while admiring his playing.

He truly was better, at least back then.

Now, I had no idea what he was up to. A motorcycle wreck had put him on the shelf, fracturing the band, which splintered more when Rory and Duce voted to replace him.

Big mistake.

Replacement was a self-centered dick with an ego the size of Texas. It hadn't taken any of us long to see that the soul-sucking drain of having to be around him wasn't worth what he brought to the table in terms of playing.

Lyrics weren't his thing.

Songwriting, outside of long, drawn-out, hastily stitched-together guitar solos, wasn't his thing either.

But man, he'd loved the spotlight.

And drugs.

All the drugs.

Anything anyone gave him, to the point where it showed every night he got on the stage with us. Tragic, considering it wound up being a life cut short when he passed away backstage after collapsing during a show.

As a band, we couldn't bounce back from that.

Maybe that was my fault too. I'd never fully forgiven them for replacing Bowie, who was a damn better player than fucking K.C.

had been. My resentment got the best of me more than once during his time with us, but dammit all, replacing Bowie had been such a dick thing to do after he'd gotten hurt.

But I'd been outvoted. When faced with whether to walk or accept the decision, I'd stayed because music had always been my drug of choice, and I'd already proved I was selfish enough to sacrifice anything for it.

Hadn't really known what to do without the band, either, with Roman stationed in Ketchikan and Ezzy who knew where.

I'd left that friendship beyond fractured.

Songs changed as the trees along the highway blurred, wheels eating up the miles between me and the first face-to-face reunion with my past since the night I'd slipped away without saying goodbye.

Thanks to hours of video chats, I didn't have to worry about not recognizing Roman, not that he'd changed much over the years.

Two years ago, he'd been medically retired and returned home to take over the position of swim coach at the high school we'd gone to.

Since then, he'd started letting his chestnut hair grow out until it flowed over the back of his neck when he swept it back, but it still had a few inches to go before it touched his shoulders.

Wouldn't have needed a bun if my hair was that short; I'd have just let that warm

wind send it whipping everywhere, but mine reached the middle of my back, thick and sleek in the strobe lights on the nights I still played.

Alone.

Damn, it sucked sometimes.

I missed the stage interactions, the laughter on long van rides, and when I was at my loneliest, I even missed the stench of Rory's farts after the goddamned Reuben sandwiches he insisted on getting every time we went to Arby's.

Which was a lot.

Like, a lot-lot.

To the point where Bowie threatened to shove a plug up his ass if he farted again on the long drive between Portland and Palm Springs, that's how bad he was gassing us out.

Over the years, each of us had taken turns designing T-shirts for him touting the extent of his flatulence, which he'd proudly worn on stage.

Fartinator.

Positively Fartastic!

Human Fart Machine.

Not very original, I know, but it was funny as hell every time he put one on and even funnier when someone asked him about it.

He ran that old dive bar with his uncle now and, as far as I knew, hadn't been back up on a stage since the night K.C. died. A real shame, with the powerful voice he had and his stunning way of delivering vocals. I hoped he still sang, at least. No one should ever waste a gift like that.

I missed his sleep-slurred, rumbling good mornings when he stepped past me in the kitchen, desperate for a mug of tea and a couple spoonfuls of honey after a crazy show the night before.

Missed the way he'd sit across from me while I'd been hunched over my plate, hair half hanging in my eyes as I cursed whoever the hell had given me Kamikazes and snake bites the night before.

Even half hungover, we'd start talking about tweaks to the playlist, or adjustments to some lyrics we'd been working on, mornings spent clinging to that rough, wooden surface, like shriveled slugs waiting for rain.

I'd alternate between ice water and apple juice, waiting for the Tylenol to kick in and my head to stop throbbing with the echoing beat of Dues' drums.

Sometimes I catch a show at the rowdy bar where he's the house drummer, playing behind a cage because shit tends to get out of control. He's still as good as ever, but I've turned down every offer he's extended for me to join him.

It's just not my scene anymore.

I'd rather not have to comb glass out of my hair at the end of a performance, thank you very much.

Maybe that's why he's shaved his head bald. It's a badass look on him. At five foot six, he was always searching for a way to look bigger, hitting the gym until every

inch of him was sculpted muscle he showed off by playing bare-chested in just a pair of holey cutoff jeans.

Should have known the drive would send my thoughts spiraling to the past, especially when Roman waited at the other end.

When I thought of the way everything had gone with the band and everything I'd thrown away to have that opportunity, my mellow mood shifted to melancholy even as I started tripping over the words that rolled through my head.

Words I'd spoken and never been able to take back.

"Can you just not, for once in your fuckin' life, Ezzy!

" The sharp, short words barked with such frustration he froze, eyes widening in shock while I kept pacing beside the pool table.

"This is Eugene, not LA! There's no fuckin' reason to walk around painted in glitter or showing off all your piercings with all that mesh.

It's fuckin' ridiculous. Of course people are going to target you for it.

Of course they are gonna say shit, and not just about you, but about me and Roman too!

Consider that, at least, before you decide to add more sparkles. "

"There's nothing wrong with sparkles."

"Everything is wrong with sparkles; it's all anyone sees. That and you practically wandering around bare-chested cause you want everyone to see your nipple rings and

belly button piercing.”

“Don’t forget the corset.”

“Who can forget the corset when you have Roman lace and tie the damned rings with sparkly shit too! What’s your plan for an encore, tattooed butterfly wings so you really look like a fuckin’ fairy?”

Unholy silence followed, the kind that came before the winds shifted, when everything was as still as a live wire crackling with an undercurrent of deadly energy.

Their fists clenched, jaw working as their lips parted right before they pressed them in a tight line, face pale beneath the shimmer of the makeup they had on.

They were stunning without it, hauntingly so. I opened my mouth to tell them so when they whirled and fled the room, followed by Roman, cutting me a scathing look as he stalked out the door to catch up to them.

That was the last time I was in a room with either of them.

The memory of the moment made my eyes well up, blurring the road until I couldn’t make out the lines anymore. The brown of what I hoped was a rest stop sign was just a streak at the corner of my vision, so I slowed, grateful that no one was behind me as I searched for the pull-off spot.

One mile turned into three, both hands on the wheel now as I sniffled and sucked in a breath, holding it in the hopes of keeping the rest of the tears at bay.

I barely got into a spot in the empty parking lot before they fell.

Welcoming them, I pressed my head against the steering wheel, allowing myself to

feel all the sorrow and regret I'd been living with since I'd let jealousy, and other people's opinions, color my opinion of one of the people I'd loved.

Not my finest moment, but leaving without telling them and without apologizing for what I'd said or owning up to why I'd said it—now that was the worst mistake of my life.

All these years, I hadn't dared to ask Roman to set up a three-way chat between us, though I knew they still talked, the same as Roman and I did.

Sometimes he let slip something Ezzy was up to, but I never pressed for more details, because a part of me still felt like I didn't have the right to know.

Swiping at the tears, forehead sore from where it had been pressed to the Jeep's steering wheel, I fumbled for the bag on the passenger's seat, the wire edge of my battered notebook warm against my fingertips as I yanked it out.

Of course the pen I'd clipped to the metal got caught, and of course, I tugged rather than taking the time to untangle it.

Patience had never been a strong suit of mine, especially when I was upset.

The resulting tussle sent the pen flying straight at my face, cap tangling in my bun when I remembered to duck.

The pen itself landed outside, which was fine; I hadn't intended to sit in the Jeep and write anyway. Not when there was a perfectly good picnic table several feet away. It felt good to get out, stretch, and let the sun finish drying the occasional tear that leaked from the corner of my eyes.

When Roman had first suggested we meet up for pride camp, I'd balked, because

what if the old vibe wasn't there once we started hanging out again?

What if the past eight years had changed us too much?

What if I let slip the secret I still carried after all these years?

What if I fucked up and tried to kiss him while we were walking around the pond one night, the fireflies flitting in between the reeds, making the whole moment seem magical?

What if that was the moment when my mouth got the best of me again, only instead of something scathing, I blurted that I still loved him?

What then?

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Chapter Two

Roman

Why was I, a man who'd dropped from helicopters into choppy seas, as nervous as a seven-year-old on the way to sleepover camp for the first time? The answer was easy and not one I needed long to think about.

Axis and Ezzy.

In what might prove to be the single biggest fuck-up of my life, I'd convinced them both to join me in Redmond for pride camp after eight years of being apart.

In any other case it would have been a reunion to look forward to and even be excited about.

Hell, another time, another place, another me, and I'd have run the risk of a speeding ticket tearing down the highway in my Challenger, eager to lay eyes on them both and squish them into the kind of tight hug that used to leave them gasping and complaining they couldn't breathe.

Now I was just hoping this would go well and that neither would wind up hating me before our two weeks in the woods were over.

Shit.

Fuck.

What if they got there before I did?

What if they ran into each other while I was still cruising along at five under the speed limit, like a little old man checking out the fall foliage?

I pressed the pedal down and brought the needle up to sixty-five, set the cruise control, and told the smart speaker on my phone to pull up driving playlist number three, filled with old-school metal and classic rock.

Having Motorhead pour through the smart speakers, especially Love Me Like a Reptile, helped ease the tension in my shoulders a little, but I still gripped the wheel with both hands, peering with single-minded focus on the highway in front of me.

At least the drive would be a short one.

Hadn't done myself any favors getting on the road later than I'd planned, though.

Two years out of the military, forced to retire after injuries during an offshore rescue, I'd fallen into some sloppy habits, especially once summer rolled around.

As the high school swim coach of the team I was once the star of, as well as the director of the town's aquatics center, it was rare that I rose before seven these days. Daybreak swimming at the aquatics center was overseen by two senior lifeguards, while my office hours didn't start until nine.

Since I lived less than two blocks from the facility, I'd gotten into the habit of rolling out of bed, having coffee, then heading down to get a mile swim in before showering in the locker room, and plopping myself behind my desk, where a mini fridge stocked with fruit, yogurt, and whatever takeout was left over from the day before awaited me.

Along with more coffee courtesy of the Keurig I'd installed the day I'd taken over the position.

After years of training, constantly being on the ready for that call to come in that lives were in danger, dealing with pissed-off mamas upset because they weren't allowed to book the entire pool area for little Billy's birthday party wasn't the way I'd envisioned my future.

But it was my job.

The rules said they could rent the outdoor splash pad for no more than three hours.

It included four picnic tables beneath a wooden overhanging.

Bookings were taken on a first-come, first-served basis, so no, I could not ask someone else to please move their event so they could hold it during the time they'd planned.

Maybe not sending out invitations until you have everything locked in wasn't something they liked to hear either, but there was no wiggle room or exceptions.

Not that I'd have been tempted to give any with the entitled attitudes and condescending tones they used when they spoke to me.

The phrase "Yeah, well, I don't work for you," had been my response more than once, often followed by them ending the call with a huff and a few choice profanities.

Oh well. Not my problem and not my boss's either. She'd fielded more than one irate phone call only to shut them down with the cold, clipped tone she reserved for when people pissed her off.

Personally, I never wanted to be on the other side of it. I'd been grateful the first time it happened, when she'd poked her head into my office to tell me to keep on running things the way I was, and to send any complaints to her.

Turned out, she'd had problems with the previous director trying to double-book, or flat-out rescheduling events when someone slipped him a little extra to make a booking turn out in their favor.

That shit would never fly with me, and I'd told her that, earning a smile before she'd headed back upstairs to deal with the reports she provided city council each year. I was just glad I didn't have to worry about that shit on top of everything else.

Our indoor play area, designed for the littlest visitors to the aquatics center, had been in desperate need of upgrading when I'd taken over. Most of the first year was spent researching fixtures and arranging to have them installed.

This year, my biggest task was organizing a swim team for the center, something it had when I was growing up.

Over the years, a lack of funding, lack of coaches, and lack of overall organization to arrange consistent practices and meets had led to the team disbanding, which had also led, at least in my opinion, to the competitiveness at the high school level falling off.

Those students who excelled tended to be from families with properties that bordered the lake or those who were fortunate enough to have homes with backyard pools or friends with them.

Growing up, I'd had neither. Just the town pool, which back then, had been outside and only usable in warm months.

I'd been stationed at Coast Guard Station Chatham in Massachusetts when they'd

built the center and hadn't seen it until I'd toured the facility during my orientation, after I'd already taken the job.

Spacious and heated in winter months, with tall windows that let sunlight stream through, it was a beautiful facility, but the membership costs were a deterrent for some families, and rightly so.

Back when I was a kid, we paid a buck to use the outdoor pool and signed in so we could come in and out all day without having to pay another dollar.

Can't tell you how many lunches I'd have missed out on in the final weeks of school each year if Axis and Ezzy hadn't shared their lunches with me.

Ezzy always brought food from home, and not just leftovers.

Their mom was always experimenting in the kitchen, making naan bread and then covering it with diced pieces of steak, cheese, mushrooms, vegetables, and any other toppings that came to mind.

She'd make homemade pita bread and stuff them with cucumbers, tomatoes, and chicken, all coated in a delicious sauce.

She always putting a few extras in that she knew Ezzy would never be able to finish.

Sometimes Axis would try them too, though most days, he had a bag of whatever his mom had brought home from her job the night before.

Fried chicken, deviled eggs, potato salad, there was always a feast in those Styrofoam containers.

They were the ones who made it so I could practice in the pool whenever possible,

not that my folks didn't do all they could, but with six of us, there hadn't always been a dollar for lunch and for swimming.

Still, they never missed a meet, nor did Axis and Ezzy.

Hell, Axis used to bring his acoustic guitar to the pool and sit well away from the water to rehearse during my practices.

Could have used an indoor pool back then, since I always felt like my times fell off after the season was over.

Something I could never work at fixing until we reached high school.

At least then, the policy was that members of the swim team, as well as other sports, could get a slip excusing them from study hall so they could go to the gym, the weight room, or, in my case, the pool and get some practice time in.

In my case, I had to check in with Coach first, not that he ever minded leaving his office to come sit poolside so I wasn't unsupervised.

It didn't matter that I was lifeguard certified by my junior year; you couldn't lifeguard yourself, Coach always said, so if he wasn't already supervising whatever gym class was using the pool at the time, he'd just come out and supervise me and any other teammates who dropped in, of which there were several.

Swimming hadn't been part of the gym curriculum when I'd returned, and the school board had been toying with the idea of eliminating the swim team altogether, one of many reasons I'd been working so hard to establish a team through the aquatics center.

If the school decided to go ahead with one of the proposals to shut down the pool and

locker room area and demolish it to expand the wrestling room, at least there would be something in place for the kids who still wanted to compete.

What I'd prefer was them keeping it open and allowing me to help bring in staff that could man the space all day so that gym classes could get back to including swimming and pool activities, which were awesome for building stamina as well as weight training, especially when you worked with water resistance.

A mound of paperwork had been involved in that proposal.

I just hoped I could get it pushed through before the start of the school year.

The longer time ticked by without the space being utilized to its fullest potential, the easier it would be for those wanting to shut it down completely to push their agenda through.

In the end, it all came down to dollar signs.

Which was why I'd used the contacts I'd made during my time with the Coast Guard to help me put together a scholarship fund for kids who wanted to use the aquatics center to build up their swimming skills and train for competition or even military service.

I'd never have become a rescue swimmer if it wasn't for all of the extra hours I'd gotten to spend in the water, mind blurred with the tranquil, rhythmic motion of being in it.

My drive would have left me a loner if it hadn't been for Axis and Ezzy, but they never stopped figuring out ways for us to spend time together, even when Ezzy never had any desire to dip a toe in that chlorine.

Axis loved it, though. He never wanted to compete, and actually told me once that he hated the thought of failing too much to put himself in the position to disappoint anyone.

Still, he'd join me in the water from time to time and even race me when there was no one else around to push me, because, damn, he was fast and would have easily earned a place on the team.

Most days he'd provide me with background music, unless Ezzy was quizzing us on some test we had coming up.

They'd holler questions at me when I was catching my breath between blocks of laps, helping me keep my grades up because sometimes, I'd be too tired to study properly after a long practice session.

When they weren't helping to keep one of us keep from failing, they'd be studying a script or writing one, getting ready for an upcoming theater performance they often had a starring role in.

Axis and I always made as many shows as we could, and when he wasn't busy playing or practicing with his band, Axis would help paint sets and even learned how to run the lightboard, becoming quite the accomplished theater tech during our four years of high school.

It's not much different than a soundboard, and I've been running one of those since I was twelve, he'd pointed out when Ezzy asked if he really wanted to spend that much time at the booth in the theater.

Axis had just shrugged and asked what else he was supposed to do when he hated being at home.

Not that either of us could blame him for that.

I'd always known he'd leave the moment the opportunity arose. I just never expected it to be under the cover of darkness, with bitterness between us and no goodbyes.

That part had been the hardest to forgive, but I had, once he'd told me the reason. I just hoped Ezzy would give him the same opportunity to explain. That hurt ran deeper.

We'd always said that we'd never let anything divide us, only that hadn't proved true in the end. Words Axis had spoken in a moment of frustration had divided us, and an unresolvable home situation had made it worse. Now we had the opportunity to make things right again.

I just hoped they'd both been honest when they'd admitted to having a desire, even after all these years, to make things right between them, because soon we'd all be together again, and neither knew just how much I needed us to find a way to be on the same page again.

Needed them.

Hell, time for me to be honest.

I'd never stopped needing them.

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Chapter Three

Ezzy

You ever just have a taste for something very specific that haunts the edge of your memory until you track it down?

From the moment I hit the road for pride camp, I craved an orange creamsicle, and not just any orange creamsicle, but the kind Mr. Feely kept stocked at the corner of Seventh and Crabapple, at the heart of the neighborhood I grew up in.

For just fifty cents you got a creamy burst of citrus perfection that tasted just like frozen orange cream soda.

It's still the only pop I drink, but it's getting a lot harder to find these days.

I learned to become a connoisseur of craft varieties, stocking up on four-packs whenever I found them, even if that meant dedicating an entire cabinet in the cramped kitchen in my old apartment to them so I'd always have some on hand.

They were the last items I'd packed before my trip, carefully tucked into the cooler and covered with ice, so they'd stay cold until I could put them in the refrigerator at the cabin along with the rest of the supplies I'd brought.

According to the brochure, three meals would be provided each day, either in the dining hall or around the campfire, but I suspected they meant during what most people would consider mealtimes. A night owl like me could find themselves shit out

of luck unless they planned accordingly.

That was me. Always the planner.

Which was why I told my phone to plot a course for the nearest grocery store.

If I could find those orange creamsicle pops, I'd get two boxes for those nights when Roman and I were sitting around the cabin bullshitting about the past and everything we hadn't been able to fill each other in on over the years.

Talking through a screen had stopped being enough years ago. I missed his hugs and the low rumble of his chuckles, the way his eyes lit up in firelight, especially when he was happy about something.

A few times over the years I'd thought about visiting him, especially when he was up in Alaska, but things had never quite worked out for me with school, work, and the associate teaching position I'd taken within the theater department.

It was harder to try to plan something when he'd been out in Massachusetts, clear across the damned country, since I was too chicken shit to ever get on a plane.

I'd never been a very daring kid. I didn't mind getting dirty; I'd come home a filthy mess and hose off in the yard so as to not track muddy footprints on Mama's floor.

She appreciated it so much she installed a hook beside the hose and kept a towel hanging on it for me, knowing Roman, Axis, and I were always getting into something.

A block from Mr. Feely's store was the neighborhood park, filled with playground equipment we outgrew by the time we were ten.

There was a little pond behind it, though, the site of many of our misadventures.

We'd score lines on the inside of weathered pieces of bark we found curled on the ground, keeping track of how many frogs we each caught and who caught the biggest. To the victor went bragging rights until the next frog-catching day, and occasionally, the last cookie in the Ziplock bag, if we'd saved any back from lunch.

Some would call the kind of childhood I had idyllic and even rare in an era of online game play, TikTok, and other social media, but we'd made use of those things too, just in the cold months, when it got dark early and getting wet meant risking a cold and being stuck in bed, separated from one another.

We'd always hated being separated. From the time we met in third grade until the night everything had fallen apart between us, we'd been the best of friends, and later, more than friends, curiously exploring the attraction we'd felt for one another without jealousy or shame.

Or at least that's what I thought until Axis lashed out at me after I'd stormed into his garage and interrupted a profanity-laden practice session between him and his guitar.

I should have seen the signs that he was already pissed.

Should have paused and asked him what had him upset.

Instead, I launched into a long, bitter tirade about the latest indignities I'd experienced at the hands of Jamie and Jerek Lindstrom, the twins who'd grown up at the end of my block.

Two pains in the asses who'd seen it as their life's mission to make my high school days hell because I was different.

I knew they were just parroting the bullshit their parents spewed.

Mrs. Lindstrom had made more than one comment to my mom about the way I dressed, my mannerisms, the makeup I wore, and later my piercings, once I'd been old enough to get them.

She'd complained that my folks shouldn't indulge me by using my chosen pronouns, they/them, or allow me to continue running around, confusing people about what gender I was.

Mom, never one to mince words, had blistered her with a scathing comeback about how people might be far happier in their own lives if they learned to keep their noses out of other people's business.

Of course, Mama, being Mama, peppered it with as many profanities as Axis had been using the last time I'd seen him.

She'd also asked Mrs. Lindstrom how her husband's business was recovering after the IRS audit that had seen more than half of their property and equipment seized amid the scandalous revelation that the accountant he'd been having an affair with had not only cooked the books but made off with a chunk of money that was never reported as revenue.

She'd stormed away in tears, and a part of me had wanted to be happy about that, but all I'd felt was crushing frustration.

Who I was shouldn't have been fodder for gossip or complaints from anyone, not when I'd never harmed a soul by being myself.

Hell, I went out of my way to avoid the people I knew had a problem with me.

I never went looking for trouble or confrontation.

Most times, I didn't even stop when people whispered, stared, or threw something at me, though I had gotten up in Jamie's face the day he'd 'tripped' and dumped his whole tray, including an open chocolate milk, in my lap, staining my white mesh top with chocolate and spaghetti.

To this day I didn't know what I was actually going to do, face to face with him looming over me, taunts spilling from his lips while I dared myself to hit him.

I didn't even know how to throw a punch, but Axis did.

One moment I was alone, and the next he was there between us, and Jamie was on the ground with blood gushing from his nose, his blue shirt splattered with it.

A shirt for a shirt, Axis declared before catching my hand and kissing me right there in front of everyone.

It was a hell of a coming out for both of us.

Which is why it had come as such a blow less than a year later, when he'd stood there in that garage and read me the riot act for being too sparkly and in everyone's faces with my appearance.

What had prompted those words I'd never know, not when he'd been begging me just a few days before to help him apply a smokey-eyed look before he got on stage.

He'd asked for shimmering purple highlights along his cheekbones too, wanting to stand out while he was playing with his band.

Funny, but when I looked back on that night, the thing I remembered most was that

his eyes lacked the excitement they usually did before a gig. I'd tried to ask him about it and the foul mood he'd been in afterwards, as well as why he hadn't been playing lead the way he usually did.

Drop it had been his only response, right before he'd suggested we go to IHOP for red velvet pancakes.

Talk about a decadent treat, especially when he'd fed little bites to me while we'd been snuggled up in the booth together, waiting for Roman to arrive.

I'd agonized over whether to accompany him to the out-of-town swim meet he'd been competing in or stay and see Axis play.

In the end, Roman had ended the debate by telling me to stay, since his folks would be at the meet with him, while we both knew Axis would have nobody.

It wasn't that they disapproved of him playing; it was just that they'd never viewed it as more than a hobby.

If I'm going to go see a concert, then dammit, I'm gonna go see a real band where I know what the hell they're singing about.

I doubted Axis knew I'd heard that whole conversation, from the start, when he'd tried to give his father a ticket to the show, to the end, when he'd stormed out telling his old man that one day people would be lining up for the chance to see him.

He'd kicked the screen door closed while his old man had been bellowing about not slamming doors.

Was shocked he hadn't opened it just to slam it again; he'd been that pissed.

Which was why I'd let him get halfway down the block before I'd chased after him.

He'd been silent all the way to the pond, where he'd whipped stones at the water until every living thing had been chased from the spot by all that splashing.

After he'd calmed down and kicked his shoes off, we'd sat with our feet in the water, the legs of our jeans rolled up, while he'd complained about no one taking him seriously.

Not his folks, not his music teacher, not his older brother, not even his grandparents, who'd been the ones to buy him his first guitar.

I play my ass off! If I spend any more time out in the garage practicing, I'll have to move my bed out there just to get some sleep. I've bled on those strings.

I know, I've bandaged your fingers.

Yeah. But it's still not enough.

And burning yourself out is gonna be? Making yourself hate something you love is gonna be? You can't make him care! Why can't it be enough that Roman and I think you're amazing?

You'll never get it.

Then explain it to me in a way I can.

I can't.

Why not?

Because maybe I don't know why nothing I do is ever good enough for him.

Sometimes I wondered if he'd ever found out or even gone back home to make peace with the family he'd left behind.

Had he left them a note? Because Roman and I hadn't received anything from him before he'd vanished, the only thing we'd been told when we'd knocked on his door was that the fucker had left with his band.

That's how his brother had put it.

The fucker.

Like his brother hadn't always looked up to him and cheered him on when he'd been out there tearing it up on the football field. Axis deserved way better than he'd ever gotten from them.

And I'd deserved better than the way he'd treated me before he'd left.

Which took me back to some of the issues I still carried to this day. It was hard to move forward when I still clung to unresolved pieces of the past.

Like the love I still carried in my soul for him and Roman and the way I'd never been able to set those feelings aside to make room for someone else to fill the holes they'd left in my life.

That was the real reason I'd said yes to going to pride camp with Roman.

Well, that and the fact that we'd talked about getting together now that I was returning home to take over the theater director position at the community playhouse.

I both looked forward to it and dreaded it, though I hoped the dread would lessen, sharing a cabin and finally getting to really hash out some of the things we'd only touched on in video chats, long text message threads, and emails over the years.

One way or another, I'd know by the end of camp if the feelings I harbored were still the byproduct of childhood memories and my own stubbornness in clinging to old promises and dreams. If they were, then I hoped we could at least keep forging a new kind of friendship, though deep down, I knew I wanted them to be real.

But more so, I wanted him to feel the same way.

I wanted him to want me the way I'd always wanted him.

I wanted to hold his hand again and hear him tell me he loved me again.

I needed to know that he was still my person, because I'd never stopped being his.

I'd never stopped worrying every time I learned that he'd dropped from a chopper into the water to rescue survivors of some disaster.

I'd never stopped being eager to hear the sound of his voice, his laughter, or his words of encouragement when I read aloud what I was struggling with.

He always believed I'd get it right, even when I lacked the same faith in myself.

And deep down, I'd always hoped he could help me lay to rest the conflict I still wrestled with over Axis, because the end still cut as deep as it had that day, and the wound had never stopped bleeding, despite how hard I'd tried to make it stop.

Like the taste of orange creamsicle pops, it was branded into me in a way that no amount of indulgence ever seemed to fade.

Warm bodies, willing bodies—I'd accepted every shred of lustful attention people had sent my way, hoping to find the one who'd blot out the image of him that still burned bright in my mind.

Of the night he'd smeared sweetened cream cheese filling across my lips, winking as the girls at a nearby table giggled, right before he kissed it away.

And whispered, I love you.

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Chapter Four

Mackenzie

If anyone had told me that I'd be heading to camp for the first time at thirty-eight years old, I'd have laughed my ass off and then asked what the hell they were smoking.

Yet here I was, the bed of my pickup truck full of fishing gear, coolers, clothes, and two pairs of hiking boots, ready to see what the hell pride camp was all about.

Until discussion of it had started popping up among the message boards of the alternate lifestyle group I was a part of, I'd never even known something like it existed.

A camp for queer people involved in the BDSM lifestyle?

Yeah, my first thought was that someone had gotten their wires crossed somewhere and didn't know what the hell they were talking about.

Then I started digging into it, and holy shit, it was real.

I wasn't the only one shocked to discover that truth either.

A few of the men I'd spent time chatting with over the years had gotten excited about going.

All of us were Daddy Doms, and two, Charles and Marius, were also pet handlers like me.

Over the years, we'd bonded over the struggle to find partners who fulfilled all the desires we had to be both Daddy and handler, landing ourselves in situations riddled with jealousy, accusations, and tantrums that had led to the implosion of relationships.

It had been a year since I'd tried to get involved with anyone, having learned to spot the signs when someone I was interested in was after far less than I was.

I couldn't remember the exact moment when it had clicked for me that I was over one-night stands and fast flings that burned out after less than a month or two.

They'd grown exhausting and left me disillusioned and bitterly wishing I could just be satisfied with having a fragment of my needs met.

Too bad I was a stubborn man who didn't know how to tone it down or dial back the intensity I brought to everything I did.

Even on the factory loading dock, where I worked from six in the morning until three in the afternoon, I strove to stay in motion, carrying two crates at a time every time and cranking on those straps until nothing moved when a truck rattled. It was just my way.

Back in my heyday, when I'd been touring as a part of a southern rock band, I'd played like a beast, sweat dripping off me while I slayed on my guitar.

City to city, town to town, we rolled on for fifteen years.

Unfortunately, during all that time on the road, we picked up some bad habits too.

Drinking, indulging, and forgetting that the music industry is ever-changing.

We sniffed our own hype and got drunk on it, wallowing in the successes and growing lazy.

It was a hell of a wakeup call when we failed to chart with the release we'd labored over for almost two years, and to my shame, none of us was able to rebound from that.

Instead of getting our acts together, we allowed ourselves to be swallowed up by that failure, and not long after, the band fell apart.

Kicking around the Memphis scene had been pointless after that, and I honestly hadn't had the heart to try again with a new group of guys, even when the opportunity was offered to me.

I'd tucked tail and returned home to Oregon, applied at the factory I'd worked at during my final years of high school, and settled into a life of early morning wakeups, grueling work, and evenings spent restlessly prowling, looking for something to fill the hole the loss of my music had left.

I still hadn't found it, but along the way I'd learned how to be content with that.

Whenever I was feeling too nostalgic, I loaded one of those old CDs and played along to it, fingers stiff and clumsy from disuse.

At least I'd never lost the calluses I'd built up over years of sliding my fingertips up and down those strings, or I'd have bled all over the damned things.

Just thinking about playing left me glancing sideways, triple-checking that I'd remembered to pack my old girl.

The website mentioned evening campfire get-togethers and encouraged anyone who played to bring their instruments along.

The list of activities mentioned karaoke as well as a talent show, so Bertha, my acoustic-electric, was riding shotgun beside me the way she always had.

I'd always felt like the best of me came out when I was playing, not just that old guitar, but when I was deep in play with someone, learning their body language and what the tones of their sighs and wailing moans meant.

There was a type of deep, meditative focus in mapping out a lover's body, finding harmony with them until you were so in tune with one another it was like being swept into the heart of a song.

I hadn't written anything new on my old girl in over a year, almost as long as I'd gone without playing with anyone, period.

While I held little hope of pride camp being the place where I'd finally find the people I'd always dreamed of having in my life, I'd poured over the pictures on the website, mentally committing to memory all the places that would be perfect to sit and draw inspiration from.

With any luck I'd leave camp with some new pieces to play around with and maybe even recapture some of the drive and motivation I'd lost when I'd tucked tail and gone back home.

The last time I'd ridden away from here, I'd been filled with a hell of a lot more swagger, that cockiness dripping off me when I'd said goodbye to the people who'd loved me.

Hell, I'd practically promised my mama the moon and crowed to anyone who'd listen

about how the boys and I were gonna take Nashville by storm.

And we had, for a time.

But that same arrogance had burned bridges too; some who might have been in a position to help when we fell on hard times.

Only that helping hand hadn't been offered after the way we'd rejected the opportunity to be mentors and collaborators on various projects over the years.

Back then we'd only cared about the next rung on the ladder.

While we'd always been elated to work with those we'd admired and hoped to one day reach the same level as, working with lesser names was something we'd turned our noses up at.

Until those lesser names had surpassed us and we found ourselves wishing for that connection.

Talk about a kick in the ass from Karma.

In the final days of the band, our manager reached out to a promoter putting together a festival being headlined by one of the individuals we'd turned down the chance to work with several years before.

Needless to say, we hadn't been awarded a spot.

In the days that followed, with few bookings and little revenue trickling in from our failed album, we'd been forced to face the reality of our situation.

We were no longer relevant or even welcome in many of the spaces we'd once

dominated.

The fall came far faster than the ascent, leaving us all with a serious case of bitterness and pissed-off frustration as we'd come together in that last band meeting.

None of us had the heart to write new material without the motivation of a tour or festival circuit looming on the horizon.

Especially when it wasn't just the one promoter who turned us down, it was several, all in a long line.

Each time we realized that the people telling us no were the very people we'd said no to in the past.

The fates had spoken.

We were done.

A southern rock flame-out story

That was the legacy I'd spent the past two years back here in Oregon trying to erase.

Every day on the docks I did a little more than was asked of me, picked up the slack when others fell behind, and stayed late when management needed it.

It had gotten to where I'd started shaking my head, saying, no, sorry, you must have the wrong guy, whenever anyone recognized me from my days with my band.

Maybe it was a lie, but in my heart I knew I wasn't that guy anymore and would never be that guy again.

Best to hold on to the pieces of the past that had been amazing without having to answer questions about what I was doing back there, why I was working at the factory, and if I was still making music.

I wasn't.

At least not for anyone but me and the few houseplants my sister had given me that I'd managed not to kill.

I might not have a black thumb when it came to them, but the stubborn little buggers who survived did so out of sheer tenacity.

Alternating between forgetting to water and forgetting when I'd watered and overwatering, I'd drowned more than a few or left them with a bad case of fungus and root rot.

Some Daddy, right, can't even take care of a houseplant.

Shit, that was not the mindset I needed right now.

Thinking about my failures on the way to what I wanted to be an inspiring and motivational two weeks was not the right way to kick things off.

I had sixty-five miles of driving ahead, a little more than an hour once I factored in the speed limits on the backroads once I pulled off the highway.

Only there was nothing on the radio to hold my attention, and the few things that did just got me thinking about a mood or a moment in time that I didn't want to focus on right now.

Maybe an audiobook. I'd recently broken down and gotten a subscription, then

loaded up on queer fantasy novels, where everyone, even the beasts, found their mates, close bonds of friendship, and their happily ever afters.

I'd barely heard fuck all from any of my bandmates since we'd split up.

Hell, the last time I'd gotten a message from anyone, it was Terry, our old bass player, asking if I could hook him up with some cash since he'd spent his rent money on bail.

I'd had it, so I'd sent it. Received a thanks, man in response, and nothing since.

Shit, okay, stop thinking, fucker. Stop thinking.

I told my phone to cue up the poly pride cruise book I'd snagged because the smirking boy on the cover had been positively adorable, and I'd been curious to see what kind of story the author had written for him.

As the words of the opening scene filled my truck, I could picture Daddy Duncan sitting in his car, fretting over whether or not it was too early in the relationship to take his little and pup on a Caribbean cruise vacation.

Little Ember answering the door with Boo, his boa constrictor, over his shoulders while he fed Bump in the Night, his bearded dragon, a cricket, made me laugh and wonder how he'd come to name them the way he had.

If he was my boy, I'd want him to share those stories with me and any others that let me get to know him better.

And Rusty, the pup who expressed his worries about having too dominant a personality for a handler to want to take the time to learn what he needed, left me just wanting to hug him and tell him that a competent handler who was secure in who he

was as a Dom would never have an issue with his pup being proud, confident, and self-reliant when he needed to be.

I hated seeing that shit when I did visit clubs and tried to spend time with the pups and littles who didn't seem to be receiving much attention from anyone.

Unfortunately, all the clubs close enough to where I lived were still too far for me to visit as often as I needed to forge lasting relationships, but still.

On the nights I was there, they were the ones I focused on, hoping that in some small way I'd made the evening better for them and left them with the hope that someone else would come along and see how wonderful they were.

Maybe if one had truly grabbed my heartstrings and left me with a burning need to see them again, I'd have made it a point to visit with more frequency and even invest in a membership instead of a weekend pass, but I'd yet to feel the burning spark I'd been yearning for.

Was I waiting on something that only happened in the stories I listened to—that thing so many others claimed to have felt the moment they met the one ?

You're damned right I was.

With the same desperate desire I'd always felt when I took to the stage, I waited for my forever, all while struggling to believe it would ever happen for me.

Did I fail to connect time after time because I couldn't fully believe in it, or trust that the fates had something amazing in store for me?

Or was I simply letting the failures of the past color my expectations of the future?

Had I created one of those self-fulfilling prophecies people talked about when they said that someone's fear of failure had led them to fail spectacularly after they'd done something to sabotage themselves?

Hell, in my time with the band, we sabotaged ourselves over and over again, with that ego of mine playing a big part of it on more than one occasion. Failure had taught me to tame it, but it had also taught me how easy it was to let my dreams slip through my fingers.

As I listened to the moment in the story where Duncan explained to Rusty how much he enjoyed sitting back and watching their little, Ember, submit to him, I was reminded of how much I'd always loved watching a little and pup play together.

The dynamics of the relationship in different headspaces was something few ever got to experience.

I had and I craved it like those bottles of tequila I'd learned to leave alone.

Tequila and me wasn't a good combination, much like me and loneliness. At least at the camp, with so many others around, the only reason I'd have to be alone was if I wanted to be.

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Chapter Five

Axis

Damn, the cabins were far apart. As I navigated my jeep along the winding road that ran around a wide, shimmering lake, that was the first thing I noticed.

It was nice, though, the lake and the distance between cabins.

Mornings spent splashing around in it had already become part of the daily itinerary I'd been forming in my mind on the last part of the drive.

Not only was the cool water sure to wake me up, but there had always been something appealing to me about staring at a glistening body of water.

Maybe it was because there was always inspiration to be found in it.

Thirteen, fourteen, my cabin assignment was seventeen, so I pressed on along the road, excited to see if Roman had arrived yet.

If so, then my first suggestion would be fuck unpacking; let's just dive in, soak up some sun, and enjoy the warmth of this perfect summer morning.

Now I was glad I'd left Portland as early as I had.

The idea had been to beat traffic, but it looked like I'd also beat most of the other campers, as there were only a few scattered vehicles around.

Including a blue Challenger that looked just like the one in the photo Roman had shared after he'd bought it.

He'd looked proud as hell, leaning against it, hand lovingly stroking the hood as sunlight shimmered off its gleaming cerulean surface.

I pulled up next to it and barely got the Jeep in park before I spotted him racing towards me.

Out the door I tumbled, my arm getting tangled in the seatbelt in my haste.

Laughing at my clumsiness, I fell into an embrace that was all broad shoulders and muscles.

The fact that he could still make me feel small felt amazing.

Relieved, I sunk into it and let myself be held.

"Tossed and turned half the night, waiting for this moment," he murmured and squeezed me tighter.

"I didn't bother trying to sleep until after midnight," I admitted, my ear pressed to his shoulder as we just clung to one another like we both expected the moment to shatter and leave us standing there alone.

"And you're still here this early?"

"I'm still good to go on five hours of downtime."

"Downtime that I hope involved closing your eyes, at least for a little while," he chided in that gently reproachful tone he'd always had.

“I slept for a full four hours and even made myself breakfast before I hit the road. Finally got the hang of folding an omelet over so all the filling stays where it belongs.”

“I’m sure your pans are eternally grateful that you’re not standing in your boxers by the stove, threatening to beat them with a spatula.”

The moment the image popped into my head, I dissolved into a fit of giggles, remembering the look on his face over the video chat feed as he’d attempted to talk me through making one after I’d complained that my favorite diner had closed.

Pan-fried potatoes I’d easily gotten the hang of, but those damned omelets, holy shit, I’d been ready to accept defeat at the hands of two defiant little eggs.

He'd been right; investing in a non-stick pan had helped my efforts greatly, along with the addition of a teaspoon of milk for each egg I used.

Use a wire whisk, not a fork, and season the poor eggs, for fuck’s sake. Oh my god, whip them; don’t beat the shit out of them, and make sure you pick any shell fragments out first.

How he’d known I’d gotten shell fragments in the fuckin’ bowl was beyond me, but I picked out three before proceeding.

“I’m sure they’d thank you if they could,” I said as we finally stepped back from one another, but not far.

I could still reach out and touch him if I wanted, but I settled for letting my gaze rove over his body, mapping the changes I’d only partially seen through the video feed.

The turquoise tank top he had on showed off the tattoo on his bicep.

The trio of pandas was sweet and comical.

One sprawled on its back, one standing on its head, and one dangling from a bent bamboo branch, feet poised like it was kicking.

“Is that still the only one you’ve got?” I asked.

“It is, and before you open your mouth to suggest it, don’t. I will not be getting a tattoo of Mighty Mouse on my ass.”

I made a show of zipping my lips and tossing the key over my shoulder, snickering at the memory of that conversation.

“Just remember, Mighty Mouse wasn’t my idea in the first place.”

“No, you just suggested the placement.”

“You wanted a spot where you wouldn’t risk your folks seeing it,” I reminded him.
“With the Speedo you wore for swimming, there weren’t many options left.”

“How about my hip?”

“How about your cock?” I blurted and watched his eyes grow wide.

While he sputtered, I took a moment to admonish my inner voice, which had never managed to grow a filter. Wish the little fucker would; it was going to get me into trouble one of these days.

“Why would you even go there?” He finally asked.

Shrugging, I just kept on giggling at the horrified look on his face.

“Seriously, there has to be some reason your mind would even go there.”

“I may have watched Duce get a cobra’s head tattooed on the head of his,” I admitted, laughing harder as his horrified look morphed into one of abject terror and disbelief.

He raised a finger, started to say something, shook his head, then covered his eyes with his hand and just snickered.

“How am I only hearing about this now?”

“Guess we never got to that story or anything else that led into it.”

“You guess? Nah, dude, I’ve said for years that you’ve been holding out on me. Now I’ve got proof.”

“Maybe.”

“No, maybe. You have got to share the rest of that,” he insisted. “Including what the hell inspired it, who put him up to it, and how the hell he managed to sit for that.”

“Poorly,” I said, as I shoved the door to the jeep closed so the dinging would stop. “The tattoo artist had to stop every ten to fifteen minutes while Duce got himself together so he didn’t pass out.”

“Do I even want to know how long it took?”

“Almost three hours, and thank the gods it wasn’t bigger, because I think he’d have walked out with it unfinished if the artist hadn’t been done by that point.”

“Color or shaded?”

“Ohh, he opted for color but then cut down on the number of colors after the first one had been applied. Told him he should have opted for red 'cause green made it look like his junk was about to fall off. He’s got the forked tongue going around the slit and everything. The last thing he wanted was for anyone to touch it for like, a month afterward. Should have heard him yowl every time he had to take a piss.”

“I bet, holy shit.”

“There’s gotta be more to it though,” he said. “Why do it in the first place?”

“If you wanna hear that part of the story, why don’t you help me drag the inflatable island and air pump out of the back?

We can blow it up, float on the lake, and I’ll tell you all about why our badass drummer decided he needed to do something so outrageous just to try and prove something we already knew. ”

“That he was a glutton for punishment?”

“Mmm, I wouldn’t exactly say a glutton for it.”

“But....”

Raising an eyebrow, I deliberately stepped up to the back door of the jeep and opened it rather than answer.

“You’re seriously going to make me wait until we’re on the lake before telling me the rest of the story?” He said, shaking his head even as he held out his hands for the raft once I’d extracted it.

“It’ll be worth it, I promise.”

“In that case, we’d better bring the rest of your things in so whatever you’ve got in the cooler won’t wind up floating in melted ice, if it isn’t already.”

“It isn’t. I stopped at a gas station about an hour ago to drain out what little water there was and pack more ice on top.”

“Good to know, but that doesn’t mean we should leave it out here. Neither one of us has much time awareness when we’re on the water.”

Okay, so maybe he did have a point there, and I’d picked up steaks, burgers, chicken, and several bags of shrimp and scallops to cook on the grill.

Each cabin had one and a full kitchen inside, so I’d gone shopping, grateful for the opportunity to enjoy a few homemade meals that I wouldn’t have to eat alone.

“Fine, but as soon as we unpack, we get wet, deal?”

“Deal.”

While he set the inflatable island on the porch, I retrieved the cooler and carried it into the wood-paneled interior.

Rustic, but homey. The slanted roof and exposed beams were cool, but the thing I loved the most was the sofa and two loveseats I spotted in front of a flat-screen television mounted on the wall.

I’d brought my PlayStation and a bunch of games and couldn’t wait to break them out later tonight.

I immediately clocked the Xbox and games on the coffee table and grinned, pleased to see that he’d had the same idea.

It was the same thing when I reached the kitchen and opened the fridge to put away the things I'd brought.

He'd filled a shelf with fruit and vegetables that I added to as I started unpacking the cooler.

Looked like we were pretty stocked up, which was good, because I was still on the fence about the whole dining hall and chuckwagon meal options.

While I knew there would be plenty of people here to meet and interact with, I'd come for him and hoped for as much one-on-one time as possible.

"Have you checked out the rooms yet?" He asked as he carried in my duffle bag and guitar case.

"Nope, just finishing up in the kitchen. I want to dump the ice and let the cooler sit open on the porch to dry so it doesn't start to smell."

"I'll just set this stuff here then and go back for the last of it while you look around," he replied.

"You don't have to do that; I can get it."

"I know you can, but I've already had a chance to look around, so you look, and then we can figure out which rooms we want."

"One is just as good as the other."

"There are three."

"Okay, so any one of the three will do as long as it's got a bed and a place for me to

plug in my phone charger.”

“Trust me, you want to look before you decide. They’ve all got en suite bathrooms, but one of them has a huge fuckin’ shower and a sunken tub.”

“You can have that one if you want. I don’t need huge or a tub, just a shower stall, some warm water, and a shelf to put my shit on.”

“If you insist.”

“I do,” I said as I headed out to bring in the rest of my stuff, Roman hot on my heels to help me.

“What’s the second cooler for?” he asked as I tossed a pillow on top of it.

But when I reached for the second duffle bag, he snagged that and the box of staples I’d brought, cutting me a look when I opened my mouth to once again insist that I could get everything.

“Don’t need you tripping on the way up the stairs, spraining an ankle, and spending the rest of camp limping around complaining that you can’t go hiking or take part in some of the rest of the activities.”

“One time, one fucking time, I tripped going upstairs, and you’ll never let me forget it.”

“Because you were being stubborn when it happened the way you’re trying to be stubborn now.”

He was right, not that I was willing to admit it when he was already wearing that smug look on his face. I just grumbled beneath my breath about how stubborn-ass

people shouldn't go around calling other people stubborn, which of course he heard.

"That's exactly why they are the only ones with the right to call other people out for their bullshit," he pointed out as we headed to the kitchen to unload the rest of my supplies.

"Because we know exactly what the hell it looks like when a case of stubbornness is about to come back and bite someone in the ass."

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered, opening the marshmallows and popping one in my mouth before I stuck them in the fridge.

"Dude, they go in the cupboard."

"They go in the fridge so they stay cold and don't stick together while they swelter in a plastic bag," I grumbled once I'd finished chewing my sweet, sticky treat.

"Marshmallows don't last long enough around either of us to swelter," he replied, but he left me alone about them and turned his attention to the cupboards and unloading the contents of the box.

"They also glide onto the stick a lot easier when they are cold," I said, grinning as I stuck the candy bars in there too. "With a lot less smooshing and sticking to the wood while you're positioning it right. You'll see."

"Alright, we'll table this debate until it's time for s'mores."

"Ohh, s'mores, I got here just in time."

That voice.

If it weren't for Roman removing it from my grasp, I'd have dropped the bottle of strawberry lemonade I was holding.

Blinking, I shook my head, certain my mind had conjured up a ghost. Only it was no spectral being that came bouncing into the kitchen with spiky blond hair tipped with bright fuchsia.

It was Ezzy.

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Chapter Six

Roman

The reunion was eight years in the making; only now that it was happening, I could only stand there and hope that it went well.

Ezzy's eyes were wide. Axis's eyes were wider, then he strode forward, closing the difference between them to stand right in front of Ezzy.

"I..." Axis stammered, shook his head, licked his lips, and sucked in a deep breath. "I'm so fuckin' sorry. Fuck. I should never have left the way I did, especially not after what I said to you. That wasn't fair. To either of you."

He looked my way when he said that part, even though he'd apologized to me years before, in the first text he'd sent.

"If you were so sorry, why are you only saying it now?" Ezzy blurted, gaze darting from him to me and back again.

"Figured you wouldn't want to hear it," Axis admitted.

This time, when Ezzy's gaze darted to me, I could see understanding dawning in their eyes.

"You set this up," Ezzy said, eyes narrowing. "He didn't know I was going to be here any more than I expected to walk in here and see him."

“Pretty much.”

Blinking, Ezzy took a moment to process it all, then their lips split into a grin as they turned back towards Axis, who stood there nibbling on his lower lip.

“Thank you,” Ezzy said before hurling themselves at Axis, who staggered, an oof escaping him as Ezzy crashed against his chest.

It was the best possible outcome and everything I’d wished for when I’d got them both to agree to come. Axis held Ezzy tight, then one of them sniffled while the other let out a low moan, their sobs starting almost simultaneously as they held on to each other.

“You never deserved what I said,” Axis stammered, voice shaky as I wrapped my arms around them both and held them tight.

“I took my frustrations out on you that night, and it was so unfair and such a shitty thing to do that I’ve never been able to forgive myself for it.

Please forgive me. It was a dick thing to do.

You were just being you. I had no right to tell you that you should try to be different.”

“It doesn’t have to be today, but will you at least tell me why you said it?” Ezzy asked, their voice muffled against his chest.

“Yeah,” Axis murmured, voice choked with emotion. “I owe you that and so much more.”

“Your apology is more than enough right now,” Ezzy stammered. “All I’ve wanted

for years was to see you again and know that you were okay.”

“I’m good. A lot has changed; the band broke up, but I’m good doing my own shit. I didn’t like myself very much by the end and wasn’t a big fan of Duce and Rory either.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It needed to happen. Things had spiraled so far out of control that was the only possible outcome.”

“Still sorry. I know how much your music meant to you.”

“It still does, but I learned some real hard lessons about the things that truly mattered in the process.”

“Then I’m glad it wasn’t a bad thing for you, though I know it couldn’t have been easy.”

“Nothing about being away from the two of you has been easy,” Axis admitted as we slowly drew apart.

Cool air hit my cheeks, and I realized I was crying right along with them. None of us stepped back too far, and when I looked down, I noticed that Axis and Ezzy had entwined their fingers together and were still holding on to one another.

“It hasn’t been easy for me either,” Ezzy said. “I’ve missed you guys so much that I’ve only been home a handful of times since I left.”

“I’ve never gone back,” Axis admitted. “Couldn’t, especially after the band broke up. I didn’t need my old man trying to push me into enrolling at the community college

or joining him and my brother in that soulless ass repo company.”

Ezzy’s eyes went wide again. “I thought Aiden went pro after college?”

“He did,” Axis explained. “Lasted barely two seasons before he blew out his knee and herniated a few disks in his back. Never got his speed back, so they cut him. He used the money he made to buy into the company and help Dad expand. They’re up to six trucks and a twelve-man crew, plus the folks in the office.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah,” Axis murmured. “Like I said, a lot had changed. Where have you been all this time?”

“Vale,” Ezzy explained. “I ended up getting my master’s and an associate professor position in the theater department, which helped me get the theater director’s position I just took back home. I’ll be teaching at the university too, in their theater arts department.”

“Wait, so you’re going home too?”

“Got everything packed in my trailer outside, not that I had much with how small my old apartment was, so it worked out beautifully.”

“That’s awesome.”

“Yeah, I am pretty thrilled about it myself,” Ezzy admitted. “Just hope I can finish the scripts I’ve been struggling to polish with all the new responsibilities I’ve taken on.”

“You will,” Axis said, giving Ezzy’s hand a little squeeze before finally letting go. “You were always able to accomplish everything you set out to.”

“Not everything,” Ezzy admitted. “But those are stories for another time.”

“We should bring your stuff in,” I suggested, feeling pretty damned proud of myself for the way this had all turned out. “Neither of us has chosen a room yet, so all three are free.”

“Is there one with a view of the lake?” Ezzy asked.

“Yup, that one,” I replied, pointing it out to him.

“Then if no one minds, I’ll take that one,” Ezzy said. “Looking out at the moon’s reflection on the surface is sure to be inspiring.”

“Works for me,” Roman said. “Axis said he didn’t want the one with the tub, so I’ll take that one. It’s across from the living room, where I’ll probably spend a chunk of the night playing video games anyway.”

“Same,” Axis replied. “I saw you brought the Xbox; I brought the PS4.”

“Sweet, then we’re all set,” I said, heading for the door with Axis and Ezzy behind me.

“Everything for camp is in the back seat,” Ezzy said as they headed around to the other side while I opened the door closest to me. “Hope there’s room in the freezer. I kinda stocked up on orange creamsicle pops, in case it got hotter than the forecast projected.”

“Doubt the forecast had anything to do with it,” I chuckled. “You were always a fiend for those things.”

“Like you were much better,” Ezzy grumbled.

“Fair, though the root beer ones were pretty amazing too, while they were still around, anyway.”

“Man, those were fire,” Axis said as he slung a backpack over his shoulder and reached in to grab a cooler, grunting with the effort of lifting it.

“Damn, you really did stock up, didn’t you,” he said as he headed inside with it.

“Yeah, but that cooler doesn’t have the freezer pops in it; it’s loaded with soda,” they said, giggling a little as they watched Axis head inside.

Alone, they paused to stare up at me right before they gave me the biggest hug I’d gotten since Mama had laid eyes on me after my accident.

“I can’t believe you did this,” they said.

“I had to. You were both so convinced that the other wouldn’t want to speak to you that I had to do something to try and get us back on the same page before another eight years slipped past.”

“I don’t think I could have handled another year, let alone eight.”

“Figured that,” I admitted. “Didn’t think Axis could have handled another year either. It’s really been eating at him.”

“Yeah, its been eating at me too, worse and worse with every year that went by,” Ezzy said.

“I just hope we get the chance to really talk while we’re here.

I wish you’d told me about his band, and don’t tell me you didn’t know.

If you've been talking to me through chat and messenger all this time, I know you've been talking to him. ”

“I have. But he hasn't said much more about it than what he did inside.”

“Guess we've all been keeping secrets.”

“Well, maybe we can stop now,” I offered. “Was always easiest to talk when the three of us were together. Digital conversations have never been the same, even back when we'd be texting one another after midnight and then getting fussed at in the morning for sleeping through our alarms.”

“Oh my goddess, do you remember the four-day weekend we spent camping up at LaPine State Park, when we decided to stay the extra night instead of heading home on Monday the way we'd planned?”

“I do,” I admitted, shooting them a pointed look.

“Someone came up with a brilliant idea about how we would set our alarms for four, break down the tent, grab showers, and drive home with plenty of time to get to homeroom. Only we managed to sleep through three alarms going off. Still don't know how the fuck we managed that one. ”

“We all sleep like the dead, that's how,” Axis said as he headed around to finish grabbing the stuff behind the passenger's seat. “Mr. Leroux was not thrilled when I slunk into history class with pine needles still in my hair.”

“In all fairness, I did warn you about that branch,” Ezzy said, giggling.

“Yeah, you did,” Axis admitted. “But I seriously didn't think it was as low as you claimed.”

Eight years ago, Axis would have made a short joke, and Ezzy would have flipped him off and stuck his tongue out at him.

At that point Axis would have told them to put it to good use and I'd have been treated to the sinfully delectable view of Ezzy doing just that, at least until I decided to stop watching and get in on the action.

Now the funny thing about those short jokes had always been that Axis wasn't much taller.

Just two inches, unless Ezzy was wearing one of the many pairs of platform boots they loved, then they'd be at least three inches taller, at which point Axis would start making sasquatch jokes, Ezzy would have flipped him off, and Axis would have replied that he could work with that if Ezzy was offering.

Either way, I won in the end because watching them always got me revved up, and once that happened, I'd have had them side by side, fucking both of them.

"Found out different, didn't you?" Ezzy said as they headed in with three bags while I grabbed the second cooler and a box I couldn't resist putting on top of it, since I was tall enough to see over it.

Axis followed me up the steps with a smartassed comment not to trip, which just got Ezzy giggling again.

"He's not the one with a history of falling up stairs."

"It was one time, one goddamn time," Axis complained. "When are you two fuckers gonna let me live it down?"

"Never," we replied, dissolving into laughter as we headed in.

Damn, it felt good to laugh with them again.

In the back of my head, I knew that our reunion, as amazing as it was, would eventually lead to hard topics at some point over the next two weeks, but I was content to enjoy the moment, and wait to see who brought up what, before I started worrying about what was going to happen down the line.

Of the three of us, I'd always been a bit of a worrier, but then, of the three of us, I was the only one who was an older sibling.

Ezzy was an only child, while Axis had been three years younger than his brother and unused to having anyone pay enough attention to him to notice when he was about to get into shit.

It had been ingrained in me from a young age to watch out for my siblings.

The protectiveness I'd felt for them was part of what had made me a good lifeguard, and in a way, that had contributed a lot to my decision to go into the military, specifically the Coast Guard, where I could help people who'd gotten themselves into sticky situations.

I'd loved my job and hated like hell to be told that I was medically unfit for duty after my accident, but even on appeal there had been no changing the doctors' decision.

It had taken everything in me not to give up.

Whether they knew it or not, those chats and texts and emails with Axis and Ezzy had been a big part of what had kept me going during that time.

I'd wanted to crawl into a hole and give up on everything until Ezzy had suggested coaching, reminding me of how much I'd always loved helping the younger kids

improve the fluidity of their strokes, and thus their times, when a meet rolled around.

Axis hadn't had any suggestions for me, except to get off my ass and quit wallowing because we'd always had a rule about only one of us being allowed to be a miserable fuck at any given time, and he had miserable on lockdown at the moment.

I'd wanted to be pissed and tell him it was my turn, only he was right.

I couldn't just sit there on the couch catching up on daytime television and feeling sorry for myself, not after all the shit I'd given him when he'd talked about selling his guitars after the band had broken up.

I could do no less than what I'd pushed him to do, and he'd known it and pushed me back, something I was eternally grateful for.

With our lives falling to pieces less than six months apart, we'd flirted with the idea of moving in together, but he'd been dead set on staying in Portland while I'd decided that if I was going to coach, then I wanted to do it back home, where I could be close to the rest of my family.

Not to mention the school had been in need.

The other reason I'd held back had been more complicated.

It hadn't been a good time to tell him that someone else had made a similar offer, because if I had, he'd have asked who, and I hadn't been sure of how he'd take finding out it was Ezzy.

Even with Ezzy's decision to move back home, it was a discussion we'd never had, because choosing to live with one had felt too much like cutting the other out of something we'd always planned to do together.

It was too early to start hoping we'd still get to live that dream, but it was hard to deny my heart the thing it had wanted most since we'd made those plans so many years before, and I'd never been good at denying myself anything.

Especially when it comes to them.

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Chapter Seven

Ezzy

“Man, I could lay out here all day,” Axis murmured, his voice a bit sleep-slurred as I cracked an eye open to stare across the inflatable island at him lounging on the edge of the center hole where we’d dangled our feet earlier.

The thing was huge, easily fitting the three of us with space for at least another person, maybe two with the way it was designed. The inflatable seatbacks had made relaxing chairs, while the flat section allowed sunbathing and easy access to the water.

“We have,” Roman grumbled. “And it shows. Look at the sky.”

Clearly, Axis hadn’t realized how close to the edge he was lying, one hand dangling in the water, which he promptly fell into the moment he rolled to try and do as Roman said.

He came up sputtering, laughing, and splashing water all over us as he sunk beneath the surface.

He popped up on the other side of the raft and rolled, floating on his back with his feet lightly kicking beneath the surface.

“Damn, when did the sun start going down?” I asked, no longer having to shield my eyes when I looked up.

Reddish orange streaked with hints of pink, it was an amazing sunset, backlighting the tree line on the other side of the lake.

“Shit, aren’t we supposed to go to that campfire welcome thing?” I asked as I straightened up from where I’d been slumped against the arm of my seat, rolled my shoulders, and slid to sit on the floor of the island with my feet in the water.

“Yup, which means we’d better tow this thing in and shower off before we head down there,” Roman said. “Guess we all lost track of time this afternoon.”

“When have we ever been together and not lost track of time?” Axis asked, lazily kicking his feet as he floated around the inflatable island.

“Never,” Roman shot back, sitting up now and brushing the hair out of his eyes.

Giggling, I slipped into the water too, enjoying the cool feel of it against my skin after the long bask in the sun. Of course, Roman had insisted upon slathering us in sunscreen on and off all afternoon, especially me, since the two of them were as tanned as ever.

He dove off the island with a splash that sent water all over me, grabbed the tow rope, and started pulling the island in with Axis and me trailing behind it.

I still couldn’t believe he was here, that we were here together with Roman in this amazing setting.

I’d pinched myself twice when they weren’t looking, just to be sure it was real.

There had been a moment of awkward silence once we’d gotten everything put away.

It had been clear that none of us were ready for words or a long, drawn-out

conversation, so when Roman had mentioned the raft Axis had brought, we'd all jumped at the chance to swim, float, and settle whatever emotions had gotten stirred up in the kitchen.

"Where the hell did you find something this big?" Roman grumbled as we neared the shore and his feet could finally touch the bottom.

That just meant Axis and I had to swim a little further before we could stand without water over our heads.

"Got it when the band was still together," Axis admitted as he stood and dipped his head back, smoothing stray strands of hair out of his face so it trailed down his back in a heavy, sleek curtain when he straightened back up.

It looked as thick as ever, and at least seven inches longer than the last time I'd seen him, the longest strands reaching his waist.

"Wrote quite a few songs on it back when we were still on the same page," Axis said as he helped Roman tug it up onto the shore.

"Let's get it up on the deck," Roman suggested. "We can bracket it in with the coolers and use the tie rope to tether it to the railing in case the wind picks up tonight."

"Good idea," I said as I hurried to help them. "Even with the air pump, it took a while to get all the compartments blown up."

"Yeah, it is a bit much, but I always loved being out on it."

"I can't believe it had a compartment for ice and drinks and everything," I said.

“Like the boys and I would have been caught dead floating around without beverages and something to snack on.”

“Okay, you’ve got a point there. I remember how much Duce and Bowie could pack away.”

“You should have seen them when they started packing on muscle,” Axis said. “Duce is a complete beast now. Bowie I haven’t seen in years, but he was pretty jacked the last time I laid eyes on him.”

“How long has it been?” I asked, unable to keep my curiosity in check.

His relationship with his band had never interfered with the relationship he had with us.

In fact, his three band brothers had frequently joined us on camping trips, amusement park visits, and trips to the waterpark, never failing to engage with Roman and me whenever we were all together.

Duce told me several times how much they appreciated us coming to the shows and even manning the merch table once they’d had stickers, keychains, and other small things to sell.

“Almost four years,” he said, his tone holding a pained note that was impossible to miss.

“Is that when the band broke up?”

“Nah, that was a little over two years ago, not too long after Roman had his accident.”

“Damn.”

We carried the inflatable island up onto the deck, bracing it with coolers and the coolers with the deck chairs, before tying it to the railing. Rocking it produced little motion, but by the time we had it secured, I had another question for him.

“Did Bowie quit?” I asked, stepping up to the railing where Axis was leaning, staring out at the ever-deepening red streaks across the sky.

“Not of his own choosing.”

“Oh.”

“We should shower and get changed,” he suggested, sighing as he pushed away from the wooden railing to head inside.

There was so much more I wanted to ask, but he was right; if we were going to get to the campfire, we needed to get moving.

“You’re bringing your guitar down tonight, right?” Roman asked as Axis moved past him.

“Yeah, I’ll bring it. I can’t promise that I’ll play, but I’ll take it along.”

And with that, he disappeared into his room, leaving Roman to stare at the closed door he’d vanished behind.

“I take it that’s still a sore subject?” I asked as I paused beside Roman, who draped an arm over my shoulders and tugged me against his side.

“I think so, but when we talk, he deliberately avoids saying much about his music at

all, just that he still plays coffee houses and bars a few times a week. Most of the work he does now is voice recordings for audiobooks and short instrumentals for people doing podcasts and product trailers, that kind of thing.”

“I’m glad he’s still making a living doing the thing he loves.”

“Me too, though I get the sense that he doesn’t love it the way he used to, and that’s a shame.”

“Yeah, it is; he’s always been hella talented.”

“You both are.”

“Let’s wait and see how talented I am once I actually get something production-ready.”

“Something tells me that you’ve reached that point, and beyond, already and are allowing nerves to keep you from sharing your creations with the rest of the world.”

“I dunno, there could be a shred of truth to that,” I admitted. “But I’ve done table readings on them a few times, and there’s just something missing. Figured I’d read over them while we were here and see if I can figure out what it was.”

“You could always read it to us.”

“To you maybe, but some of the stuff in it...” I glanced towards Axis’ door when I said it, thoughts whirling with the complicated feelings I still had for him.

“Needs to come out,” Roman insisted.

I couldn’t deny he was right about that, so I said nothing and grumbled when he

messed up my wet hair, leaving it almost as spiky as it had been before I'd gotten into the water.

"See, it's a done deal, no more protesting," he said before turning me loose.

"There's sure to be activities we don't feel like doing and days when we'd rather it just be the three of us without a bunch of other people around, so we'll plan for that, as well as the conversations we're all dying to have.

For now, let's get cleaned up and go enjoy ourselves.

I'm curious to see what they're serving tonight around the campfire.

It's been hours since lunch, and I'm starving. "

"I see some things never change."

"Nope."

We parted ways, him heading to his room, me heading to the fridge to pour a glass of the iced tea we'd made before heading outside.

I drank half of it standing there in the fridge and the other half once I'd pulled a pair of shorts and a crop top from my bag before I headed to the shower, thoughts still whirling with the questions I wanted to pose to both of them.

Until Roman had admitted to not knowing anything more about Bowie or the band breakup than Axis had mentioned outside, I'd have assumed that there were no secrets between them, unlike the ones I'd been harboring all these years.

Only now it seemed like their friendship, while intact, was still a bit frayed and

fractured around the edges, the same as Roman's and mine was. There were plenty of things I'd shared, but there was also plenty I hadn't wanted to bring up during those video chats.

Emails and texts had always felt too impersonal for long conversations, so those were relegated to quips, jokes, GIFs, and memes, with the occasional grumbled complaint about something going on at work.

I tried not to dwell on any of the things I hadn't told him while I took a quick shower and dressed, but it was hard when having the three of us back together again made me long for the chance to sink into the little world we'd always shared and stay there until we'd had a chance to fully catch up on the eight years we'd spent apart.

By the time I returned to the living room, Ajay stood there in holey black skinny jeans that clung to his legs and showed off glimpses of the tattoos that covered them.

I'd gotten a good look at the ones on his calves while we'd been swimming, as well as the full back piece and sleeves that ran down his arms, but some of the rips suggested that there were others hidden higher up, and a part of me was very curious to know what they were.

He wore a Megadeth T-shirt that was plastered to his back from the water that still dripped from his hair.

All this time and he still preferred to let it air dry rather than rub most of the water from it before he put his T-shirt on.

A guitar case leaned against the couch next to him, the same battered hard case he'd had back when we were in high school, though with far more stickers all over it.

Roman was in black jeans too, with a soft-looking light gray Henley, long-sleeved, as

the temperature had already started dropping.

I'd opted to grab a light throw blanket to pull around me if I started getting cold, which was rare for me, since I always tended to run warm.

Figured I'd be cozy around a roaring bonfire and would probably just end up sitting on it.

"All set?" Roman asked.

"Yup. Which vehicle are we taking?"

"The jeep might be easiest, since Ezzy has the trailer hitched to theirs, and your car is kinda low for the ruts in the road."

"Tell me about it," Roman grumbled. "I bottomed out a couple of times and winced when something scraped against the undercarriage."

"The Jeep it is," Axis replied, fishing in his pockets for the keys.

Sure as shit, the moment he started the Jeep, we were all glad to have the windows rolled down all the way, as loud metal music blared from the stereo system, nearly deafening me.

"Sorry about that," he said as he turned it down, a sheepish look on his face as he turned to look over his shoulder as he backed out.

At least the bonfire site was easy to find. The fire was already roaring as we pulled up beside the main lodge and found a parking spot between several other vehicles.

"Welcome," A lady with perky fox ears perched on top of red hair said as we

approached the group.

The tag on the front of her shirt read Staff , and she quickly pointed us to the buffet line and refreshment station.

“Help yourselves and enjoy the evening,” she said with a big smile.

“Thank you,” I replied as we strode past her to get in line.

Everything smelled delicious, and someone was already playing a tune on their harmonica while others ate around the bonfire, a few in adorable little onesies, clutching stuffed animals against their sides while they carefully balanced a pie tin of food on their laps.

A few were in pup gear too, headpieces having been removed so they could eat.

I hadn’t expected everyone to so freely display themselves on day one, but wow, did it feel good to know that I could slip into whatever I wanted when we came up here.

Tomorrow, I told myself as I picked up a pie tin and followed Roman through the line. I had a good idea of exactly which outfit I’d choose to put on. My little self did a squirmy happy dance at the thought of pulling on the cute shorts and crop top I’d found, along with a matching binky and cap.

Only, as I started to fill up my pan, a little thought wormed its way out, taking root front and center.

What the hell would Roman and Axis think when they saw me in it?

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Chapter Eight

Mackenzie

The place had a nice vibe, especially around the fire pit, where it looked to me like at least fifty other people were seated around the bonfire in various arrays of dress, from full-on Dalmatian pup gear to worn jeans and T-shirts.

The young man with the sticker-covered guitar case who sat a little to the left of me was one of those who'd dressed in comfortable streetwear, as did his larger companion.

Their spiky-haired friend, who I couldn't clock as male or female, was dressed in what could have been little's lounge-around attire, with the outfit they had on, but nothing in their mannerisms pegged them as a little for certain.

The largest of the three sat in between the other two, which put the smallest one closest to me and the one with the guitar furthest away.

When they finished eating, the largest collected the pie tins from the other two, ruffled the smallest one's hair, and shot them a fond smile that left me with a pang of disappointment surging through my gut.

He must be the daddy then. Damn.

The small one was super adorable, and the guitarist was hot as hell with all that long, damp hair framing his face.

At least he wouldn't run the risk of catching a cold sitting this close to the flames, but if he was my boy, I'd have dried his hair before bringing him down here, just in case.

Their daddy was a fuckin' hotty, but I'd never been one to try and push in where there was already a dynamic in place.

Still, when he rejoined them, I couldn't help but notice that neither of the other two was particularly cuddly, despite the three sitting side by side on a big log.

There was just enough distance between them to suggest that maybe they weren't touchy-feely with one another, which threw my original assumption for a bit of a loop.

Just friends, maybe?

It would bear watching, not that it would be a chore when they were each stunning and unique in their own special way.

Across the fire, the blond-haired leather daddy who'd been playing the harmonica broke into the Stones' Midnight Rambler, and my foot started tapping as I reached for my guitar case and withdrew Bertha.

I saw the wet-haired guitarist grinning as he nodded along to the song, fingers inching towards his case, before his smile waned, and he withdrew his hand from where he'd lovingly started caressing it, tucking it back in his lap and covering it with his other hand like he'd been naughty.

As a fellow musician, the reaction threw me, especially as I watched some of the light in his eyes dim as he started worrying one of the threads around a rip in his jeans.

Why bring the guitar down if he didn't want to play it?

When I saw the one in the middle nudge him and incline their head towards the case, I was left with more questions than answers, especially when the guitarist shook his head and then ducked it in response.

Well then, clearly it was his decision not to join us in the song, or maybe he was just shy and waiting to see how many others were going to play and sing along.

If that was the case, then maybe joining in with Bertha would offer him the encouragement he needed to share his talent.

His spiky-haired friend had no qualms about lending their voice to the song.

They threw their head back and sang with gusto along with a handful of others who knew it, though it was clearly not as popular a tune as the harmonica player might have hoped.

That was fine; there was plenty of night left and plenty more songs we could try. The crowd was an eclectic mix of Gen Xers, Millennials, and Gen Zs, so maybe we needed to move things up a generation or two, music-wise.

When the song ended, I immediately slipped into the intro for Turn the Page, the harmonica player joining right in. From somewhere to my right, someone started drumming on a small electric drum kit, while several around the circle broke into the lyrics, instead of the trio I'd had my eyes on.

Long hair's fingers flexed, and I knew that itchy feeling well; only he settled for tapping them against the back of his other hand rather than taking his guitar out of the case.

Still, I could hear their voices mingling as they sang along to what turned out to be a pretty rockin' rendition of the song.

As it always did when I had Bertha in my hands, the concept of time faded as everything slowed, blurred, and grew a little hazy.

We'd just finished Holding out for a Hero and slipped into All Star from the Shrek movie, when I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and glanced over to see spiky hair get up from their seat and move around to the other side of the guitarist, lift the instrument case, and place it in the guitarist's hands so they could occupy the space right beside him.

This time there was snuggling, as spiky hair pressed in close and peered up so imploringly that the look on their face nearly led to me missing a changeover.

They batted their eyes, and the light from the flames caught a hint of something shimmery on their lashes and cheek.

I couldn't tell the color, but there was definitely glitter there.

Whatever they said led to the guitarist closing his eyes, shoulders heaving as he finally opened the case to pull out a denim blue acoustic guitar that I was certain was an Ibanez.

The moment All Star was over, he started strumming the intro to Hallelujah, faltering a moment before glancing at his friend, who made a shooing motion with their hands, urging him on.

His voice, when he did start playing, was low, until the big one nudged him, leaned against his shoulder, and whispered something in his ear that left him looking resolved, though he did start singing louder, and damn, he had some pipes on him.

Rolling, lilting, and so damned haunting it sent a shiver down my spine. I refrained from joining him so I could listen to him play and study the way he held himself.

Head down, refusing to look at anyone as he played the song without any more stumbles or hesitation.

No doubt about it, he was hella talented.

When spiky hair joined him on the chorus, you could just tell they were used to singing together, with the way their voices harmonized and one chimed in just a little behind the other, so their voices rose and fell.

As I listened to them draw out all the scales, I watched their big friend stare at them with such heartbreaking tenderness, love, and admiration, I instantly knew that they'd been close for a very long time.

For a moment, it was like they were in their own little world, especially when spiky hair mouthed something during the final chords, and the guitarist actually smiled a little and nodded.

I knew the new song from the moment he started playing it, and this time I joined in.

I loved Ed Sheeran, and Castle on the Hill was one of my favorites and one that evoked all kinds of memories as I sang along.

The end of the song caught me completely off guard, though.

Not because of the music, but because of the tears on the trio's faces, right before spiky hair and the guitarist leaned towards one another, spiky hair's fingers tangling in the guitarist's hair as they melted into a kiss.

In any other setting, they might have been subjected to catcalls and wolf whistles, but public displays, often of a far more intimate nature, weren't uncommon in our lifestyle, so the harmonica player just launched into another song, while the pair went

from kissing to clinging to one another like at any moment they expected the other to vanish.

Like it was second nature to him, their big friend slipped the guitar from the guitarist's grasp and placed it back in the case, then scooted closer so he could get in on the hugging, resting his head on top of theirs as they huddled together on that log.

I had so many questions that I knew I didn't have the right to ask, but something about their reaction to the song made me wonder why the spiky-haired one had asked him to play it.

I was certain they had, just like I knew they'd been the one to request Hallelujah and get the reluctant young man to stop hesitating when he clearly played like a pro.

I needed to meet them, if only to figure out why I'd been so intensely drawn to them from the moment they'd sat down around the circle.

When they stood, three songs later, and turned away from the bonfire, I bolted to my feet, nearly stumbling backward over the log behind me before I found my footing, hastily tucked Bertha back in her case, and hurried after them as they headed for the parking lot.

"Hey," I called after them, carefully trying to follow the light of their flashlight without the benefit of one of my own.

Only after I stumbled twice did I remember that my phone had one I could have used, but of course it was too late by then.

"Hi," one replied, though I couldn't tell which with the darkness and shadow shapes of vehicles between us. "Did we drop something?"

“No,” I replied, a little out of breath by the time I’d caught up.

Now that I was face-to-face with them, I realized what a dumb plan it was to approach without first figuring out what the hell I intended to say.

“Can we help you with something?” the larger one asked.

The smaller pair stood a half foot behind him, fingers entwined.

“Just wanted to introduce myself to a fellow guitar player and his friends,” I blurted.

The truth, good or bad, was always the right place to start, even if it did come off as lame.

“I’m not a guitar player,” the man said, even as he carried proof positive in the form of the case he held by the handle. “I just dabble from time to time.”

“Sounded like more than dabbling to me.”

“Somehow I doubt that, especially coming from you.”

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“Why do you say that?” I asked, momentarily caught off guard by the emotionless tone in his voice. “Have we met before?”

“Met? No, but I’d have known you even without seeing your girl, but she’s pretty distinct,” the guitarist, and he was one despite what he’d said, replied. “You’re Mackenzie Redding.”

I chuckled at that and nodded. “You got me; I am indeed Mackenzie Redding, and you are?”

“Nobody.”

“Well, nobody,” I said, chuckling a little more, 'cause he was a stubborn one, and I love stubborn. “Who does that make your friends?”

“I’m Roman, and this is Ezzy,” the biggest one said with a heavy sigh, a reproachful look creeping across his features before he turned away from the light to point to the spiky-haired one.

Funny that he made no attempt at all to tell me the guitarist’s name, though I was certain he’d have tried to stop Roman if he had.

“I saw you play in Deadwood, at Outlaw Fest,” the guitarist blurted. “You guys were awesome.”

At least he didn’t ask what had happened to the band the way most people did when I acknowledged who I was. Funny, but having it turned around on me like he’d done

wasn't a good feeling.

"Were you there as a performer or a spectator?"

"Both."

"Not gonna tell me what band, are you? Or were you playing solo?"

"Band doesn't matter; it doesn't exist anymore."

"Yeah, I know what that's like," I admitted, running a hand through my hair.

"I'm Axis," he softly admitted.

Damn, the name was familiar, but I couldn't place the band, and I'd never gotten a clear look at him while he'd been sitting around the bonfire. Not with the way he'd kept his head down through a lot of it.

"Nice to meet you, Axis," I said. "Nice to meet all of you. I don't mean to hold you up if you're in a hurry to get back to your cabin, but I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your playing and the way you and Ezzy sounded when you sang together.

I hope you'll continue to share your talents around the bonfire.

You truly do sound wonderful when you harmonize like that. "

"I'm not a singer," Ezzy said. "But I love those songs, and it's been too many years since I've gotten to sing while he played."

Well, that was interesting.

“You might not be a singer, but when you tipped your head back and let the firelight shimmer over you, I could tell every note you sang came from your soul.”

“I just like music.”

“You and me both.”

“Are the three of you together?” I asked, trying and failing to keep the hesitance out of my voice. “Not to pry or stick my nose in where it doesn’t belong, but watching you together, I couldn’t tell and don’t wanna make any offers where they might not be welcome.”

“Offers like what?” Roman prodded, having wrapped an arm around Ezzy, who’d stepped up beside him and was now studying me curiously.

“Spending time with the three of you hanging out and joining in on whatever adventures and activities you have planned over the next two weeks,” I said, since the opportunity was there to just go for it and hope I didn’t get shot down.

“You’re a daddy,” Ezzy blurted.

“I am, yes, but if the three of you are together, I will politely request that you excuse my intrusion into your night and head back to the bonfire,” I explained.

“Why approach us, out of everyone?” Roman asked, but his posture had relaxed some.

The only one who hadn’t relaxed or stepped any closer was Axis, but something told me that was directly related to why he’d called himself nobody and been hesitant about giving his name.

“Because I couldn’t keep my eyes off you.”

“Me, or all three of us?” Roman asked.

“All three of you.”

“We’re not together,” Roman said. “Not the way you’re thinking, not in a very long time. Today is the first time we’ve gotten together in eight years, and we’re still trying to figure things out. In case you haven’t guessed yet, none of us is a daddy, nor do any of us have one.”

“We’d always hoped to have the same one,” Ezzy admitted. “At least back before things fell apart between us.”

Whoa, now that sent a surge of hope slashing through me, though if this was a bad time for them, it would be best to back off and approach them again next week, or better still, just wait and see if they approached me.

“It’s not that we’re not curious,” Ezzy said. “Or at least I am.”

“But the timing is bad, and you need time to work things out between yourselves before you introduce someone else into the mix,” I finished for him. “Perfectly understandable. I’ll say goodnight for now. I do hope to hear you play and sing again.”

“Maybe.” Ezzy said, waving.

Smiling, I gave them a nod and headed back to the bonfire, a little dejected, but if it wasn’t the right time for them, it wasn’t the right time for them.

It was in fate’s hands now. I just had to hope that I hadn’t fallen so out of favor with

her that she wouldn't be opposed to sending a bit of good fortune my way in the form of three beautiful souls who each seemed a little bent and ragged around the edges.

Just like me.

Chapter Nine

Axis

Up with the sun, though it was more like I hadn't gotten much sleep last night.

After we'd driven back to the cabin, we'd sat on the porch, enjoying the moonlight, winding down, and chatting about the activities we wanted to check out today.

None of us had been up for a serious conversation, which had been fine by me.

Meeting Mackenzie had rattled me, especially when he'd asked to spend time with us.

My inner little had perked up and started doing a wiggly butt dance, sing-songing, please, please, please, as he shimmied around, but big me had been louder and told little me to sit the hell down and shut up before we embarrassed ourselves.

Mackenzie Redding was a southern rock legend.

No way a man like that would want a little who couldn't even cut it at a fraction of his level.

I hadn't even wanted to play once I'd spotted him there.

Hell, I'd been mentally kicking my own ass for bringing the guitar to camp in the first place, when Ezzy had begged me to play for them.

No way I could say no at that point.

Never could say no to them.

Hell, I'd rarely wanted to, and when I'd tried, they'd just given me puppy dog eyes, and it was over. Stick a fork in me; I'd have tied myself to a rocket and ridden it into the cosmos just to bring them back a chunk of moonrock if they'd asked for one.

I didn't want to wake the others with my restlessness or the sound of me playing on the porch, so I took my guitar down to the shore, well away from our cabin and everyone else's, hoping for a bit of inspiration.

And to play the way I'd been too scared to the night before.

Why the fuck couldn't I have been as amazingly talented as Bowie or even the replacement asshole? Why the hell couldn't I be anyone but ordinary old mediocre me?

Sometimes I wished I could completely give up playing, but then what?

I didn't have the heart to join my brother and our old man in the repo business; I just didn't.

It seemed like such a shitty thing to do when people were already struggling.

Yeah, I knew there were folks out there who abused the system and never intended to pay for whatever it was they'd put on credit, but it didn't seem fair to lump in the people who worked their butts off.

Sometimes life just kicked you in the ass, and you fell on hard times through no fault of your own.

Banks didn't want to hear that; they just focused on the bottom line, not the faces behind the numbers.

It was the same way with my old man. I'd seen him in action when I was younger.

No compassion at all. Just steely eyes and grim determination.

You wanna eat, kid? Then you'd better stop feeling sorry for those lowlifes and start looking for that license plate number.

Let it be a lesson for you. If you ain't got the cash in hand, you don't need it.

Work hard, save up, learn to go without until you can afford whatever the fuck you're after, and for God's sake, kid, never get a fuckin' credit card.

After learning about interest rates, I'd seen why he was so adamant about that part.

I'd eaten a lot of tuna and peanut butter while saving up for my Jeep.

I'd been proud of being able to drive it off the lot without owing anything.

She'd been a few years out of date but never owned, so I'd gotten a hell of a deal on her, but I'd spent a lot of time walking while I'd saved up, and not always in the best of weather.

A wide, flat rock jutted out over the surface of the lake, with plenty of room for me to sit and stare off across the water, guitar across my lap as disjointed words tumbled through my mind, refusing to piece themselves together.

My fingers slid over the strings, caressing and listening to the water lap against the base of my rock.

Trying to push past thoughts riddled with self-loathing had never gotten me anywhere.

The key was always to stop trying, breathe, and just let it happen.

The problem with that was the pain that came when the emotions I wanted to express slammed full force, assembling the words like a storybook narrative of shattered dreams.

Who wants to be the boy born not of love but to serve a purpose?

Who wants to be the boy created to be spare parts?

My mind screamed the questions, as it often did, but those were lines I never wrote down because that meant running the risk of someone seeing them someday, and that was a secret I was willing to take to my grave.

I already felt like a worthless failure; I didn't need the world to know that the only worth I'd ever had to the parents who'd raised me was that I was genetically compatible with my older brother, who they'd been desperate to save.

Once that mission was accomplished, they'd been stuck with an irritating nuisance they hadn't known what to do with, so they'd settled for ignoring my presence as best they could.

Great for those times when I hadn't wanted anyone to know what the fuck I was getting into, but kinda shitty when I'd always felt like a ghost in my own house.

Believe in me before I fade away.

Don't know how long I can be

The ghost in the corner

The dirty secret you can't fully

Sweep under the rug

And make go away.

I belong here too.

Even if you wish I didn't

Even if sometimes I wish it too

Only I didn't get a say, now did I?

You chose now I get to suffer for it.

I scribbled the words down, certain they weren't in the right order yet, but purging them from my brain let new ones come, along with several chords I started fiddling with as I hummed along.

Sometimes I feel like I don't deserve to be seen.

Stupid me, always tryin' ta shine a little brighter.

Electric sizzle, lightning in a bottle

For you, to be your star

Only I'm too numb to feel that I've burned out already.

Washed-up, wrung-out, dead thing

Shambling zombie

Too brain-dead to admit defeat.

You call me stubborn.

But it isn't stubbornness that keeps me going.

It's the fear of going from useless to nothing.

From useless to nothing

Born to be a broken dream

Burnout, loser.

All I want is to be seen.

But that'll never happen, will it?

You can't open your eyes.

You just look for the bad in me.

Content to laugh

And spread more lies.

I was never the bad boy.

I just wanted a moment of time.

A hug, a story, your smile

Why does wanting your love

Feel like committing a crime?

Something rustled behind me, and I immediately stopped singing, though my fingers kept playing with the chords as I glanced back over my shoulder to see a chipmunk sitting there, completely at ease and unbothered by the music.

It took off when we made eye contact, but I didn't dare go back to singing.

The last thing I needed was Roman or Ezzy wandering along as the lyrics came together, 'cause they'd ask questions, and never once had I ever lied to them.

The tone was as melancholy as my mood, but I couldn't stop playing it, adding a flourish here and a somber riff there, slowly beginning to tweak it in between pausing to scribble more lyrics or rearrange some.

"Good spot for playing."

I nearly fell the fuck off my rock when that voice cut through the music from somewhere behind me. Whipping my head around provided no answers; all it did was let my long hair blind me and force me to bat at it until I could see Mackenzie standing several feet away, watching me.

"Yeah, it, um, it really is," I admitted, ducking my head and immediately reaching for the case so I could put my guitar away.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s probably time for breakfast,” I muttered, putting it away anyway. “Judging by the shimmer on the lake, I’ve been out here a while.”

“Easy to get lost in the music when you’re in love with it.”

I chuckled at that, low and bitter, ‘cause he was right; I did love it. Sometimes I really hated that about myself. Of course, self-loathing had a way of making me testy, which meant my voice was a grumbled mix of sarcasm and snark when I addressed him.

“What makes you think I love it?”

My tone didn’t throw him, not one little bit. He just cocked an eyebrow at me and smirked until I dropped my gaze, conceding defeat.

“The look on your face when you were playing last night.”

“That was for Ezzy,” I muttered.

“You might have played because they asked, but that look of utter serenity you got while you were doing it was all you,” he replied. “No one can fake that.”

“How do you know?” I grumbled. “I’m good at faking a lot of things.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“Harrumph!” I huffed, pouting and crossing my arms now that my acoustic was back in its case.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” he said, stepping up onto the rock and taking several steps towards me. “Why try and hide something you’re clearly passionate about?”

“Because being passionate about something doesn’t necessarily make you good at it.”

“Actually, that’s exactly how you get good.”

I heaved another sigh and refused to meet his gaze, even when he plopped himself down beside me and let his boots dangle over the water.

“Sucks when the dream doesn’t turn out the way you wanted it to, doesn’t it?” He said, though his tone, far away and filled with longing, made it difficult to tell if he was talking to me or musing to himself.

Was no use denying it. He’d know I was lying if I tried. “Yeah, it really does.”

“Kinda ironic,” he muttered.

Two words, and my curiosity was instantly piqued. “What?”

“That a pair of failed musicians should wind up at the same camp lamenting all the ways our lives haven’t turned out the way we’d hoped they would.”

Well, shit, he hit that nail square on the head.

“What happened to Whiskey River Revival?” I finally got up the nerve to ask.

“All the shit people warn you about when you tell them you wanna be a rock star,” he admitted. “Is that what happened to your band?”

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“Sort of, though a couple of my bandmates really helped things along by making dumbass fuckin’ decisions.”

“That’s usually the way it works, though I can admit to making a ton of messed-up choices myself that contributed to the way things turned out.”

“Yeah, I’m sure I could have handled a few things differently, too.”

“Sometimes all we can do is live, learn, and pick ourselves up after we stumble, especially if we don’t have anyone else around to help us get back on our feet.”

“Roman helped, even if he doesn’t know just how much.”

“Then you should tell him. The people we love need to know when they’re doing the right things for us. That way they won’t give up or try something different.”

“At the time, he was going through way worse than what I was dealing with.”

“Struggle is struggle. You shouldn’t diminish your own by comparing it to someone else’s.”

“What you said last night, about wanting to spend time with us,” I began as I ran my fingers along the seam of my jeans. “Did you mean it?”

“I did, and I still do. But I respect the fact that you three have things going on you need to deal with.”

“Eight years ago we’d have jumped at the chance to hang out with someone who seemed like he was interested in all of us.”

“Lot of things can happen in eight years.”

“A lot of things did.”

“I bet.”

“Are you only into littles?”

“Nope. I’m a pet handler too, and I’ve always strived to live a poly-positive life when I could find partners who were on the same page with that.”

“Roman’s a pup. He rarely gets to explore it, though. He used to be in the Coast Guard, and now that he’s out, he coaches swimming, so he’s gotta be careful that none of the judgy people back home find out he’s in the lifestyle.”

“Where’s back home, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“We grew up in Eugene, but I live in Portland now,” I admitted. “Roman just moved back to Eugene a few years ago, and Ezzy’s moving back after camp, which is really cool. At least they’ll have someone to play with. Are you from Oregon too?”

“Yup, Klamath Falls, all the way down at the southern part of the state.”

“I know where that is,” I blurted. “We camped out near there once, when we were still in high school.”

“Oh yeah, where at?”

“The KOA.”

“Shit, I’ve stayed there a time or two myself, just to get away from my apartment and spend some time outdoors without having to go too far.”

“I liked it. We had fun. When I think about the best memories I have, it always involves one or both of them.”

“Sounds like you guys have been close a long time.”

“From elementary school until the night I fucked up everything and said shit I never should have said, then took off with my band without so much as a goodbye to either of them,” I admitted.

“And yesterday was the first time you’d seen each other since?” he surmised.

“It was the first time I’d seen or talked to Ezzy. Roman and I have been emailing, video chatting, and texting since a few months after I took off.”

“From what I saw last night, I don’t think Ezzy is holding any grudges.”

“Maybe they should. They’ve always forgiven me way too easily,” I blurted. “The last thing I deserved was a hug, but that’s what they gave me the moment I apologized.”

“Because they love you. I caught a glimpse of it last night. Wanna know what else I saw?”

“What?”

“That you positively love and adore them too. Doubt anything or anyone else would

have gotten you to play until they hit you with those puppy dog eyes.”

“You saw that?”

“Hard to miss.”

“I didn’t wanna play.”

“I noticed that too,” he said, before inclining his head towards the guitar case between us. “What I don’t get is why you bothered to bring your guitar down to the circle if you didn’t want to play it.”

“I was on the fence, then I saw you, and my brain immediately kicked into hell no mode.”

“Why?”

“‘Cause you’re Mackenzie frickin’ Redding.”

“First off, it’s just Mack to my friends, and I do hope that we can be friends,” he said.

“Secondly, I’m just another out-of-work musician, same as a lot of guys who have gotten to the top and fizzled out spectacularly.

I happened to have enjoyed your playing last night, and before you snark off with some bullshit, that’s not me blowing smoke up your ass, kid; you’re good.

You should be proud of that. You’ve clearly spent a lot of time honing your craft.

Running into someone who made it a little further in the industry than you shouldn’t make you afraid to show what you can do.

At the very least, you should view it as a challenge and see what the hell you might be able to learn from them along the way. ”

“Compared to where my band was at when we imploded, I’d say a little further is an understatement.”

“Why, because you hadn’t caught a break yet?” he remarked, chuckling a little and sounding just as bitter as I had earlier. “It’s all about luck, kid. Trust me, if you stick with it, you’ll get where you want to be.”

“What if I don’t know where I wanna be anymore?”

He chuckled at that too and shot me a look, the corners of his lips lifting into a small smile. “Then you should take all the time you need to be sure, so you don’t wind up regretting your choices, the way I did.”

Whoa.

“You regret being successful?” I asked, completely thrown by that.

“I regret the things I did to become successful and the person I became while I was doing them.”

“Oh.”

“Whatever you do, don’t compromise your morals or turn your back on people to claw and scratch your way to the top.”

“Pretty sure I fucked that part up a long time ago.”

“Good, then you’ve gotten it out of the way,” he said, his grin growing as he

continued to study me. “Now you have all the time in the world to show how much you’ve learned and grown from it.”

Well, shit, when he put it that way, it actually sounded like a challenge I’d be willing to take on.

Chapter Ten

Roman

“I figured you were down by the lake somewhere,” I said when Axis stepped inside carrying his guitar case.

“The view is amazing, especially when the sun is coming up,” Axis said as he headed for his room to tuck his guitar away.

“So is sleep and food,” I followed, gently chiding, but dammit all, I was worried about his eating and sleeping habits lately. “Did you at least make it to the chow hall?”

Even before we’d arrived, I’d started noticing dark circles under his eyes when we chatted through the video feed on Messenger. All he’d ever say about it was that he was working on something, which was fair; I knew how driven he could be. But I’d thought coming here would help him relax more.

“Yeah, I did, actually,” Axis said as he placed his guitar in the closet. “Mackenzie wandered past the rock I was playing on and encouraged me to grab a bite with him.”

“That’s something at least.”

“He’s nice, and a pet handler too, not just a daddy,” Axis said as he dug around in his bag for something, finally pulling out cutoff jeans.

Hearing that left me momentarily speechless and hopeful too, because the vibe I'd gotten off the man the night before had been a good one.

I'd wanted to accept his offer to spend time with us, but with all the uncertainty between Axis, Ezzy, and me, I'd been hesitant.

The fact that he'd read the tone between us correctly and walked away without being asked had left me with positive vibes, as well as a sense of longing.

"So, did you guys decide on the fishing derby or exploring the trails?" Axis asked as he turned around.

Chuckling, I shot a look towards the closed door Ezzy was currently dressing behind. "Fishing. Ezzy's getting ready. They brought the most adorable lime green fishing pole with a matching net and cute little lures and bobbers."

"So that's what was in the little green bag I carried in."

"Yup."

"Sweet, I can't wait to see it."

"You brought a pole, right?"

"Yeah, but, I dunno, I think I'll just go watch and maybe scribble in my notebook."

"Why? You love fishing."

"I—I just, I kinda wanna wear the Bluey dungarees I got, but now I'm feeling really shy about putting them on."

“Putting what on?” Ezzy asked, bounding into the room in a glittery crop top, shorts, and socks that all bore shimmering images of the characters from Finding Nemo.

“Awe, you look adorable,” Axis said as I took in the colorful characters all over them, wondering if they’d matched any of their other outfits to the activities in the itinerary we’d been provided when we’d registered for camp.

They spun, showing off the outfit from every angle, right down to the matching cap they had tucked in their back pocket.

“Why aren’t you guys dressed yet?” They asked.

I could tell the moment they started picking up on the vibe in the room, because the big smile that had been on their face when they’d bounded in here had started drooping into the beginnings of a frown.

“Getting there,” Axis said, heading for his bathroom with those cutoff shorts in his hand. “Be ready in a moment.”

“You should wear what you want to wear,” I encouraged. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that there are still tags on all your little outfits. Why haven’t you ever worn them? I know you go to Splendid Delights every Saturday night. I thought you were playing.”

Axis paused in the doorway of his bathroom and slowly turned around to face us.

“Sometimes,” he muttered, shrugging as he clutched those shorts.

Something caught my eye, and when it did, I couldn’t unsee the anarchy sign he’d scribbled on the thigh of his shorts in several different colored permanent markers back in high school.

It shouldn't have shocked me that he still had them; he'd loved that pair.

But I was confused about why he wasn't taking the opportunity to wear one of the custom outfits he'd selected from a website that catered to littles and pets.

"Sometimes?" I repeated, shooting him a pointed look.

"Okay, so maybe it was more like two or three times where I actually played, and the rest of the time I spent watching."

"The way you plan to do today," I said as I crossed the room, trying to get him to meet my gaze.

"Just having a hard time getting into the right headspace is all," he muttered as I reached to brush his hair back from his cheek.

The wind had made a tangled mess of it in places, and my fingers snarled in it when I tried to comb it back in place.

"I had to really talk myself into putting this on," Ezzy admitted as they pressed against my side, brush in hand.

"But the website said that this whole event is a safe space, and we should feel free to be ourselves and dress however we want to for the activities, and honestly, it's been exhausting always toning myself down to fit what's expected of someone my age. "

His words brought a small smile to Axis' face, even as Ezzy moved around him so they could reach the messy strands of Axis' hair and start running the brush over them.

"What can we do to help get you in the right headspace?" I asked, caressing his cheek

so I could keep him from ducking his head again.

His answer, after several moments of hesitation, was simply to shrug and turn his head, nuzzling against my palm.

“This is already helping,” he murmured while Ezzy continued steadily brushing.

“Have you ever had a daddy?” Ezzy asked as silence descended between us.

“No,” Axis admitted, those moss green eyes of his shimmering with tears.

“I could never stop wanting what we promised one another for long enough to let someone else take your place. I’ve had plenty of sex; people were always willing to fuck around with me, especially after a show, but there was never anyone I connected with in a way that came anywhere close to what we had.

Guess I was just too stubborn to settle for less than what I’d always dreamed about. ”

Huffing, I reached to card my fingers through Ezzy’s hair while they continued to brush Axis’ until it hung sleek and slippery down his back. That’s when they reached for a hair elastic and secured it in a ponytail.

“Want me to braid it for you?” Ezzy asked while Axis traced a fingertip over the logo on my T-shirt.

It wasn’t what I really wanted to wear today either, but fishing in leather headgear, a harness, and paws seemed like it would be hot, awkward, and potentially damaging to the gear.

Besides, the fishing derby was supposed to be for the littles, with areas set up for those who regressed really young: one for net fishing and one with little plastic and

metal fish for those using magnetic poles.

They really had thought of something for all stages of regression when it came to planning each activity.

“Yes, please.”

In those two words, I detected a subtle shift in headspace, while in those expressive green eyes of his, I saw a note of hopefulness. While Ezzy started braiding, I continued caressing his cheek and letting him use me for a touchstone.

“Have either of you ever had a daddy or a caretaker?” he asked, sighing and letting some of the tension bleed out of his shoulders.

“I had a wannabe caretaker,” I admitted.

“Until he realized I was headstrong, opinionated, and not thrilled with being used as a showpiece to boost his ego. I was still enlisted then too, so I was careful about the events I accompanied him to, which he didn’t like.

Like I told you when we chatted, I go to Bend when I want to play, but that’s all I do is play in the pet room with the other pets.

I’ve gotten the impression several times that some of the handlers think I’d be too much of a handful to take on, so they leave me be. ”

“That’s shitty,” Ezzy blurted as their deft fingers finished weaving the braid before securing the bottom with another elastic.

“Really shitty,” Axis muttered, pressing his cheek more firmly against my hand.

Yeah, he was getting into that headspace the way he had the few times we'd played through video chat.

"I was never comfortable going to a club alone, so no daddy for me, just a bunch of random, mostly forgettable partners," Ezzy explained.

"I always wanted what we promised one another when we first figured out what the lifestyle was and where we fit into it. A Daddy for the three of us. Someone who'd love us collectively or individually, even if it has to be from a distance, at least in the beginning.

I know we have shit to work out, but if someone clicks with us here, I'd love to spend time with them too and see where it takes us, so at least we know what it's like and don't have to keep wondering. "

"I'd like that too," Axis said.

"Ditto," I said. "It's painfully obvious that despite time, distance, and the conversations we still haven't had, we're still on the same page about what we want and how we feel about one another. Ultimately, that's the only thing that counts, right?"

"Uh-huh," Axis said, cocking his head and staring up at me. "Does that mean we can spend time with Mackenzie if he still wants to spend time with us, 'cause he was super nice to me down by the lake?"

"What kind of nice?" Ezzy asked.

"Talkin' not touchin'," Axis explained, more into his little headspace than ever. "He didn't try to touch even when we were sitting side by side on the rock; there was space between us."

“Did he press to spend time with us?” I asked.

“Uh-uh,” he replied, shaking his head. “He just said he wanted to be my friend and that I could call him Mack and shouldn’t feel ‘timidated by him just ‘cause his band got further than mine ‘cause in the end, both bands failed, and that was okay ‘cause now we got to learn from it and figure out what we wanted to do next. I kinda wanted a hug after that, but then my tummy grumbled, and he walked me to get food so it would stop rumbling.”

“Did you ask if he was going fishing?” Ezzy asked.

“I forgot to.”

“That’s okay,” Ezzy said. “If he’s there and he comes over to us, I’d be okay with him joining us if you and Roman are.”

Instead of responding, Axis just stared up at me with the same pleading, puppy dog eyes that Ezzy had given him at the bonfire last night.

He wasn’t the only one giving me sweet, hopeful eyes.

Ezzy was too. With no logical reason to say no and absolutely no desire to, I gathered them in my arms and kissed the tops of their heads.

“If he stops to visit with us, it’s perfectly okay, but don’t either of you go running off trying to find him, okay? We don’t know how crowded it will be by the pond, and I don’t want to lose track of either of you.”

“We won’t,” they replied, practically in unison, both bouncing a little.

“I’m gonna hold you to that.”

“We know,” they singsonged.

“I—I think I’d like to change into my Bluey outfit,” Axis said. “Do we have enough time?”

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I checked the time and nodded. “If we both hurry, I think we have time to change into something we’ll each enjoy wearing today.”

“Yay,” Axis cried, crushing the air out of me when he hugged me.

He didn’t rush for his closet, though; instead, he turned and hugged Ezzy, squealing as they broke into a happy little dance.

He was a whirlwind of motion when he finally did head for his closet, and when he joined Ezzy and me in the living area of our cabin, he was dressed in Bluey dungarees that ended just below his knees, a dark blue Bluey top beneath it, one strap buckled, the other dangling from his shoulder.

He’d changed his shoes too, into a pair of blue tennis shoes, but his socks had Bluey on them, and he’d tucked a little Bluey bandana into his back pocket and looped a hand sanitizer holder through one of the buttonholes on his dungarees, and yup, that had Bluey’s face on it too.

I knew it was his favorite cartoon; he’d had it on in the background during several conversations, and once I’d even caught sight of a Bluey coloring book lying on the coffee table beside a big box of crayons while he’d been propping up his phone.

I was glad he’d changed his mind about wearing it.

Our two weeks up here were supposed to be about getting to do the things we couldn’t normally do, for whatever reason, which was why I’d pulled on my

protective pup T-shirt and added a wide, studded, leather belt to my jeans.

Part of the reason I loved it was because it reminded me of a collar .

Attached to the two clips on the back were leashes, one for each of them to hold.

For now they were doubled up and dangling to my knees, but when we weren't fishing, I thought it would be a good way to keep us connected.

I was serious when I'd mentioned being worried about losing one of them at the fishing derby.

While I might not have had much club time over the years, when I did visit one, I spent as much time as possible simply observing the littles and watching how their caretakers looked after them, guided them, and kept them from getting into too much trouble.

I'd also learned that littles loved bright, shiny things, were easily distracted even when you thought they were super fixated on something, and tended to wander at the slightest provocation, especially if they spotted something they wanted to get a closer look at.

Keeping up with these two had never been much of a challenge for me, but a lot of that had been because they loved to play follow the leader, so where one went, the other usually was.

Fortunately, the time we'd spent chatting over the years had allowed me to see that separation and the evolution of our tastes hadn't changed them much in that regard.

Now to see if we could catch some fish...and the eye of the daddy who'd expressed so much interest in us last night because Axis and Ezzy weren't the only ones curious

to see more of him. It had pained me to turn down his offer, so much so that I'd still been kicking myself over it this morning.

At the last minute, before we headed out to Axis' Jeep, I rushed back into my room to clip on the third leash I'd brought. Wishful thinking, I know, but if there was one thing coming to camp was supposed to be about, it was making our wishes come true.

Chapter Eleven

Ezzy

“I caught one; I caught one!” I declared, dancing so much my foot slipped and my toes got wet as I started reeling in my fish.

“Ohh, fishy, fishy!” Axis declared, several feet away and dancing now too as his bobber was yanked under.

Smelly old fishes started swimming towards each other while we reeled, and soon we were all tangled up with flopping fishies on both lines, tails sending water all over us.

“Big fishies!” Axis declared, holding on to his pole and only reeling when Roman told him to.

“Big fishies and an even bigger mess,” Roman said as he finally gave up trying to untangle our lines from the shore, kicked his shoes off, rolled up his pants legs, and waded in to try and fix things in the water.

“Need a hand?” a voice called.

“Our fishies got tangled up,” I explained to Mackenzie.

“I’d love a hand,” Roman replied as he waded towards our thrashing captives.

Soon Mackenzie had his shoes off too and waded into the lake in board shorts to help

Roman get our fishies untangled.

“You boys just hold on to your poles and don’t reel until we tell you to,” Mackenzie declared.

Working together, it didn’t take him and Roman long to get our fishies untangled and our lines separated. Roman held Axis’ fish in his hands, while Mackenzie placed mine back in the water for me.

“Now you can reel,” Mackenzie told me, so I did.

Slowly, carefully, inch by inch, I brought my floppy fishy to the shore with Mackenzie wading out behind it. Only after my fishy was safely on shore with Mackenzie helping to get the hook out of its mouth did Roman lower Axis’ line back into the water so he could reel his in too.

“Are we cooking or tossing back?” Mackenzie asked, with a firm hold on my fish.

“He’s big, so he’s gonna be dinner tonight,” I said, carefully pulling my phone out of my backpack so I could take a picture with it first. “Will you take a picture with me?”

“I’d love to, little one,” he replied, grinning as he went to one knee next to me so we were almost the same height and held my fish up in front of us while I took a couple selfies of us.

“Thank you, and thank you for helping to untangle him.”

“It was my pleasure,” he replied before straightening up while I skipped over to the cooler and opened it to show him the other four fish already swimming around inside. “Wow, you guys have done a great job already.”

“We turned some tiny ones loose after we took pictures of them, but Roman’s gonna cook the big ones while we blow bubbles and chase fireflies,” I blurted, proud of our fishies.

“Sounds like you have a fun evening planned.”

“Uh-huh. We’re gonna catch more fish too if you wanna have dinner with us.”

His eyes widened a little at hearing that, and he glanced from me to where Roman and Axis approached with the big one Axis had caught.

“Are you sure that’ll be okay with everyone?” he asked.

“I think we’d like that a lot,” Roman said, while Axis nodded, paci in his mouth, which he sucked on while he held his fish.

“After a conversation we had earlier, we realized that we were all still on the same page about wanting someone who wanted to have a relationship with the three of us. We agreed that if you found us and still wanted to spend time with us, then we’d happily take you up on the offer and see how things went from there. ”

“It’s not too late, is it?” I asked, folding my hands beneath my chin and staring up at him.

The bark of laughter that followed made his eyes look all sparkly where the sun fell across his face.

“Not in the slightest. I’d love to join the three of you for dinner, fireflies, and bubbles.

In fact, I have a bubble cannon in my cabin that I’ll pick up when we’re done here.

I think you'll enjoy playing with it and chasing all the bubbles it makes. ”

“Ohh, yey, yey, yey,” I declared, hopping about, then catching Axis’ hands so he could hop with me.

Giggling, he joined me in dancing around Mackenzie and Roman, who shook his head at our antics.

“Alright, you two, if we’re going to have a guest for supper, then you’d better catch a few more fish,” Roman said, doing his best to look stern, though I saw the corners of his lips quirk up a little as he held back his laughter.

We stopped and unlinked our hands so he could step out of the circle we’d made and find the container of squirmy worms we’d been given at the start of the derby.

Axis and I stood still with our poles in our hands while Mackenzie attached one to my hook and Roman did the same for Axis, who wrinkled his nose and looked away when the hook pierced the side of the worm.

“Why don’t Ezzy and I take a few steps this way, and you and Axis can take a few to your right, so there is less of a chance of them tangling their lines again?”

“Good idea,” Roman said. “I’d have had them spread out more, but it was easier to keep them close so I could help one without taking my eyes off the other.”

“I’d have done the same thing without an extra set of hands,” Mackenzie said.

The look they shared made Roman smile, which made me happy too, but there was one thing that really surprised me.

“You’re gonna fish with me?” I asked, shooting a look over at Axis ‘cause I’d have

figured Mackenzie would wanna help him so they could talk about music.

“I sure am, as long as you’re okay with me helping you.”

“I am, I am, I really am,” I said, clapping, squealing, and dancing around so much I dropped my pole.

He picked it up and handed it back to me, then adjusted my cap, which had tumbled forward, making it difficult for me to see when it was crooked and half over my eyes like that.

“Ready to catch another one?” he asked.

“Uh-huh! Uh-huh!”

“Alright,” Mackenzie said, moving around to my side. “Let’s see you cast it wayyyyy out there!”

Giggling, I showed him just how far I could cast, having to tip my head back a little to watch my lime green bobber, which was shaped like a lime too, sail through the air until it finally plopped down with a splash.

“Here, fishy, fishy, fishy,” I encouraged, giggling when he laughed.

“Look, we’ve got a beautiful boulder right here; why don’t we get comfortable and wait for your fish to come?” He suggested, stepping up onto the mostly flat rock and holding a hand out to me.

My shoes slipped a little and lit up a whole lot as he helped me up there beside him, but I was happy to sit ‘cause my feet had started getting sore from standing on the rocky shoreline.

“Ezzy, can I ask you something?” Mackenzie said as soon as I’d stopped squirming around to find the most comfy spot, wishing I’d brought my blankie ‘cause the rock was hard on my tush, which was a little sore from sitting on the log last night.

“Uh-huh.”

“Which pronouns do you prefer?”

Squealing, I wiggled happily. “They—they!”

“Okay, I’m glad I asked; I didn’t want to ass and accidentally hurt your feelings.”

“Ohhhh, thank you. People try to guess all the time. It never hurts my feelings, but it does hurt when someone asks why I don’t just pick one.”

“You have; it’s they-them, the same as she-her or he-him is picking one,” he declared.

I’d never thought about it like that and turned to stare up at him watching me with a kind smile on his face.

“I’m gonna say that the next time someone tells me to pick.”

“Good for you. Always stand up for yourself. Never let anyone dull your sparkle.”

“Do you like sparkles?” I blurted.

“I do; I like them a lot,” he said, leaning close. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Yay, secret, secret.”

“I don’t just like looking at sparkles; I like wearing them too,” he whispered. “I love a bit of bling on the pockets of my jeans, belt buckle, and hatbands too.”

“I love shiny, pretty things. Wearing dark colors makes me feel sad, like it’s raining on my head, like Eeyore.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want you to feel like that, especially not here at camp where you get to have fun, make messes, and do all the giggle dances you want to.

In fact, I think a fishy is just about ready to give you another reason to get your squiggles in,” Mackenzie said before pressing a finger to his lips, then pointing out where my lime bobber was bobbing, bobbing, each time going under a little more.

It was hard, hard, hard to sit still, hold on, and wait for the fishy to yank it under and start running away with it, but with Mackenzie beside me, I managed, despite how many times my fingers flexed on the pole as I got impatient.

“Fishy!” I squealed when it was finally time to reel. “Ohhh, big fishy, he’s heavy.”

“You hang on to him now, sparkle butt, and don’t let him get away.”

Sparkle butt?

Oh my gosh!

I wiggled as I reeled in my meanie of a fish, who fought me the whole way to shore.

“Hang on to him. Keep reeling,” Mackenzie encouraged.

Never once did he reach for my pole or offer to reel him in for me, though I got the impression that I could have asked for help at any time and he’d have done so without

taking over. I knew I could get my fishie in myself; I just knew it.

Tongue poking from between my lips, I cranked the reel, which was getting harder to turn.

“Hold him right there; let him fight for a moment,” Mackenzie said. “He’ll get tired soon.”

“Hope he gets tired before I do!” I huffed, keeping firm pressure on the handle of the reel, without turning it, while my fish zigged one way, zagged another, and flop, flop, flopped, making little waves all around him every time his tail smacked the surface of the water.

“Your fishy must have drunk a whole pot of coffee this morning to have this much energy,” Mackenzie joked.

“Silly daddy, fishies don’t drink coffee!” I blurted when a gasp off to my right alerted me to what I’d accidentally called him.

Mackenzie just flashed me a reassuring smile. “It’s okay; I am a daddy, and I won’t infer anything from you calling me that besides you enjoying yourself and the time we’re spending together. It’s all good. Now, see if you can reel him just a little bit closer.”

I did, pleased that mistakenly calling him that hadn’t derailed the whole afternoon. My fishy wasn’t fighting so hard now, and I could see the bright green of my bobber beneath the surface, getting closer and closer.

“Hehehehe, come here, fishy, you’re gonna get in my belly tonight.

Mackenzie’s big, booming laugh made me happy and shivery as he slid off the edge

of the rock and back into ankle-deep water to pick him up for me.

“Whoa, he’s huge!” Mackenzie declared as he lifted him up to reveal another largemouth bass, the biggest of the afternoon. “Good job, sparkle butt.”

Fishy flicked his tail, trying to flop free of the hold Mackenzie had on him as he stepped back up onto our rock, but I could tell he was just about done protesting his fate. He was gonna be dinner once Roman cleaned him and cut off his head so he couldn’t stare at me when he was on my plate.

“Picture, picture,” I declared as I pulled out my phone.

Like before, he kneeled beside me, only this time I got brave and reached out, wanting to put my arm around him.

“Is it okay if I hug you?” I asked before I touched, ‘cause touching wasn’t okay unless you asked permission.

“Absolutely,” he said, holding my fishy in front of us as I scooted closer and wrapped my arm around him so I could lean against him while I took our picture.

He crossed his eyes and made a funny face, so I used my fingers to give him bunny ears and took several pictures of us clowning around before he added my fishy to the cooler.

By then, Axis had gotten another one and was smiling brightly around his binky as he watched us while Roman added another worm to his hook.

Each time I looked over at him, he had his Bluey binky in his mouth and was sucking away on it, even while he was waiting for something to nibble on his hook.

When he saw me watching, he waved, then Roman stepped away from his hook, and Axis happily cast it back out into the water.

I did the same after Mackenzie baited my hook with another squirmy worm, while the sun shimmered like sparkles on the surface of the lake, making everything look dreamy and magical.

Day two of Pride Camp, and I was already having the best time of my adult life.

“Are you getting warm? Do you have something to drink?” Mackenzie asked.

I shook my head because my little water bottle was empty. “I drank it all.”

“No worries,” Mackenzie said, taking off the backpack he’d lain on the rock behind us.

My curiosity almost got the best of me and made us knock heads as I tried to peer in and get a look at what he carried in there. I bet it was fun things.

“Do you like water, lemonade, or sweet tea?” he asked, removing a small cloth cooler that was full of...water?

“It’s all water,” I declared.

“It’s magic water,” he explained, winking at me before showing me the collection of squeezey flavors he had tucked beside the water.

“Can I have lemonade tea?” I asked.

“You sure can. Axis, Roman, would you like something to drink too?” Mackenzie called.

Axis had to pluck his binky out of his mouth to answer, “Yes, pwease,” before he shoved it right back in again.

He was a littler little than me, I could tell.

It was so cool, though. I couldn’t wait to play with the bubbles later and try to catch fireflies, though we wouldn’t put them in a jar, even with holes punched in the lid, ‘cause that would kill them. We just wanted to follow and see where they led us, the way we’d done when we were kids pretending they were will-o’-the-wisps come to guide us to fairy country, and maybe they did.

Maybe that was here.

The happiest, most magical place I’d ever been.

Chapter Twelve

Mackenzie

“Alright, you two, settle down and go change, and then we’ll play with the bubble cannon.”

“Yay, bubbles, bubbles!” Axis cheered as he raced from the backseat of the jeep to the steps, bounding up them and into the house to get ready.

Ezzy’s departure was just as exuberant, while Roman sat behind the wheel of Axis’ Jeep, shaking his head.

“I don’t know where they get their energy from,” Roman declared. “I wasn’t even fishing, and I’m exhausted.”

“Because keeping up with those two requires triple-strength coffee and a splash of ginseng,” I replied.

“So that’s your secret! You’ll have to hook me up next time.”

“Nah, I wasn’t smart enough to pick up ginseng before the trip,” I said, chuckling. “But I never go anywhere without my coffee.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have any on you right now, would you?”

“Couple pods if you wanna brew one.”

“I’d love that. Those twelve fish are going to take me a while to clean and gut.”

“Will go a lot faster if you let me help you.”

“How are you gonna help me and keep your promise to play with the boys and that bubble cannon?”

“Because we are going to tire them out so much with the bubbles that they’ll be ready for a movie and maybe even a nap before supper,” I declared.

“We?”

“There are two of us sitting here, aren’t there?”

“Yeah, but...”

“No buts. You’ve been watching over them all day,” I said. “You deserve a chance to play too.”

“I do that, and I’ll be the one passed out on the couch with the movie watching me, and you’ll be the one left with a dozen fish to deal with.”

“So?”

His eyes widened, and the tip of his tongue poked out as he regarded me. “You seriously wouldn’t mind?”

“Nope, not in the slightest. I think Axis and Ezzy would much rather you play with them than sit at the picnic table scraping fish in between watching them run around having fun. Besides, I have an added surprise to go with the bubble cannon, so why don’t you go change into your swimwear and let me get everything set up? ”

“Y-yes sir,” he said before getting out far slower than the other two, but I’d seen the spark of excitement in his eyes before he’d turned to go and was proud to have been the one to put it there.

Now to hook up the sprinkler to the hose I’d brought; glad there were spigots on the side of every cabin.

A few twists and a bit of dragging that hose to a spot where they couldn’t drench the picnic table, and we were good to go.

I sat and filled the tank on the cannon with bubble mix and was just getting the plug screwed on when they came tumbling back out of the cabin.

“A sprinkler!” Ezzy declared, rushing right for it in the shimmery orange speedo they’d put on.

Each time the sun hit it, new colors appeared, like a sunset playing out on that pert little rear of theirs.

Barefoot in the grass, Ezzy and Axis raced towards it, giggling when Roman let out a bark and began chasing them.

His swim shorts had a tail on the back and a bulldog face on the front, tongue hanging out over his package, which just made me chuckle.

Axis had opted for purple tie-dyed board shorts that showed off the gargoyle tattoo on his left leg and the two purple dragons coiling up his right.

I was beginning to think that might be his favorite color, since several of the ones on his arms, chest, and back were purple too.

I wondered if he was going for full sleeves, as much of the skin on both arms was already inked up, each design being some mythological creature looking badass and fierce as hell.

Hard and soft—that was the impression I'd first gotten when I'd stared at the pair bathed in firelight, but today had given me a different insight into both.

Axis, for all the I -don't-give-a-damn energy he put out, had a tender-hearted nature that came out in full force when he was little.

Seeing him kneel beside the pond to help a duckling who'd gotten ensnared in some old fishing line had given me a glimpse of that, as had the gentle way he'd carried it back over to where the other ducks were quacking.

He'd lovingly stroked its feathers the entire way and knelt silently, setting it free so it could scurry back to its family without getting so close he scared them off.

Something told me that wasn't the first time he'd rescued a hurt critter, though he'd mentioned earlier that he'd never had a pet, not even a goldfish, and wouldn't know the first thing about caring for one.

That line about not knowing how to care for something had sounded like a cop-out to me, but I'd refrained from calling him out on it, if only because it wasn't my place. Not yet anyway.

Roman chased them through the sprinkler while I set off the cannon, giving them something new to chase. Soon the air beside the cabin was filled with a cloud of floating rainbows the trio rushed to pop.

"Look, they're on your head!" Ezzy declared, pointing to the bubbles shimmering on Roman's chestnut hair.

Loose and wet, they were plastered against his forehead and the back of his neck.

“I caught one! I caught one!” Axis declared, beaming until it popped in his hands.

He scowled for half a second, then set out to catch another.

Ezzy scampered for the sprinkler, dancing in the spray. Over it, around it, wiggling their butt and hopping like a bunny several times before Roman pounced on them and tickled them in the grass before helping them up again.

It was easy to picture what they’d been like as children, growing up together.

The happiness, the joy in the way they interacted, left my heart feeling light and free.

It was easy to join in their laughter as I fired more bubbles, creating a wall of them that Ezzy cartwheeled through.

Axis tried and fell over each time, giggling, then laughing harder when Roman and Ezzy descended on him, tickling him too.

“I give, I give!” He squealed, trying to roll away and slipping in the wet grass.
“Daddy, Daddy, save me!”

That was the second time today one of them had slipped and called me Daddy.

What else could I do but hurry over and spray them with bubbles until they let poor Axis get up?

His tanned face was flushed when he took my hand and let me help him to his feet.

Then that grinning boy hugged me, covering me in water and bubble residue.

Best feeling in the world, let me tell you.

I hugged back just as tight and soon found myself the center of a hug sandwich that left me breathless and messy as hell. Not that I cared, I'd thrown a change of clothes in my bag, knowing the process of descaling the fish for supper was going to leave me messy regardless.

"This is awesome, thank you," Ezzy said, stepping back a little.

I ruffled their hair and listened to them giggle as they tried to smooth it back into place.

"You're most welcome, Sparkle Butt," I said and watched their grin grow.

"That's the best nickname ever!" Roman declared, "Better run, Sparkle Butt, or the tickle monsters are gonna get you again."

"Rawr!" Axis bellowed before chasing after Ezzy, but not before I spotted a flash of disappointment in his eyes before he spun away from me.

Was it because of the nickname I'd given Ezzy?

I'd give him one too, once I came up with the perfect one.

One unfortunate thing I'd discovered over many years in poly relationships was how quickly the downfall had come after one got it in their heads that another was loved or cherished more than them.

It would never work with the trio if those feelings were already coming into play, which meant I'd need to tread lightly and keep a close eye on his reactions before I got in too deep with them.

It was a real shame, though. The day had already left me wanting to claim them and give them each something to wear that marked them as mine, even if we had to work out the rest of the details from a distance.

While they ran in and out of the sprinkler, I sent more bubbles flying their way until the cannon was empty and Ezzy had sprawled on the grass, letting the water from the sprinkler wash over them.

Roman joined them a few minutes later, curling up behind them, making Ezzy the little spoon, while Axis sat right beside the sprinkler, sticking his hands in the spray to disrupt it.

“Who’s ready for movie time?” I asked, grinning when all three heads turned my way.

“I am!” Ezzy said.

“Definitely,” Roman declared.

Axis licked his lips and shrugged, splashing the water more. “I’m tired. Gonna go nap.”

“You’ve had a busy, busy day,” I said. “A nap sounds like a wonderful idea.”

Nodding, he splashed once more before standing and heading in, but not before I caught a hint of wistfulness on both Ezzy’s and Roman’s faces.

“Can we watch Monster Island?” Ezzy asked.

“We sure can,” Roman replied, sitting up and brushing a hand over his damp face while I headed over to turn off the sprinkler. “But we’d better shower and change

first, or we'll get the couch all wet."

"Okie," Ezzy replied, standing and offering Roman a hand, which he accepted and held on to as they headed inside.

"I'll bring the fish in when it's ready," I told them. "Looks like there are some clouds off in the distance that might decide to drop a bit of rain on us."

"Thankie!" Ezzy said, waving as they headed up the steps.

I hoped whatever the weather had in store for us was over by tomorrow, as we had a maze to explore, as well as a scavenger hunt I knew they were looking forward to.

Once I'd draped the hose over the railing to let the water run out, I got down to the messy business of cleaning and gutting fish after I'd laid out a few brown paper sacks to make cleanup easier.

Plastic might be what the masses opted for when grocery shopping, but it was a lot harder for paper to break, at least in my experience.

I sang along with my playlist while I worked, knowing the grill, which I'd fired up before I'd gotten started, would be ready for the first four once I'd prepped and seasoned them.

It was when I went to put them on the grill that I got the sensation of being watched.

Glancing over at the cabin, I noticed parted curtains and Axis's face peering out at me.

The moment our eyes met, he withdrew and closed the curtains, leaving me to wonder why he'd been watching instead of napping or joining the others in the living

room.

Our conversation early that morning played back in my mind, along with the sad, somber lyrics I'd overheard as I'd approached him.

That he was shy about his music was a bit of a shocker to me.

So many of the guitarists I'd known over the years had been confident to the point of being cocky at times, so it was a breath of fresh air that he wasn't.

Still, there was something troubling about his behavior, both this morning and what he'd said about the night before.

That he hadn't wanted to play once he'd recognized me.

Was that because he didn't think he'd measure up or because others had put it into his head that he didn't and thus impacted his opinion of himself and his abilities?

I still wished that I could find something, anything, online about him or the band he'd belonged to, so I could listen for myself, without him being hesitant, the way he'd been the night before.

Learning about each of them as individuals would be key to figuring out how and if we could make this work.

As the first batch neared completion, I went inside to grab a platter or a plate, something that I could bring the fish in on, and found Roman passed out on the couch with Ezzy in his arms. In fact, it looked like the only thing that was keeping Ezzy from tumbling off was the way Roman held them, even in such a deep state of slumber.

Pressing my finger to my lips, I approached, not wanting to wake the exhausted pup.

“Do you guys have a large plate or serving platter?” I whispered. “The first batch of fish is almost ready.”

“Ohhh, yum, I’m hungry. There is a platter in the middle cabinet, on the top shelf,” they whispered, their little space having slipped away at some point since they’d come in.

“It won’t be too much longer; then we can all eat together.”

“Yey,” they hissed, low so as to not disturb Roman, who’d twitched a bit at the sound of my voice.

I left them smiling on the couch, still watching Monster Island, as I headed to retrieve it.

As promised, I had everything ready less than forty-five minutes later and came in to discover that Axis had joined them in the living room and was sitting in one of the easy chairs in sleep pants and a T-shirt with his knees drawn up.

While I didn’t recognize the name of the band on his shirt, I committed Malevolent Gargoyles to memory so I could look them up on the off chance that it was one of his ex-band's shirts he had on. With the way gargoyles were woven into several of his tattoos, it wasn’t too far-fetched a notion.

“Supper’s ready,” I said, once I noticed Roman was awake and blinking sleepy-eyed at the television. “Let’s get to it while it’s hot.”

“Food!” Ezzy declared, wiggling free and hurrying for a seat, followed by Axis, while Roman sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“Man, I told you I was gonna pass out the moment I was on the couch.”

“And I told you not to worry about it,” I reminded him. “Now let's go eat.”

“Don't have to tell me twice.”

“Ohh, that smells delicious,” Roman said as we reached the table in time to see that Axis and Ezzy were in the process of setting places for everyone.

Roman retrieved a pitcher of lemonade with cut-up strawberries floating around in it, and soon we were seated with our feast, which included pasta salad and watermelon slices to complement the fish.

“I'm so glad we thought to bring sides,” Ezzy said. “None of us would have been up to making anything after the day we had.”

“Will you read us a story later?” Axis asked, the hesitance back in his voice, the way it had been during our morning conversation by the lake.

“I'd be happy to.”

“And you're still gonna join us tomorrow, right?” Roman asked, his expression hopeful.

“Wouldn't miss it for the world.”

“Awesome!” Ezzy declared. “I can't wait for the scavenger hunt. I really hope it doesn't rain; we missed out on fireflies tonight.”

“There will be plenty of time for chasing fireflies, I'm sure,” I said as we filled our plates.

A sense of domestic tranquility washed over me as we ate and I sent up a silent plea that this would be the first of many shared meals and moments to come.

Chapter Thirteen

Axis

“You’re awfully quiet today; what’s up? Aren’t you having fun?” I asked Ezzy as we worked our way deeper into the maze.

Rather than wander as a group of four, we decided to make a game out of solving the puzzle that was the huge garden maze.

It took up the whole field beside the campground activity center.

Beautiful flowers were in bloom all around us, and we’d already come across two fountains and several birdhouses we hadn’t been able to resist taking selfies beside.

It was a beautiful space, and one I intended to return to first thing tomorrow morning while Ezzy and Roman were still asleep.

I hoped it was as inspiring as the lake, but even if it didn’t help me produce words, I was certain to find something to inspire a sketch or two.

An image of gargoyles perched in delicate flowers flashed through my head, the juxtaposition between hard and soft one I was suddenly curious to play with.

“It’s amazing,” Ezzy replied. “Like visiting a botanical garden. I think I’ll bring my notebook up here the next time we have downtime and see if I can figure out what the hell is so wrong with my fuckin’ play that it keeps getting rejected.”

There were two more in my inbox this morning when I checked my emails, and both were short and sweet.

Not what we're looking for at this time.

Doesn't fit with the theatrical standards we've set for this playhouse.

Okay, fine, though the first one was way easier to accept than the second.

What does that even mean, that it didn't meet with the theatrical standards?

They didn't even elaborate or explain what standards it didn't meet.

I've got other plays, if it was a matter of content, but how am I supposed to gauge anything from a response like that? ”

They had a point; it was a vague brushoff, and I'd have been irritated too.

“Sounds to me like they aren't a good fit for you regardless of what you send.”

They sighed heavily at that, so I slung my arm over their shoulder and tugged them close.

“You'll know the right fit when you find it.

Those are the same kinds of rejections we used to receive when we sent in demos, until we found someone who saw the promise in our music and reached out with a detailed breakdown of what we needed to improve upon and expand on in order to get signed.

I just wish we'd held it together for long enough to produce more than just the EPs

we paid to have produced. ”

“I’d love to hear them sometime.”

“That can be arranged.”

“I just don’t want to become the cliché. The theater director slipping one or two of their own plays into the schedule each year just so they can say their work has been performed.”

“Then don’t,” I said. “It’s that simple.

Keep polishing them, keep sending them out, and keep working on the new ones you read to us.

I love the one about the holiday sweets competition and the way the one group kept trying to sabotage their competition only to have it constantly backfire on them.

Candy Canes and Karma is an awesome title too.

If I saw it over a playhouse, I’d be curious to find out more. ”

“You’re biased.”

“No. I’m interested; there’s a difference. I’d be curious whether you were the one who wrote it or not; the title is that catchy.”

“The title, or the fact that you’ve always loved everything to do with Christmas?”

“Meh, a little of both.”

“Left or right?” Ezzy asked.

“We took a left last time, right?”

“I think so. Maybe? Shit, I don’t remember.”

“Fuck, neither do I.”

“Isn’t there some trick to mazes, about staying along the same wall and following it no matter where it goes?” Ezzy asked.

“Maybe,” I hedged, remembering something like that in one of the books we’d read, though I couldn’t recall exactly what it had said.

“I’m game to try if you are.”

“Okay, might as well; I have no clue where we are at this point or how big this thing is.”

“So, blue flowers or pink ones, which side should we follow?” Ezzy asked.

“Let’s go pink to match your top,” I said, letting them guide us in that direction.

Pausing to study a tall stem with rows of pink flowers running up it, the image of a tiny gargoyle with its arms and legs wrapped around the stem popped into my head.

I could picture it half hidden there, wings out, face pressed to one as it inhaled the scent.

If I couldn’t find the spot again, I at least wanted to take a couple of pictures of them and the name of the flower so I’d know what the hell it was. Snapdragon, oh, that was

perfect.

As I hurried to catch back up to them, I was once again treated to a glimpse of the fairy wings tattooed on Ezzy's back.

The upper set of wings spanned the width of their shoulders, while the lower set started at their hips and vanished beneath the waistband of their shorts.

The pink and green made for a beautiful combination, but I was a little hesitant to comment on them, considering what I'd said to them so many years before.

I just hoped they hadn't gotten them out of spite, or at the very least, if they had, that they truly loved them and didn't regret the decision.

"I can feel you staring at my ass," they said as I took my time catching up.

"More like staring at your tat," I muttered, kicking myself when they turned to look at me. "Sorry. I really need to learn to keep my mouth shut."

"Why?"

"So I don't blurt out stupid shit."

"There's nothing stupid about being honest," they said. "Besides, I put them there to be stared at whenever I wore anything cropped or mesh, like this. Cropped mesh is the best of both worlds, which is why I wore this top today."

"It's beautiful," I admitted.

"Before you ask, no, I didn't get it because of what you said to me; I got it after I attended a pride parade as a pixie prince.

I liked wearing the wings so much that I wanted a permanent set to remind me of how awesome the day was.

The artist who put them there was handing out cards and temporary tattoos at the event, and after seeing their work online, I just knew they would be the perfect person to ink my wings for me. ”

“That’s fuckin’ awesome. I love Portland’s PrideFest; the band and I played it several years in a row.

Their drag show was fabulous. This performer there, Plastic Princess, and I got to be friends, and she convinced me to give it a try a few times, which was hella fun.

Wish she hadn’t moved to Palm Springs, or I might have gotten more into it. ”

“Whoa, back the hell up. You did drag?”

“Just a few times. It was fun, especially shopping for outfits. One year she glammed me up in this beaded lavender mermaid dress, and then we dyed my hair lavender and streaked several darker shades of purple through it, which looked amazing. We curled it too, so it fell in waves except for the braids we put in, with seashells and seaweed woven through it. I so looked like a mermaid by the time she got done.”

“I bet you were stunning.”

“I don’t know about stunning, but when I looked in the mirror, I loved the transformation. I still have the dress.”

“Okay, now I have questions,” Ezzy declared.

“Go for it.”

“What song did you sing, and don’t tell me you didn’t perform something—not if you actually took part in the show, so what did you choose, and what the hell was your drag name, because damn, now that I have the image in my head, I hope you’ve got pictures stashed somewhere, ‘cause I’d love to see them. ”

“Lavender Laguna, and yeah, there are pictures; there may still be a couple on my phone. I’ll have to look later.”

“And the song? It was Under the Sea, wasn’t it?”

“Like I said, it was totally cliché, but every second of it was amazing.”

“Oh my god, now I’m hoping for a video to go with those pictures.”

“I may have one of those on here too.”

“Uh-huh. May have. You are so showing me later; that is just too cool not to share.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll pull them up when we get back to the cabin.”

“Yes!”

“When I made that remark to you about the way you looked, all glittered up and sparkling, I wasn’t just upset because you’d gotten threatened and harassed over it,” I said, wanting to deliver on the explanation I’d promised them. “I was jealous and I handled it in the worse way imaginable.”

“Of me? Why? You were the one with wannabe groupies trying to hang off you at school.”

“Not so much of you, but the way some people stared at you like they wanted to take

you away from us,” I admitted.

“And why wouldn’t they? You were amazing.

Never be afraid to just be you. I was afraid that one of those times you’d meet someone awesome and realize that you could do way, way better than me.

I always figured that Roman was the glue that held us together, and with him leaving for basic training, you’d start to see how many better options there were out there, and then I’d be on my own without either of you. ”

They looked thoughtful as they stared at me, tears welling up in their eyes. “So you ruined it before anyone or anything else could.”

“Pretty much.”

“Didn’t you know that no matter who else came into my life, you and Roman were the only ones for me?”

“Back then, no, especially not that night. God, that whole fuckin’ night sucked.”

“Why, what else happened?”

“That was the night the band decided to make Bowie the lead guitarist over me,” I admitted.

“It just drove home for me that I’d always come in second, no matter what I did or how hard I tried.

It was already that way at home. To have it be like that with the band, or think about you doing it too, it just pissed me off that I could never be enough for anyone. ”

“But you were. You are still everything to me. I never stopped wanting you, Axis. I’ve always loved you, even when I was pissed as hell.”

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Huffing, I closed my eyes because now there were tears threatening to fall from them, and we couldn't both just stand there crying.

Some other group was liable to come along eventually and think we were upset because we'd gotten lost, and then what the hell were we supposed to say?

That we were crying because I was an idiot who had a hard time accepting that anyone could really and truly love me? Yeah, how pathetic would that be?

My whole life I'd watched my brother get all the hugs, all the attention, and all the praise, while I'd been left watching and wondering why they hadn't bothered to just give me away once they were finished with me.

There had to be some place to dump off unwanted genetic material, 'cause that's all I'd ever fucking been to them.

"What aren't you telling me?"

Ezzy's hands on my cheeks startled me for a moment. My eyes flew open to see that our faces were inches apart. They wouldn't let me duck my head, so I settled for lowering my gaze to stare at the rose quartz heart pendant they'd put on this morning.

"Axis?" They growled. "What aren't you telling me?"

Sighing, I decided to finally just come out and tell him the one thing I'd never let either of them know when we were growing up.

“You know how my folks were with my brother and the way they were with me,” I muttered.

“They were assholes when it came to you. Sorry, not sorry for putting it so bluntly, but they were.”

“Yeah, I know. You don’t have to be sorry for stating the obvious,” I said. “What I never wanted to tell you guys was why they treated me that way.”

“Don’t try to excuse it.”

“I’m not excusing it,” I explained. “I just...they never wanted a second kid.”

“Okay, but they had one, and they should have treated you just as well as they did your brother.”

“It’s because of my brother that they had me,” I said.

“I was a savior, baby. My brother was really sick when he was a kid, so they had me so they’d have a genetic match for him.

Once he wasn’t sick anymore, they were stuck with this kid they didn’t know what to do with and didn’t really have any interest in.

The shitty part is that I get it, and I’m glad that my being born was able to save his life.

I just wish that once they were through harvesting what they needed, they’d have given me to someone who’d have loved me, ‘cause it really sucked watching them spoil my brother and lavish all their time, attention, and affection on him when I’d have loved some too. ”

They gasped, hands flying to their lips, covering them as tears spilled over, a mix of horror and pity on their face that I'd never wanted to see.

"Now you see why I didn't tell you guys."

They shook their head, even as tears coursed down their cheeks.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry."

Stomping their foot, their features morphed into one of outrage and fury.

"Fuck that, you have nothing to be sorry for! Nothing. I wish you'd told us back then.

Oh my god, Axis, that's shitty. And the fact that you can't see how shitty it is, that's even shittier.

You saved his life, and that's how they choose to treat you?

That's bullshit! That's beyond bullshit!

That's one of the cruelest things I've ever heard.

How fuckin' dare they! Oh my god, I better not run into them when I get back home.
,"

"It doesn't matter now. We're grown up, and I rarely bother with them unless I'm summoned home for something, which isn't often. So please, just let it go."

They huffed at that and crossed their arms. "Fine, I won't say anything, but I will glare my fiercest glare and hope like hell it unnerves them. You have to give me that much, at least."

“You can glare,” I relented and found myself engulfed in their embrace.

“Roman and I will just have to love you enough for them and everyone else who's ever treated you poorly,” they said. “And if Mackenzie winds up becoming our daddy, then I know he'll shower love and affection on you, too, the way they should have done.”

I tried to smile at that, but it was hard, because thinking about my folks and the reason for my birth always hurt; another reason this was the first time I'd openly spoken of it.

“I like him a lot,” I admitted, hoping for a subject change. “I love the way he fixed it so Roman could play with us yesterday.”

“Me too. I didn't expect him to spend all his time helping us. He never even cast his line.”

“Because I was too little.”

“There's no such thing as being too little. You can't control how far you regress. I'm glad you were able to get into the headspace you needed to in order to cut loose and enjoy yourself. Besides, it makes me feel like an older sibling.

“I'd have loved having you for my older sibling, though it would make this hella awkward,” I declared, before leaning in and brushing a kiss across their lips that they immediately deepened.

Their fingers tangled in my hair, and a low moan escaped me.

They kissed like they were trying to climb inside me and reclaim all the pieces that had always been theirs.

Melting into it, I urged them to keep on kissing me until I no longer thought about my folks, my brother, or anything else but the feel of their body melded against mine and the lingering essence of the orange creamsicle soda they'd sipped on the way to the maze.

Chapter Fourteen

Roman

“It’s been awhile since I’ve done a climbing wall,” I admitted as we were getting harnessed into our gear.

“You’re not the only one,” Mackenzie said, inclining his head towards where Axis and Ezzy were staring up at the wall, waiting to be told they could start.

“Something tells me they’ll be waiting at the end of the zipline for us, looking for some mischief to get into while we struggle to catch up to them.

“Ezzy, maybe, but Axis has never been a big fan of heights. I was pleasantly surprised when he decided to join us.”

“Really? I never would have guessed.”

“Don’t let the aura he tries to give off fool you,” I said.

“His philosophy has always been fake it until you make it . Only sometimes I wish he’d learn to fake it less and ask for help more.

The one thing I hate more than seeing him struggle, is seeing him get hurt because he’s too proud to back down when he should. ”

“Just remember, there is little chance of him getting hurt today. They’ve got an A+

safety record and experienced staff who will go up after him if he gets stuck and can't work out the right path to take, or freezes because he panics at the height.

When he makes it to the other end, and I have no doubt he will, on sheer stubbornness alone, we can all celebrate with surf and turf.

I've got a huge bag of snow crab legs that are dying to be boiled. ”

“That sounds delicious, but you don't have to cook for us again.”

“Pup, you're doing me a favor by letting me cook,” Mackenzie explained. “It's something I enjoy and rarely indulge in since it's no fun cooking for myself.”

“Ain't that the truth.”

“Are you guys ready?” the climbing master asked.

“As ready as we'll ever be,” Roman declared.

“Then up you go.”

Having the wall and the next handhold to focus on would be good for me and maybe help chase away the twisty feeling that had been tying my stomach in knots since the garden maze yesterday.

Well, more specifically, since Axis and Ezzy had emerged with a reddish tinge to their eyes like they'd been crying.

Both had offered assurances that everything was fine and had even been holding hands, so I'd let it go.

Or at least, I'd tried to. It still bugged me not to know who and what had been the cause, but Mack was right, I needed to stop worrying about every move they made and trust them to discuss things in their own time, without pushing.

Shit. There I was, forgetting to focus again.

The handholds near the bottom were easier, but as we neared the middle of the wall, I started to notice a change in the degree of difficulty and the distance between them.

Of course, this was the wall that had been set up for those who wanted to challenge themselves, while Axis and Ezzy were on the one designed for littles and newbie climbers.

Glancing over, I could see that they were already a little higher than Mack and me, while we were steadily keeping up with one another.

Having time alone together yesterday had taught me that he was as big an outdoorsman as we were and enjoyed staying active, especially when there was water involved.

When he'd started talking about jet skiing I'd found myself looking forward to that adventure, and the adults only night at the waterpark down in his neck of the woods, which I was excited to visit.

Axis, Ezzy, and I were already planning a visit the weekend after we got back home.

Long distance would work out just fine while we were finding our footing, he'd assured me, and in just a short time I was coming to trust in the fact that he was a man of his word and a natural caretaker who enjoyed having others to look after.

Handhold by handhold, I made my way to the top and pulled myself over the lip to

find that Axis and Ezzy were seated next to two other littles at the top of the platform, blowing bubbles and playing with squishy balls while they waited for us.

A mama I recognized from the recreational center was seated next to them, calling encouragement down to her girl and pet, who were working their way up together.

“Whew, we made it,” Mack remarked as he pulled himself up over the lip less than a minute after me.

When he spotted our boys sitting on the mat playing just as nice as could be, he grinned and reached into his pocket, pulled out the treats he was never without, and passed each of them a slice of candied pineapple.

“You guys did an awesome job waiting and not getting impatient and moving along to the ziplines on your own,” he said, ruffling their hair before plucking a water from the big ice bucket beside the crate of toys they were seated near.

We each took a moment to hydrate, then the boys returned their toys to the crate for others to use and stood ready to tackle the next phase.

There were seven ziplines of different lengths and heights awaiting us and Axis looked a little apprehensive.

Before I could say anything, Mack wrapped an arm around him and pointed out the ladder leading down to the base.

“You can go down and wait at the bottom if you’d like, that’s perfectly okay,” Mack told him.

“I-I wanna at least try one,” Axis insisted. “But I think I wanna go first to get it over with.”

“There are ladders that go down from every tower,” the mama said, a kind smile on her face. “My pet was worried about the same thing.”

“Then I really wanna try,” Axis said, his eyes a bit wide as he said it.

“Okay then, you can go first.”

Axis nodded and walked over to the zipline to get clipped in, his steps a little hesitant, but he got there, got hooked in, and screamed all the way down the line, the echo rolling across the wide, open space between us and the tower.

“Wow, he’s got some lungs on him,” the mama said, smiling as her pet and girl finally joined her on top, where she gathered them into a hug and praised them for being so determined. “He did it though.”

“Was he scared too, Mama?” her pet asked.

“He sure was, sweetheart, but remember what I told you. It’s okay to be scared. We’re all scared of something,” she said, giving him another squeeze.

“I’m gonna try too, Mama.” Her pet replied.

“That’s my brave boy.”

Seeing her and other mommies and daddies manage more than one partner with ease had given me a clear look at what poly relationships looked like from the outside.

I’d always thought that the relationship Axis, Ezzy, and I had was rare, but coming here had shown me that in our lifestyle community, it wasn’t at all uncommon.

There was another foursome among the campers.

A leather daddy with three pups, two male and one female.

Watching them had been eye opening. I'd not only gotten to witness the way he cared for them, but the way the three of them cared for each other and brought smiles to their daddy's face with their antics.

The mutual love, affection and care they showed each other was a beautiful thing to see and bolstered my ability to trust that the same thing could be possible for Mack, Axis, Ezzy, and me.

Each moment we spent together left me longing more and more for it to work out.

When Ezzy stepped off the platform, they were giggling, but that giggle soon turned into a bellowed holy shit as they started moving faster and faster away from us.

"I'm gonna have to have a word with them about their language," Mackenzie said. "Given that you guys have been apart for so long, I'm going to guess that there have never been rules and limitations set, or punishments for transgressions?"

"Nope, but when we were young, the thing they always hated most was being sent to the corner or time out chair," I explained.

"So, three minutes a curse word would be a good deterrent?"

"I think so. We can start there, anyway."

"Well then, we'd better catch up and warn them before they let the next one slip," Mackenzie declared, going next on the line.

By the time I followed, enjoying the scenery and the feel of the wind on my face, it was to see Ezzy with a solemn look on their face as Mack finished speaking to them.

“No more cussing,” Ezzy declared. “I promise. I’m sorry.”

“Then you are forgiven, Sparkle Butt, but you will still owe three minutes in the timeout chair when we get back to the cabin,” Mack declared.

Ezzy huffed out a long sigh, before whining, “Okay.”

“You wouldn’t want to get other littles in trouble for copying you, right?” Mack asked.

“That would be bad.”

“Exactly. And that’s what the time out is for. To give you a chance to think about that and all the other reasons we shouldn’t use that kind of language in public.”

“Does that mean I get to cuss when it’s just us?”

“As long as it isn’t excessive and you have a good reason for letting an expletive fly, then yes, cursing is permissible,” Mack said. “But if it starts leading to you letting fly with the colorful language when we’re around others, then we will have to revisit that rule, understood.”

“Yes, da...Mack,” they replied, quickly correcting themselves.

Mack motioned Axis and I over to him and waved for the mama, her little, and pet to go ahead of us, clearly wanting to take a moment to have a conversation right then and there.

“I’m good with any of you calling me daddy whenever you’d like,” he declared.

“Maybe I didn’t make myself clear enough when we were fishing, but it’s perfectly

okay, especially with everything we've discussed over the past few days.

If it's comfortable for you, go ahead and say it.

Personally, I enjoy hearing it from you and look forward to reaching a point in our relationship where we can make it official. ”

“Yey!” Axis declared, already eyeing the other line. “Daddy, I wanna go on the next line.”

“Alright then, let our ziplining adventure continue,” Mack declared.

And continue it did. Somewhere along the line, Axis screamed less and giggled more, finishing all the lines, including the longest one, while Ezzy kept his mouth in check, laughing, but never screaming out another curse word when things got a bit frightening.

It was good practice for the next time we were at an amusement park, since Ezzy was a frequent curser on every rollercoaster and freefall ride.

I wondered if Axis would join us on those in the future, now that he'd discovered how exciting they could be.

They both looked happy, seated beside Mackenzie beneath a tree, enjoying snacks and cold water from a nearby bucket of ice and drinks.

“So, what would you two like to do next?” I asked when I joined them.

“Watch The Avengers and play with action figures,” Ezzy replied. “After I finish my three minutes in time out. “I know they have a bunch of stuff in the activity center, but I'd really like time where it's just us.”

“Me too,” Axis said. “I love all the stuff there is to do, but sometimes it’s a little overwhelming.”

“It is a lot to take in, isn’t it,” Mack said.

“Uh-huh,” they both replied.

“Fortunately, there is plenty more time to try it all, at our own pace, so no one winds up too exhausted, or anxious and over-stimulated, to enjoy themselves.”

“Can we take the floating island out on the lake after supper?” Ezzy asked. “We can float and talk and watch the sun set, then go back in for more Avengers movies?”

“I think that would be a great way to spend the rest of the evening,” I said.

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Mack concurred.

“They have UTVs ready to take us back to the main hall,” I pointed out. “Let’s go catch a ride.”

Ezzy wobbled a little when they stood, and I put my arm around them while they shook their foot. “It fell asleep.”

“I think mine did too,” Mack said, taking a few experimental steps as Axis stood and placed a hand on his arm to steady him. “I’d have been in real trouble if we’d stayed on the ground much longer.”

“Same,” Axis said, while Ezzy snuggled against my side for the walk.

We sat in the far back while Mack and Axis sat in the middle for the drive, though I noticed he didn’t attempt to snuggle and instead, stuck his binky in his mouth before

folding his hands in his lap.

He leaned into the embrace when Mack put an arm around him for the ride and that's when it clicked for me that Axis rarely initiated physical contact with any of us.

He'd never been like that when we were growing up, but the years seemed to have stolen some of the joy he used to get out of being freely and unabashedly affectionate.

Out of all of us, he'd always been the one to seek out hugs, probably because he'd rarely got any at home and craved every opportunity to enjoy them.

Something told me that he hadn't had a lot of that in his life during his time in Portland, but I knew it was way too soon to suggest that he join us in Eugene.

He'd have to make the decision for himself, and I really hoped he would, because we belonged together and we belonged with Mackenzie. The pieces just fit.

In our lifestyle, when you knew, you knew, no matter how short the timeframe.

With gatherings like this being as rare as they were, and kink clubs being few and far between, we had to seize every opportunity that was offered to find happiness.

As we headed for his Jeep to drive back to the cabin, I was firmly convinced that my happiness would only be found with the three of them.

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Chapter Fifteen

Ezzy

“Tag, Tag, Tag!” I chanted as I waved my flashlight around, sending slashes of light all over Roman and the tree he was half hidden behind.

“You got me!” Roman declared, stepping from behind the tree and turning his own flashlight on.

“You’ve got thirty seconds to hide while I hunt for the other two,” he informed me.

Picking my way over branches and logs, I took off in search of the perfect hiding place, only to damn near jump out of my skin when a hand touched my leg.

“Shhhhh.”

My heart felt like it was in my throat when I looked down to see Axis’s face and arm sticking out of a moss covered log.

“Get in, there’s room for both of us,” he whispered, so I did as he said and squirmed up inside the fat hollow log beside him and turned my flashlight off.

“Ro is totally going in the wrong direction,” I whispered, snuggling against him when he lifted his arm to wrap it around me.

In the darkness, I couldn’t see his eyes, but I could feel the warmth radiating off his

body and the way his jeans clung to him like a second skin. Shifting his hips, he turned on his side while I mirrored his movements, the flashlight slipping from my fingers as I slid my hand along his side.

“I think we’re about to tick off another first,” I murmured, brushing a kiss along the edge of his jaw.

The groan he let out sent a shiver up my back as he hauled me closer and slid his fingers through my hair, then kissed me like it was the last time he’d ever have the opportunity.

There were probably grubs in this log, and spiders, and who knew what else, but I couldn’t have cared if there were ladybugs crawling all over me; every moment was perfect.

Deepening the kiss, I plastered my chest against his, slid my hand beneath his shirt, and lightly raked my nails down his back, just to feel him arch and rock his hips.

He was as hard as I was, fingers digging into the ass of my jogging pants as he rocked me against him.

We made out like the teenagers we’d been the last time we’d done this, rocking, squirming, and breathing hard and heavy as we sought as much pleasure as we could manage before we got caught and one of us had to take over being it.

My hair snarled on some bark, and I hissed, freezing as the strands were pulled, but the careful way he untangled them and kept his hand pressed against the back of my head so it wouldn’t happen again soon had me forgetting all about the slight bit of pain I’d felt.

His fingers were cold when he slid them beneath the waistband of my joggers and

over my ass, chuckling against my lips.

“Commando?” He murmured.

“I may have forgotten to pack enough underwear,” I admitted, giggling, which almost turned out to be our undoing.

Footsteps crunched over leaves, hurrying in our direction, while Axis tried to stifle my giggles with a scorching kiss that left us panting. Fortunately, the loud hooting of an owl drowned out his groan of need.

“Fuck you, owl, goddammit,” Roman murmured before the sound of his feet snapping twigs headed off in a different direction.

Axis tipped his head back, and I kissed his throat, nipping and sucking on the skin until he squirmed and gasped, clinging to me tight enough that I was certain there would be a handprint on my ass and a bruise or two from the knobs that pressed against my hip and thigh when I rocked over them.

I was just about to beg for more skin when a low rumble of thunder reached my ears, followed by a flash of lightning so bright it illuminated everything.

The hair on my arms stood up as I froze, trembling for an entirely different reason now.

“We need to get you back to the cabin,” Axis said, seeking his flashlight the same way my fingers were scrabbling against the bark, trying to find mine.

He remembered that I hated being outside in a storm. A close call with a lightning bolt in my childhood treehouse had left me terrified of it. He kept hold of my hand as we squirmed out, our flashlights in his other hand, the beams bright when he turned

them on before handing mine to me.

The next roll of thunder made me flinch and squeeze his hand tighter as we made our way back towards the cabin, illuminated in the distance when the next lightning strike came and the sky unleashed a torrent of rain all over us.

“Boys!” Mackenzie bellowed, a beam of light cutting through the raindrops as he called for us. “Call out if you can hear me!”

“We’re here!” I hollered and sprinted towards him, tugging Axis now.

I forgot to be careful and fell, the collision with the ground just as jarring as the thunder. Axis’ hands were firm beneath my arms as he hauled me up and wrapped an arm around me, hurrying me towards the light and Mack.

“Have you seen Roman?” Mack asked.

“He ran past us right before the storm started,” Axis said. “I can find him if you’ll take Ezzy in; they’re scared of storms.”

Without even waiting for an answer, he propelled me into Mackenzie’s arms, whirled, and disappeared back into the woods as Mack bellowed, Wait!” Not that Axis slowed down, not even a little.

The next boom of thunder erupted in an explosion of sound, and I shirked and buried my face against Mack’s chest and sobbed.

“Let’s get you inside,” Mack declared, scooping me up and carrying me up the stairs and into the cabin.

Shaking, I clung to him as the cold air from the air conditioner hit like a slap to my

face, making me shiver harder.

“Let’s get you out of those wet clothes and get you dry,” Mack said, carrying me into my room and the bathroom on the opposite side.

In no time at all, he had a warm shower going, my clothes off, and was easing me beneath the spray, now that I’d stopped clinging to him.

“Do storms always scare you this badly, Ezzy?” He asked as the warm water made it so I finally stopped shivering so hard.

“Only when I’m outside in them,” I explained. “It rolled up so fast, I never even heard it before the thunder was right over us.”

“There were rumbles in the distance, but when I called for you all, no one answered.”

“I didn’t hear you,” I said. “Axis and I were hiding in a hollow log and were too distracted to notice.”

“Too distracted, huh?” he replied, chuckling. “I can only imagine what you two were getting up to in that log.”

“Kissing,” I said. “Lots and lots of kissing.”

“Really. No wonder you hid yourselves so well.”

“It was his hiding spot until he decided to share it with me,” I replied.

Mackenzie chuckled again, the sound low and rolling over me now that I was warm beneath the spray and could appreciate the rumble of his voice. “Guess sharing really is caring.”

“In this instance, it really was.”

“I just hope they bring their asses back here soon,” he said. “That storm outside sounds like it’s getting bad.”

“Axis won’t give up until he finds him,” I said.

“Then I hope like hell he finds him quickly.”

“Me too.”

Warm, I turned off the shower and pushed the curtain aside to see him waiting with my towel held open for me.

As soon as I stepped out onto the mat, he wrapped it around me and started drying me off, grabbing a second for my hair and rubbing to keep me from losing any of the warmth the water had given back to me.

“Ready to get dressed, Sparkle Butt?” he asked.

“I think so,” I said, sighing as he held me and rested his chin on the top of my head. “Everything is gonna be okay, I promise.”

With his arms around me, we went back to the main part of my room, where I slid into the one pair of footed pajamas I’d brought with me.

“Maybe we should turn the air conditioner down a little, at least until the others get back and have a chance to get warm too,” he said, heading for the thermostat when the door slammed open and a dripping, muddy Roman burst in.

“Oh, thank the gods!” he declared, rushing over to me. “Are you okay? Did you get

caught in the storm? I couldn't find you guys and wandered all the way over to the next cabin before I realized I'd gone too far."

"Where's Axis?" Mack snapped, cutting through his explanation. "Didn't he find you?"

"No, I was it , so I was looking for you guys."

"Axis got me out of the woods, then ran back looking for you," I blurted. "We were hiding in a log, and you passed us."

"Son of a," Roman growled, whirling, about to plunge back into the storm again when Mack grabbed his arms.

"No, no one else is going back out into the woods," Mack declared. "Ezzy, do you know if he had his cell phone on him?"

"Yeah, I could feel it in his back pocket when we were making out."

"Good, call it, and let's hope he's got the ringtone up high enough to hear it."

It dawned on me then that I didn't have his number, but Roman did, and he rushed into his room for his phone.

"Come on, come on, come on, pick up," Roman growled, dripping water all over the floor while he paced. "Axis!"

Silence followed for several seconds, until Roman snarled and barked into the device. "Shut up and listen to me; I'm fine! I'm back at the cabin; now you need to turn the fuck around and get back here!"

More silence.

“Yes, yes, I said I was fine, didn’t I? Clean the water out of your ears and listen to me. I’m soaked but perfectly fuckin’ okay, which I won’t be if I have to go out there and drag your ass back. So come the fuck on!”

I watched him scrub a hand over his face, looking equal parts frustrated and relieved.

“We’ll watch for him; you go change and get warm,” Mack said as he moved around the room, turning more lights on in the house so Axis would have an easier time finding his way back.

“Yeah, I guess I’d better,” Roman muttered, casting a glance at the door before he trudged to his bathroom.

I stood with my nose pressed to the window, staring out into the night, waiting to see a flashlight beam through the tree line and heavy rain. It was next to impossible to make out anything through the heavy beads of rain running down the window.

“He’ll be alright,” Mack said, draping an arm over my shoulder as he joined me at the window.

“If I hadn’t been so afraid, he might have been able to catch up to Roman. He couldn’t have been too far away when the first lightning crash startled us.”

“None of that now,” Mack said. “No one is at fault. The storm caught us off guard, and he did what he felt was best to make certain you would both be safe.”

“I just wish he’d let us keep him safe for once since no one else ever has!” I cried, then slapped my hands over my mouth, too afraid of blurting out the secret Axis had shared with me.

He squeezed me a little tighter and kept on holding me until finally, we saw light followed by heavy footsteps thudding up the stairs. Axis was thoroughly drenched when he came in; shirt, jeans, every stitch of clothing plastered to his skin.

“Are you okay now?” he asked me the moment our eyes met.

“Am I...” sputtering, I gestured to him dripping all over the floor. “You should be worried about you!”

“I’m no wetter than I’d be if I’d fallen in the lake,” he declared, flashing me one of his trademark grins as he knelt to remove his shoes and socks. “I’ll go change before I make more of a mess.”

All I could do was throw my hands up and watch him go, while Mackenzie retrieved the mop from the supply closet and cleaned up the puddles Axis and Roman had made while I headed to the kitchen to make cocoa.

When Roman stepped out, still towel-drying his hair, his gaze darted around the room, immediately spotting the soaked sneakers beneath the rack.

“Did he look okay when he got back?” Roman asked. “He didn’t look hurt or anything, did he?”

“Not that I could see,” I said.

“Good. I can’t believe he tore off into the storm to look for me.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a fuckin’ mess out there.”

“You’d have done the same thing,” I reminded him.

“The difference is that I have the training to handle myself.”

“Doubt training matters much to him when someone he loves is in danger,” Mack pointed out. “Now let’s all settle down and get our emotions back in check. Something tells me that all scolding him will do is hurt his feelings, which I doubt either of you wants to do.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Roman said. “The last thing I want is for him to think I don’t appreciate what he did. Was just worried when I realized he was out there running around looking for me.”

“We all were, but it’s over now, so let’s find something soothing to put on while we get over the scare we had, okay?”

“Cocoa will be ready in a few minutes,” I declared.

“Good, that should help chase any lingering chill away.”

“Could you stay the night with us?” I blurted. “We could all sleep out here; there’s plenty of room. We can drag a couple mattresses out or sleep on the couch and in the chairs.”

“I think two mattresses would make it far easier to get some cuddle time in, which I think we could all use,” Mackenzie said. “Of course I’ll stay.”

“Let’s grab mine and Ezzy’s,” Roman declared.

“Yeah, and my octopus too, please,” I called after them as I stirred the chocolate and milk mixture as it slowly began to melt.

Too hot and I'd scald the milk or burn the chocolate, which was the last thing I wanted to do. Cuddles, cocoa, and a movie we'd probably fall asleep to really would be the best way to settle all the frazzled nerves in the room.

The only one of us who didn't seem frazzled was Axis when he stepped out of his room several minutes later in sleep pants and an Anarchy T-shirt, a bright smile on his face when he saw the blanket-covered mattresses on the floor.

"We're having a sleepover?" He declared. "Awesome."

"Yes," Mack said. "We're having a sleepover, but before you get in that bed, you are going to come here and let me dry your hair."

"It's okay, I can dry it," he declared, tugging his braid forward so he could undo the elastic on the end and start undoing the braid.

"Maybe I'd like to do it," Mackenzie said, approaching him with the towel.

I knew that expression; Axis was confused and even a little uncertain, like he really didn't understand why Mack wanted to take care of him. It hurt my heart to see that look on his face, knowing what I knew, but Mack didn't hesitate; he just moved around behind him and finished undoing his braid.

"Was a brave thing you did," Mack murmured as he finished undoing the strands and took the second elastic out.

As Mackenzie's fingers carded through Axis' hair, I could see the confusion begin to fade as his eyelids fluttered and he gave in to the sensation.

He'd always loved having his hair played with, but seeing his initial hesitation left me certain that having someone do that for him was rare.

Turning off the burner, I set about filling the mugs while I waited for the chance to hold him and thank him for what he'd done for me.

Something told me that he really needed to hear that and more from all of us.

Chapter Sixteen

Mackenzie

We arranged Ezzy and Axis in between us so they could cuddle, with Roman snuggled up behind Ezzy while I held Axis, who gave me the same confused look when I went to hold him as he'd given me when I'd moved to tend to his hair.

For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what I'd done to cause it, but I was sure as fuck going to find a way to fix it.

With Madagascar on the television and Axis stroking his cheek and hair, Ezzy had succumbed to the pull of sleep first with Roman drifting off soon afterwards.

Even after he was out, Axis kept stroking Ezzy's cheek, occasionally moving down to his arm or fussing with the blankets, pulling them up around him.

"You're gonna wake him if you keep that up," I whispered as I stroked his hair back from his ear.

His hand fluttered, then finally went still, resting on Ezzy's hip.

"Did I do something to upset you?" I asked, deciding to go for bluntness and hope he was willing to talk to me.

"No."

“Then why have you been pulling away from me?”

“I haven’t.”

“Don’t bullshit a bullshitter, kid; I can tell when something is wrong. You didn’t even want me to dry your hair tonight.”

“Wasn’t that I didn’t want you to; I just didn’t need you to when I could do it myself.” He replied. “There was no need for you to make a fuss over me.”

“Why not?”

“‘Cause I was fine. The storm didn’t bother me any.”

“Maybe it bothered me, knowing you were out there running around alone trying to find Roman.”

“Who didn’t need any help at all,” he muttered. “Guess it was kinda dumb.”

“No, it wasn’t. What if he had needed help? You did what I wanted to do; only you took the choice out of my hands when you tore off like that.”

“Ezzy needed you.”

“Yeah, he did; you’re right about that,” I replied. “But it’s okay to need me too, I hope you know that.”

His silence said more than any bullshit answer he might have tried to concoct.

“Only you don’t, do you?”

“I’ve needed a lot of things I’ve never gotten,” he admitted, much to my surprise.

“So you learned how to stop wanting them.”

“Pretty much.”

Sighing, I pressed my nose to his hair and inhaled the scent of rainwater still clinging to it. “I hope that in time you’ll let me change that.”

Again he said nothing.

“Uh-huh, still wanna stick to your story about nothing being wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he insisted. “I just don’t want to get too used to this, or you, knowing that in a little over a week, we go back to reality.”

“And what, exactly, is reality as you see it?”

Now he sighed and leaned away from me to press his forehead against Ezzy’s.

“They’re going home together, and I’m going back to Portland.

You guys have real jobs with time constraints.

When it comes down to it, it’ll make far more sense for you to visit them or for them to visit you when you’ve got time freed up. ”

“And you can’t join us?”

“Weekends are kinda busy for me,” he admitted. “It’s when I do most of my playing.”

Ahh, now we were getting someone. He had a point too.

Weekends in the music industry were when the bulk of your money was made.

It would present a problem, but not an insurmountable one.

During my conversation with Roman in the garden maze, he'd let slip that he hoped a time would come when he and Ezzy could convince Axis to return home to Eugene.

"We'll figure something out."

"There's no need to go through that kind of trouble for me. I'm not worth it."

"Who told you that?"

He shook his head, going silent on me again. If he really thought I was going to accept that as an answer, then he had another think coming.

"Axis, I asked you a question," I said, putting a bit of added bass in my voice.

"I've never been anything but spare parts and attitude," he murmured.

"If my folks couldn't love me, then how the hell is anyone else supposed to?"

No matter what I do, no matter how hard I try, I'm never good enough, I'll never be good enough, and I'm too goddamn stubborn to stop trying, which makes it that much worse.

I'm tired of making things worse, and I'm tired of failing.

You three are gonna be perfect together.

Anyone with eyes can see that. I'm not gonna get in the way, and I'm not gonna fuck things up for them.

They need you, and I think you need them.

Ro always tried to be our protector, but watching you with them, you're the real protector, and once he sees that, he'll finally get to cut loose, enjoy being a pet, and let someone else take care of him for a change. ”

Selfless little shit. I saw where this was headed.

He was attempting to erase himself from the occasion.

Well, I hope he caught a clue right fuckin' quick that I was never going to allow that to happen.

While I had no goddamn clue what he meant about that spare parts line, him feeling like his folks didn't love him gave me some insight into the song I'd overheard and the broodiness he sunk into from time to time.

“You listen to me, and you listen good,” I growled, feeling him shiver as my lips brushed against his ear.

“I am not letting any of you go, understand me? You three belong to me. The rest we'll figure out as we move forward.

Now, someone has done a real number on your self-esteem, and you're gonna tell me about that right now, or there will be consequences. ”

“Like what, you gonna put me over your knee? I like spankings, but they're not gonna make me tell you anything I don't want to.”

“And snark and that attitude you were talking about isn’t gonna make me turn my back on you either, so spill it.”

“You should tell him what you told me,” Ezzy muttered sleepily. “I don’t like keeping that secret.”

“Shhhhh,” Axis whispered. “Go back to sleep before you wake Ro.”

“Already awake, fucker, and I’ve known you’ve been keeping something from me for a while now,” Roman growled. “Since Ezzy already knows, you might as well tell the rest of us, ‘cause you’ve been pulling away from me too, ever since the pond.”

“Because you wasted too much of your day helping me!” He snapped, no longer trying so hard to keep his voice down since we were all awake.

“It wasn’t a waste, dammit, especially not when I got to see you finally slip into little space and play without a care in the world.”

“And look at what it took to get me there,” he pointed out, leaving me confused, since I hadn’t been with them as they’d been getting ready.

“It’ll get easier once you start to accept that we’re not gonna ditch you for needing a little help slipping into the right headspace,” Ezzy said, cupping his cheek.

“I get it, I do. It wasn’t easy for me in the beginning either.

Letting my guard down and being vulnerable while still trying to figure out if I could trust the person I was with, it’s a lot.

But you’re back with us now, and you’ve never been too much for us.

I used to wish you'd let us give you more hugs and more cuddles, 'cause I knew you never got any at home, but if I'd known why, I'd have made damn sure you spent more time at my place and far away from those shitheads. ”

“Ezzy, it's not their fault. Like I told you in the maze, they were just doing what they had to do to save my brother.”

“Okay, fill in the gaps for the rest of the room, for fuck's sake,” Ro snapped. “I'm already getting pissed. At this point I just need to know who the fuck to cuss out!”

“One of over a dozen reasons why I've never told you,” Axis pointed out.

“Well, I'd like you to tell me now, please, 'cause you're really starting to worry me.”

“They never hurt me,” he blurted, easing the knot that had begun to form in my chest as I'd leapt to the same conclusion Roman had.

“Not physically, you mean,” Ezzy spat. “But emotional abuse and neglect is still abuse.”

“I wouldn't say they neglected me,” Axis insisted. “I never went without anything. I had a room, clothes, food, and school supplies; they made sure I got checkups and eye exams and all that shit.”

“But they still ignored you and failed to show any interest in the things that were important to you,” Ezzy said. “That is neglect, Axis; no matter how hard you try to defend them, they didn't treat you right, and you know it.”

“They were disappointing, but lots of kids' parents disappoint them,” Axis said. “Maybe if I'd fallen in line and learned to do as I was told, things would have been better, but I couldn't stop myself from being so stubborn.”

“You are who you are,” I told him. “Something tells me you have a reason for being stubborn.”

“Because I wanted to have some choice in who I was,” he said, sucking in a breath and holding it a moment before letting it out in a long, shuddering exhale.

“To them, I was the kid they had to save their other kid. I was a means to an end. This rare mix of genetic material to be preserved in case my brother ever needed blood, bone marrow, or platelets again. They couldn’t give me away, ‘cause what if whoever adopted me wouldn’t consent to me donating again?”

They had to keep me for Ander, but they really didn’t have time for another kid. ”

“I’ve heard of that,” I said. “I forget what they call the baby, but I know there is a term for a child who is conceived to save another child.”

“Savior baby,” Axis said. “And yeah, that’s exactly what I am.”

“I see,” I said.

“Well, I don’t,” Roman declared. “I need you to spell it out a little better. Are you saying that they harvested your blood and stuff when you were a kid?”

“Cord blood and everything, at least according to my mom,” Axis explained.

“They harvested a bunch of eggs from my mom and used genetic testing and in-vitro fertilization to implant the one that was a genetic match for my brother. Me. It gave Ander the best chance at survival, and look how well it worked out; he made it all the way to the NFL.”

“And became a raging dick along the way,” Roman spat.

I shot him a look that I hoped he'd interpret the way I intended. I could understand him being upset, since he'd have firsthand knowledge of the brother's behavior, but I needed him to tone it down a little before Axis shut down on us.

"You know what jock culture is like," Axis said, shoulder flexing beneath my chin as he shrugged it.

"Oh my god, if you defend them one more time, I'm going to be the one to put you over my knee, and I guarandamntee you won't enjoy it!" Ezzy snarled, the outrage in their voice unmistakable.

They wasn't even trying to look at me, so shooting them a look would be utterly useless. Ezzy glared at Axis and caressed his cheek as Axis cupped his hand to keep it pressed there while he nuzzled against it.

"I don't mean to defend them," Axis said. "I just don't want to hate them, and I don't want you guys to hate them or Ander."

"Which is another reason you never told us," Roman surmised.

"Pretty much," Axis admitted. "I always thought that if I could do something truly spectacular, like with my band, that I could measure up to Ander and show them that I was more than just the spare parts they'd needed to keep Ander alive.

I thought I could make them see me as something separate from the fear and the pain they went through, and when that happened, I just knew they'd fall in love with me and everything would be okay. "

"But it wouldn't have been okay if we hated them, because then you wouldn't get the perfect scene you'd built in your head," Ezzy murmured, huffing as they scooted closer and pressed their forehead to Axis's chest. "I think I understand now. You saw

the way our families were and how any of us was always welcomed and made to feel like a member of the family when we visited each other's houses, and you wanted that too. I can't blame you for that."

Ezzy's fingertips scraped over my abs as they snaked a hand between us so they could hug Axis, the pair clinging to one another while Roman hugged them and I tried to hug the three of them and almost pulled it off.

I got a hand on Roman's shoulder, and that was about it, but I still felt like it connected the four of us together.

I nuzzled the back of Axis' neck and spoke directly into his ear so there would be no chance of him misunderstanding me.

"From here on out, I only want you to be who you are and who you want to be," I growled.

"You! Not who you think your parents want you to be, not who you were trying to be for them, and not who you think you need to be for anyone else, got it. You need to follow your heart so maybe you can start loving yourself the way we love you!"

"You can't lo..." he began only to have me cut him off.

"You don't ever get to tell anyone what they can or can't feel; you don't have the right," I told him.

"If you choose not to accept it or to keep your feelings to yourself, that's your choice, and no one gets to tell you that you're wrong.

Every individual gets to define time and what's right for them in their own manner, even in a relationship, so shut it. "

I heard his teeth clack a little as he snapped his lips closed.

“Now, as I was saying, it’s time for you to let go of other people’s expectations and be true to yourself.

If you want something, be honest enough to ask for it; if you’re afraid of something, be honest enough to admit it; and if you’re worried about something, then goddammit, ask questions to get clarification rather than sitting around anxious and confused.

Your feelings matter, joyful ones and the dark ones too, so stop trying to bury them, stop trying to sabotage what has the potential to be a beautiful situation for all of us, and for fuck’s sake, stop trying to make yourself the odd man out ‘cause none of us are ever gonna allow that!”

I felt his breath hitch before he whimpered and let out a sob he muffled against Ezzy’s shoulder.

We held him as he cried. I hoped purging some of the emotions he held so tightly leashed inside would help him start to heal and feel better about the man he was and the sweet, sweet little he kept buried inside.

Chapter Seventeen

Axis

The storm ushered in two days of heat and sunshine, which we spent mostly on the lake, relaxing on the floating island, swimming, diving, and lazing about all day, before retreating to the cabin for movies, playtime, and story time with Daddy Mack reading to us.

Daddy Mack.

In my head I could say it without feeling a twinge of fear and uncertainty, but I still felt cautious about saying it out loud and accepting everything he was still trying to offer me.

He was right, though. I'd never be able to trust in his feelings if I couldn't see any worth in myself.

I knew I was gonna struggle with that for a while.

I'd been struggling with it all my life.

Tonight, we were inside, with Thor on and a crate of Marvel action figures we'd emptied on the floor to divide between us.

"Daddy gets to be Thor!" Ezzy declared. "Since he looks a little like Thor, especially when he gets fierce and frownie."

“Daddy wouldn’t have to get fierce or frownie if a certain little Sparkle Butt wouldn’t scare Daddy half to death hurtling off things, or in this case, letting someone fling him in some crazy human cannonball contraption.

You better believe that camp management made those littles dismantle that thing and promise not to build anything like it during the remainder of their time here. ”

“But I flew all the way out into the lake,” Ezzy declared.

“Yes, you did, and took a year off my life with it,” Daddy said.

“Mine too,” Ro replied, as I buckled his headpiece on.

As soon as I got it fitted, he threw his head back and howled. He’d gotten into full pup gear tonight, and I was excited to see what he’d do once we started playing.

“Puppy!” Ezzy declared, leaving the Thor figure with Daddy before bounding over to hug Roman, who immediately started wiggling his rear to make his tail wag.

Tonight I’d put on my black and purple onesie.

It had feet, and a hood, and everything.

Both sides had the same print of moons, roses, and coffins; only one side was purple, and the other was black.

It was one of my favorites and one I snuggled up with around my apartment whenever I wanted to lounge around, brood, and see how many movies I could binge in an afternoon.

Daddy had called it; I did brood a lot. I even looked for broody places I could hunker

down in when I was in a mood.

I shouldn't be in a mood here in this amazing place, especially when we were having so much fun playing and cutting loose.

Yet every morning, I looked for a new place to scowl and work on lyrics.

These past few mornings, Ezzy had gone with me, with his own backpack full of pens and notebooks, to work in the silence of the morning not far from wherever I sat.

Hands settled on my shoulders, and I nearly jumped out of my skin before I realized it was just Mack.

When had Daddy moved? He'd been clear across the room a minute ago?

Only when I focused on the television did I realize that more than a few minutes had passed.

We were already in Asgard with all the glittery gold buildings and clouds. Guess I'd gotten lost in my head again.

I felt a light tug on my hoodie as Daddy tugged it down and buried his hands in my hair, fisting the strands, tugging lightly, and forcing me to sit up straighter as he leaned in and sniffed my hair.

"How do you still smell like rain?" He growled. "Even after all the swimming and showering off the leaf debris, you still smell like rain."

"Sounds almost like song lyrics when you say it like that," I moaned, letting my head tilt back completely as he started massaging my scalp.

“Good, think of it as a song and get lost in it,” he told me. “You did such a good job helping Roman get ready. Did it help you a little to focus on someone other than yourself?”

“Yeah,” I murmured. “I couldn’t think about other stuff while I was doing it.”

“But when you stopped, your thoughts started swirling.”

“Just a little.”

“Let’s get that part to stop completely so daddy’s little Lightning Bug can relax and enjoy the evening.”

Blinking, I sat there stunned while he trailed his fingers through my hair as the words sank in.

Last night we’d finally gotten to chase the lightning bugs along the edge of the pond after we’d come in from swimming, and when they’d all gone away, I’d held my flashlight beneath my chin, blinking it on and off while Ezzy and Ro chased me around until we were all exhausted.

Earlier in the day, Roman had gotten a nickname too.

His was Water Bug, and it truly fit him.

Until a moment ago I was scared that I wasn’t gonna get one.

Now I spun into Daddy’s embrace, tugging my hair a little in my rush to hug him.

If he’d been near the top, it would have really hurt.

As it was, I wrapped some around my neck as I spun and choked myself a little.

He hugged me back just as tight and hard, stroked my hair, and murmured in my ear, making me shiver and press tighter to him.

“I just needed to find the right one.” He said, nuzzling my neck.

Melting against him, movie forgotten, I stayed that way as the whirlwind inside my head began to settle.

Yes, I was insecure, and I hated it. Deep down I still felt like I needed to do something, anything, to show that I could be special too, only now I wasn’t sure who I wanted to prove it to more, my folks or me?

I guess the real problem was that I couldn’t see myself as more than spare parts and a donor supply for my brother.

Daddy was right. Until that changed, nothing ever would.

All this time, I’d stayed away from there because I hadn’t wanted to run into them until I had something positively amazing to share.

But did I really want pride to keep me away from Ezzy and Roman once they got home or from joining in on fun times with Daddy when he visited?

It was less than a two-hour drive from Portland to Eugene, especially with the way I drove.

Maybe I couldn’t join for Friday nights and Saturday, but if I took off after a show on Saturday night, I could get there in time for story hour and have all of Sunday to spend with them. That would be something at least.

Or you could just bite the bullet and go home!

The voice in the back of my head was loud today, constantly trying to remind me that there were plenty of clubs that would love to have me play in and around Eugene.

My online work, including the voice acting and the jingles, could be done from anywhere, and again, the distance was close enough that I could drive to Portland whenever I felt like playing a bigger venue.

It was possible.

But I'd wait to see how things unfolded a few weeks down the line, once we'd gotten back to our daily lives.

Mack could easily decide that he wasn't up to the task of maintaining a long-distance relationship with three different people, and a little part of me was scared that Ezzy and Ro would blame it on me.

For the rest of the time we were here, I'd work harder at being less complicated and difficult if I could only stay the fuck out of my head.

Even leaning against Mack I was thinking too hard, but if he noticed, he didn't say anything. He just steadily stroked my hair, low, rumbling sounds coming from him that sounded almost like...wait...it was a song. He was singing to me.

Focus on that, not anything else.

At least this time the voice in my head was attempting to be helpful.

Focus on that.

Focus on the music.

Now that I had always been able to do.

Closing my eyes, I gave myself over to the rolling timber and the rise and rumbling fall of the notes.

The best part was that pressed against him, I could feel the melody along my skin.

It made the hair on my arms stand up, and prickles surge up my spine like rolling spirals of electricity, until it curled up the back of my neck and made me shiver.

Someday, I'd try and put this feeling to music, the tidal wave of endorphins whiting out everything else whirling around in my head.

Flattening all thought, it let me dial in on Daddy's voice.

Daddy wanted to play with me.

And Daddy's Little Firefly wanted to play with him and my friends. Slowly, I let the song help me tuck my big boy problems away. We both knew they weren't gone, but I needed to let them go for now; put them on the shelf with all the stress and worry.

Like picking up toys. The time for big boy things was over.

"Can I be the Winter Soldier?" I asked, slowly drawing back from Daddy to see him smile at me.

"I think so; I'm almost certain I saw one in the crate when I packed it," Mack said as he smoothed the hair back from my face. "Let's go see if we can find it."

“Thank you, Daddy!”

It felt amazing to see the smile that word put on his face, and my little butt wiggled as I crawled away from him to search through the toys on the floor. He caught up to me and pulled my hood up, the two coffin-shaped ears at the top bobbing as I continued my search.

“Here he is!” I declared, holding him over my head and waving him so Ezzy and Ro could see too.

“Winter Soldier!” Ezzy cried. “I’m gonna be Captain America!”

He wiggled past me to search for the action figure while Ro pounced me and pinned me to one of the couch cushions we’d spread around.

“Woof, woof!” He barked, rubbing noses with me and nuzzling.

I rubbed his ears and scratched behind them until he finally let me up, only to whirl around and smack me in the face with his tail as he snatched up an action figure before bounding away to claim a pillow.

It took us a while to all get settled. By then, Thor was already wrecking trees and people with his hammer, so Daddy made his Thor fly through the air and knock over a stack of Jenga blocks still piled up from our last game.

Ezzy squealed and clapped while I giggled, and Daddy had Thor fly high above the mess.

“I’ve vanquished thee, foul pile of wood!” Daddy growled in his best Thor voice, waving his hammer over them like he was daring one of them to move.

“Ruff! Rurrrrrrr! Ruff! Ruff!” Ro cried, with Deadpool’s dog Peggy clutched in his paw.

He bounced her over to the fallen Jenga pieces and pressed her face to them like she was gnawing on a chunk.

Ezzy crawled over with Captain America, and we hunted for the Red Skull figure.

Once we had him, Ezzy sat Captain America on top of him, pinning him down, while I crawled around, looking for something to tie him up with.

Daddy’s shoelace was in his boot, but I tugged it free and dragged it back so the Winter Soldier could tie him up while Captain America kept him pinned.

Villain vanquished, we looked for more wrongs to make right and spotted Daddy tickling Ro, who was squirming and wiggling around on his back, four paws waving as Daddy tickled his belly.

“Evil tickle monster!” I declared.

“Save Ro!” Ezzy cried as we crawled as fast as we could with our action figures to tackle Daddy.

We tickled him for tickling Ro and discovered Daddy had ticklish spots. His belly, behind his knees, and the inside of his elbows. Roman got in on the tickling too, the three of us pinning Daddy to the floor as our laughter filled the cabin.

“I give, I give, Thor has been vanquished,” Daddy cried. “By the halls of Valhalla, stop this infernal tickling!”

Ro and I tickled more, while Ezzy flew Captain America high over Daddy’s

squirming body.

“Do you yield to the shield of Captain America!” Ezzy asked.

We paused to see how Daddy answered, only when I looked up, I could only cock my head and study the toy they held, ‘cause something was missing.

“Ruff! Ruff! Ruff!” Ro barked, tail wagging as he batted his paw at the shield Ezzy had dropped on one of the blankets.

Ezzy’s face grew pink as they scooped it up and snapped it back over Captain America’s arm. “Now are you ready to yield to the shield, Daddy!” Ezzy announced, while Daddy snickered and slapped a hand over his eyes.

“I yield,” Daddy muttered. “But I really wish I had a video of that, Sparkle Butt. I bet it would get a million laughs and smiley faces.”

“It just did get all the laughs,” Ezzy declared. “Yours are the only ones that matter.”

We let Daddy sit up so he could hug Ezzy, then Ro and I knocked them over with a hug so we could get in on the cuddles too.

We ended up squishing them to the cushions where we could all watch the movie for a little bit.

Daddy slipped his hand beneath my hood and petted my hair, his other hand stroking up and down Roman’s back as Ezzy lay snuggled up against his side, their head on Daddy’s chest. Everything felt warm and comfy, like the biggest hug I’d ever received.

“It looks like my boys, with the help of their faithful hound, have vanquished Thor

and claimed Asgard as their personal cuddle space,” Daddy declared. “Long live the lords of Asgard. Sparkle Butt, Firefly, and Water Bug!”

Ezzy and I giggled and cheered at hearing that, while Roman barked and pawed Daddy’s chest until Daddy rubbed his ears again.

“I’m not moving from this spot for a while, am I?” Daddy asked.

“Nope!” I said, sighing as he stroked my hair some more.

“You’re our prisoner, Daddy,” Ezzy declared, draping an arm across his abs and squeezing him.

“Rurf!” Roman barked, short and sweet.

“Well, that was a no if I ever heard one,” Daddy muttered, chuckling as he wiggled, just a little, before letting out a soft sigh. “Not a bad place to get stuck, if I’m being honest.”

I felt Daddy relax beneath us and settle down until we were ready for more adventure with our action figures. As I got cozy and finally settled in to watch a chunk of the movie, all I could think was...

Best. Feeling. Ever.

Chapter Eighteen

Roman

I woke to a hiss and a sigh, the low sounds making my cock ache.

Rolling, I fought to focus blinking eyes on whoever was making those sounds and soon zoned in on an Axis and Ezzy make out session.

Axis was on top, long hair blocking me from seeing what was going on, but there was no mistaking those sounds.

Ezzy had one hand snarled in Axis' hair and the other pushing at the sleeve of his onesie.

When Axis threw his head back with a groan, I palmed myself and slowly rubbed as more skin was revealed.

Ezzy's face, when Axis sat up, was one of focus and desire as they eased the zipper the rest of the way down and helped Axis peel it to his waist. When those pierced nipples were revealed, Ezzy surged up and seized one of the hoops in his teeth, tugging and causing Axis to hiss and rock against him.

"I want all of this off," Ezzy demanded when they released the piercing.

"Why, you wanna see the rest of the jewelry I've got in?" Axis murmured.

“There’s more?” Ezzy groaned, pushing at the fabric now.

“Oh, there’s more.”

Shit, even I didn’t know about the piercings that lay beyond what was revealed when he was in board shorts.

He’d had boxers on when we’d helped him dress for the little’s fishing derby, and damn it all, now I was too curious to hold still.

I wanted to see everything without disrupting the flow of what they had going on.

Watching the graceful way Axis slid down Ezzy’s legs, shoving their top out of the way so he could nibble skin, got me even harder.

Ezzy’s moans made it easy to shift my position a little at a time while steadily watching them.

“If you get to look, I wanna look too,” Axis whispered, having reached Ezzy’s shorts, fingers gripping the edges but not tugging.

Their gazes locked, and Ezzy smirked and flicked out their tongue before lifting their hips, allowing Axis to remove their shorts.

Holy fuck, they were naked underneath, and I had to stifle a groan as I watched Axis shake his head, spilling long tendrils of his hair across the abs he’d just exposed.

Ezzy’s little giggle was punctuated with a gasp when Axis shook it wildly, draping some across Ezzy’s cock.

I’d seen them play this way when we were teenagers: teasing, exploring, and ramping

up the undercurrent of desire between them.

It had taken me a little while to get with the foreplay parts.

Watching had always been more my thing. I'd wait for one of them to beg me to fuck them before I jumped in, usually while one was pleasuring the other, which it looked like Axis was going to do, rather than strip.

Sure as shit, he ducked his head, nuzzled Ezzy's cock, and made them groan as his hands settled on Ezzy's hips, pinning them in place before he wrapped his lips around the head of Ezzy's cock and hummed.

"Eeep!" Ezzy gasped, gripping his hair as Axis did it again.

"Shhhhhh," Axis hissed before making it extremely difficult for Ezzy to comply with the request by licking them like a popsicle while keeping them from trying to squirm away.

I had the perfect vantage point to see Axis's tongue lave over Ezzy's skin.

The eye contact, in between each lick, was smoldering.

My cock throbbed, but I refused to stroke myself any faster.

Pressing the heel of my palm to the base of it, I massaged in slow circles, desire coiled in the pit of my belly, forcing me to clench my teeth together to keep from groaning.

Axis bobbed his head again, licking all the way down to Ezzy's balls, nuzzling beneath them, a soft, slurping sound coming from him as Ezzy shuddered and tightened their fingers in his hair.

When Ezzy spread their legs, Axis slid his hands beneath their bottom and lifted, so Ezzy could hook their legs over Axis's shoulders, allowing him to slide even lower.

Holy goddess, Axis dove right in and soon had Ezzy writhing while he rimmed them.

Between the wild way Ezzy shook their head and the way they bit into their sleeve to keep themselves quiet, I nearly came.

Precum welled up from the tip of Ezzy's cock and dribbled down the crown, while Axis moaned, hummed, slurped, and let out tiny growls, one hand sliding over Ezzy's hip, until he could stroke their cock, using the precum for lube.

It took less than thirty seconds for Ezzy to come with a pillow pressed to their face and Axis milking them until they bucked and repeatedly smacking him with the pillow to get him to stop.

Chuckling, Axis pressed his face against Ezzy's thigh, muffling his humor and causing a crop of goosebumps to erupt along Ezzy's arm.

Ezzy didn't look like they would be moving anytime soon, but Axis did, scooting off them with a grin as he stared down at the boneless heap he'd left Ezzy in.

He was still grinning when he pulled the pillow from over Ezzy's face and lightly booped them on the nose.

"Can't let you suffocate yourself," Axis whispered.

Ezzy's arm flopped, but they managed to huff and flip Axis off before Axis scooted the rest of the way off the blanket mound.

"Be right back," Axis whispered as I snapped my eyes closed so I wouldn't get

caught watching them.

Not when I suspected there would be much more to see.

Axis vanished into his room, while Ezzy lay sprawled on the blanket and pillow nest we'd been playing in the night before.

“Fuckkkk,” Ezzy moaned, their voice low and a little floaty. “That backfired.”

Now I had to stifle a giggle, because Axis had always had a way of doing that to Ezzy.

It had always been a game between them, one in which Ezzy tried to tease and torment Axis only to find themselves on the receiving end of pleasure.

I wished I could see the expression on their face, but I didn't dare open my eyes until they were occupied again.

I didn't dare twitch, even though my cock was begging for attention.

I didn't hear Axis return, but I heard Ezzy's voice when they admonished him.

“Oh no you don't,” Ezzy hissed. “You don't get to have your hands back on me until I get to count how many piercings you've got hidden beneath that onesie. Now off with it.”

Damn, Ezzy with the command voice. Okay.

The whispering rustle of fabric accompanied Axis' immediate compliance.

“Why no belly button piercing?” Ezzy asked.

I'd noticed the absence of one too, when he'd been in his board shorts, and was just as curious to know the reason as Ezzy was.

"It's pierced," Axis murmured. "Just forgot to put jewelry back in before I came out here. Forgot to bring any extra piercings too, so I've had to be careful not to lose any."

"And now I really, really want to see where you're worried about losing pieces from."

A thud that I was certain was Ezzy hitting Axis with a pillow reached my ears the moment Axis chuckled.

"Now you're just being a tease," Ezzy declared in a low grumble. "Get with the stripping, dammit!"

"Ohh, you want stripping?" Axis crooned, and yeah, there was no doubt he was being a shit and teasing.

I cracked one eye open to see him moving to some random beat in his head, gyrating and turning his back as he pulled one arm free of his sleeve, cast a glance over his shoulder, winked, and removed the other, all without turning around.

"I swear you left the room just so you could redress and torment me!" Ezzy grumbled.

"Nah, had to piss and brush my teeth," Axis declared, swiveling his hips as he let the onesie slide over them to pool around his ankles.

And still he kept his body turned away from Ezzy, save for a little twist where he revealed a little flash of silver in the head of his cock that only I caught a glimpse of

before I snapped my eyes shut as he began turning my way.

“Gonna get you for this,” Ezzy groaned.

“Not if I get you first.”

“You always get me first.”

Axis said nothing, just chuckled again. My eyes snapped open when I heard Ezzy gasp and whisper , Holy shit.

“Like it?”

“Dude.”

My gaze flickered to Axis’ cock. Ezzy was right; holy shit was the only way to describe the sight on display to the left of me.

Axis didn’t just have a bar through the head of his cock; he had a whole fucking ladder of them running up the underside of it.

My first thought was ouch, ouch, ouch, which my dick responded to by wilting a little, but when Ezzy sat up so they could count them, the pink tip of their tongue poking through their lips as they lightly stroked over each one, my cock got with the program and perked back up again.

“Please tell me you didn’t have these done all at once,” Ezzy murmured as they moved from counting them with their fingers to tracing each with their tongue.

“Actually, I did,” Axis whispered, stroking their hair as Ezzy nuzzled them. “All seven of them.”

“Painslut,” Ezzy growled.

“Maybe.”

“Fuck! That’s so hot. Ever fuck anyone with those in?”

“Nope.”

“Want me to be the first?”

Silence. The pause went on so long, I finally stopped looking at Axis’s cock piercings to stare at his face while Ezzy and I both waited on his answer. Wide-eyed, he ducked his head a little, letting a curtain of his hair block out most of my view of him.

“Never fucked anyone,” Axis finally admitted, finally breaking his silence after almost fifteen seconds of making me wonder what the fuck was going on.

“Now I really wanna be the first,” Ezzy declared.

“I don’t have any supplies,” Axis admitted. “Didn’t expect to get laid on this trip.

I nearly sat up and growled, What, seriously?

With all the flirting we’d done online, it should have registered with him that I’d intended to get my hands on him, but clearly it hadn’t.

Dammit, my hands on both of them was what I truly wanted right now, only I wasn’t ready to let them know I was awake yet.

Not until I watched the rest of this little scene play out.

“I do, but you’ll have to let me go so I can get them,” Ezzy replied.

Well, at least one of them had understood that I still wanted them in that way and had intended to have them.

The look on Axis’ face was one of stunned acceptance as he let go of Ezzy’s arms so they could get up.

When they moved, I caught sight of Daddy Mack grinning at the scene and wondered how long he’d been awake and watching.

Now things were sure to get fun, as I could tell, by his expression and the way his hand stilled beneath the blanket he had pulled over him, that he was as hard, horny, and eager to get in on the action as I was.

Ezzy came sprinting back and all but threw the supplies on the blanket by Axis’ knees in order to haul him in for a kiss.

“Eager much,” Axis murmured as they broke apart.

“Never been so eager,” Ezzy declared, cupping Axis’ cheek and letting him nuzzle it.

He kissed Ezzy’s palm, his gaze hooded as they stared into each other’s eyes.

Despite wanting to be the one on the receiving end, Ezzy was clearly in charge.

Raising up on their knees to kiss Axis again, they brushed fingertips over his cheek, smoothed his hair back, and kissed him on the tip of the nose as they finally eased apart.

Axis looked like Ezzy had already blown his mind, while Ezzy reached for a condom,

tore it open with their teeth, and slowly rolled it on him before slicking it with extra lube.

They even lay back and fingered themselves with lube-coated fingers, knees wide as they peered up at Axis and crooked a finger at him.

“Fuck me,” Ezzy whispered.

My cock twitched, and I could barely hear the words.

I was closer than Daddy Mack and could no longer see his face, so I couldn’t tell if he’d heard them too.

As Axis settled on top of Ezzy, he kissed them again, Ezzy’s hand between them, putting Axis where he wanted him.

As soon as he thrust in, I saw Daddy Mack sit up, letting the blanket pool in his lap as he stroked himself the same way I was doing on the other side of them.

Ezzy’s fingernails dug into the globes of Axis’s ass as he pulled him in deeper, then Axis rocked his hips, and I heard Ezzy moan.

After all the teasing and foreplay, it wouldn’t have shocked me if Axis fucked them hard and fast, but he didn’t.

Just like when they’d first started teasing each other, they made out while Axis thrust slow and deep, touching, caressing, and utterly forgetting to keep the noises down, which was the very best part.

I pulled my aching cock from my pants to stroke myself freely while I watched them, each groan, each whimper, ramping my pleasure up more.

When Axis finally did start fucking him in earnest, Ezzy cried out, rocking to meet each thrust. I heard Daddy Mack groan and saw that he'd pulled his cock out too, and holy shit, it was fat.

The crown was a deep red as he fisted it, stroking, twisting a little at the end of each stroke, eyes locked on the two of them.

“More!” Ezzy demanded, whining when Axis gave them exactly what they'd asked for.

I wondered if Axis had jerked off in the bathroom just so he'd last longer for Ezzy, since they'd already come.

Long, deep strokes gave way to short, rapid ones as he snapped his hips, wringing more sounds out of Ezzy, who bucked and groaned before finally crying out.

That's when Axis really started fucking him like it was the last chance he was gonna get.

With Ezzy clinging to him and screaming out a stream of encouragement in between moans and cries, Axis fucked him until Ezzy shuddered, bucked, and clawed up his sides.

The pinpricks of pain from the scratches threw Axis over the edge, and Daddy Mack too, as he came along with them.

A few more strokes and my cock erupted, while Axis collapsed on top of Ezzy, panting as he struggled to catch his breath.

One of them groaned, while Ezzy clung to him, the two of them visibly trembling as they held on to one another. I collapsed on my side with a groan, only to see the two

of them watching me with heavy-lidded eyes and twin grins on their faces.

“Looks like we put on a show,” Ezzy rasped, before tugging Axis into a brief, gentle kiss that was nothing like the way they’d been making out before.

They groaned as Axis slid out of them and off to the side, reaching for his soft cock to pull off the condom, his hands shaking as he struggled to tie it.

“Let me,” Daddy said, leaning over to lick a stripe up the side of his neck before taking it from him.

“Thanks, Daddy,” Axis huffed out, breathing still a bit erratic.

“No, Firefly, thank you for kicking daddy’s morning off in the best way possible.”

Groaning, all I could do was shake my head, because damn. “You can say that again.”

Chapter Nineteen

Ezzy

Fuzzy-brained and tripping on the edge of little space, I tried to get dressed for the day, only to find myself half-stuck in dungaree shorts with both legs through the same hole. Hopping, I tried to reach the edge of the bed only to topple over and land on my ass on the hard wooden floor.

Tears welled up in my eyes moments before I let out an ear-piercing wail that brought Ro, Daddy Mack, and Axis running. Daddy Mack immediately scooped me up and sat on the bed with me in his arms while Axis scampered up beside us, rocking the bed as he bounced around trying to hug us both.

“It’s okay, Sparkle Butt, you’re okay,” Daddy cooed.

“Owie, Daddy!” I cried, burrowing my head against his chest. “I hurt my bottom!”

Wailing, I launched into another round of sobs as my bottom throbbed from where it was pressed against Daddy’s leg.

Leather paws stroked the back of my neck as Ro started trying to comfort me too. Even after passing out on the floor and taking a long, bliss-induced nap, I was still a little tired, and now a bit cranky too.

“Daddy will check to see if there’s any damage and get you untangled from your clothes,” Daddy Mack cooed. “Then we’ll go down to the water ball pit so you can

play and have your picnic by the lake.”

Thoughts of colorful balls and yummy things to nibble on settled me some, as did the scent of Daddy Mack’s bodywash and the way he so tenderly held me.

Ro and Axis were helping too. Axis rubbed circles on my back; the soft slurp, slurp, slurp of him sucking on his pacy at a rapid rate told me he was worried and just wanted me to smile at him.

He’d woken fully in little space, raring to play, and when Daddy Mack had mentioned the ball pit that had been created in the lake, we were both excited to see what they’d made for us.

My tushy didn’t hurt so much anymore, so I sat up a little and swiped at my tears, sniffing as Daddy pressed a kiss to my forehead.

“There you go, little Sparkle Butt, let’s dry those tears now,” he said, as Axis started trying to help by brushing at them, and my entire face, with a tissue from my bedside stand. The edge dragged over my nose, tickling and making me sneeze.

“Okay, okay,” I squealed, batting at the tissue until Axis got the hint and threw it away.

“Let’s see about getting you sorted out,” Daddy Mack said.

Axis decided to help and tugged my shorts off my legs, finally freeing me of them. I had my swimsuit on underneath, just a pair of yellow and green briefs with a sparkly frog on the rear.

Daddy chuckled upon seeing it.

“One of many reasons I call you Sparkle Butt,” he said as he peeled them down.

His hand stroked the last of the soreness away and helped me settle back into my little headspace again.

“No damage done, not even a bruise,” Daddy said before leaning over me to kiss both cheeks. “There, does that make it all better now?”

“Much, much better, Daddy,” I declared as he pulled my briefs back into place.

I held on to Daddy while Axis held my shorts for me to step into. Ro pulled them up and helped fasten the one strap I always clipped. I hadn’t bothered with a shirt, since we were just gonna strip off our clothes when we reached the lake.

“I’m ready for the ball pit now!” I declared, slipping off Daddy’s lap and holding my arms open for a hug.

He squeezed me gently, pressed a kiss to the top of my head, then took my hand and led us all out into the sunshiny day.

Having Daddy with us chased the grumpiness away.

I was excited to see the ball pit and insisted upon sitting up front with Daddy in his big pickup truck, while Ro and Axis cuddled in the back.

In the rearview, I watched Axis pet Ro’s hair as he leaned against him in his Dalmatian-spotted swim shorts.

I loved how he was a pup even in swim gear.

He was so much fun when he was playing with us.

As soon as we got near the lake, bright colors made me squeal and clap my hands. They had big balls. Beach balls! And a huge area roped off for us to play in.

“Don’t you touch that door until the truck is parked and the locks disengaged,” Daddy said in his super stern, growly voice. “Or your little Sparkle Butt is gonna be sore all over again.”

“No more sore!” I declared, sitting on my hands so I wouldn’t be tempted to touch the door handle as he was parking.

He chuckled, maneuvered into a space, and finally parked the truck while I waited impatiently for the little noise the locks made when they opened.

As soon as they did, I scrambled out and nearly fell over when I tried to yank off my shoe as I hopped around, struggling to pull it off so I could get in.

Clothes were for the picnic anyway, and that was hours and hours away. I had big, bright, beautiful balls to get to.

“Rufffffff!” Ro declared as he came tumbling out beside me, flinging his T-shirt over his head.

“You will pick that up along with any other clothes you discard, fold them, and carry them to where we’re going to set up our picnic blankets, is that understood!” Daddy declared as he stepped out and saw the chaos. “That goes for all of you.”

“Yes, Daddy,” we chorused.

Like Ro, Axis was in board shorts and a T-shirt, his binky still in his mouth.

He better not take it in, or it might get lost in all the balls.

Then he'd be sad, and I hated when our Firefly was sad.

If Daddy didn't remember, I'd take it out of his mouth for him once our blanket was spread out.

Then it would all be okay when we got in the water.

At the shore of the lake, well away from where all the splashing would be, Daddy shook out the blanket, and it blocked out the sun.

Axis ran under it but didn't make it to the other side before the blanket fell over his head.

Spinning, he got himself all tangled up in it, little giggles coming from underneath the fabric while Daddy chuckled.

"The blanket is for the sand, not my Firefly," Daddy said as he untangled him.

"Firefly undercover!" Axis giggled as his head popped out, binky dangling from a clip on his overalls. Ohh, smart, I'd forgotten about that. "Uh-oh, cover blown."

"It most certainly is," Daddy declared. Now please go stand over by Ro until I get it spread out properly, then we can weigh down the edges with our shoes, and we'll be all set to play."

"Yay!" Axis declared, bouncing, which made untangling him take even longer.

Daddy just laughed while he wrestled with the blanket, then Axis spun free and bounded over to Ro, who draped an arm over his shoulder and kept him pressed to his side until Daddy Mack had smoothed the blanket out over the sand.

We placed our shoes on the edges, followed by our clothes and the big picnic basket and cooler daddy had carried down from the truck.

“Now can we go in?” I asked, bouncing as I stared at the balls and the spaces between them rapidly being filled with other bodies.

“Now we can all go in,” Daddy declared.

“Ruff, ruff!” Ro barked and took off for the water.

“Wait for me, wait for me!” I called out, legs churning against the sand as I raced to catch up to him, Axis floundering through the sand right beside me.

Into the cold water we splashed with Daddy Mack right behind us.

I had my eye on a pink and yellow beach ball when something brushed against my leg, and I yelped and jumped back, lost my balance, and sank under the surface for a moment.

I popped up just in time to catch the pink and yellow ball that was hurtling at my face.

Axis stood grinning several feet away, water streaming down his face with a purple ball in his hands.

“You scared me!” I squealed as I waded towards him. “I thought you were a big ol’ water snake or something.”

“Snake!” Someone squealed several feet away.

The cry went up across the ball pit as several littles and pets rushed for the shore.

“There’s no snake,” Daddy Mack called out, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Just my Sparkle Butt being overly dramatic.”

“Oopsie,” I said, squirming under the fierceness of his gaze. “Sorry, Daddy.”

“Just watch what you say, Sparkle Butt.”

“I will, Daddy,” I replied, before sticking my tongue out at Axis, who returned the gesture, only to be pounced and knocked underwater by Ro.

“Avenging puppy to the rescue!” I declared as they popped up, laughing.

Axis had to chase his ball, so I threw mine to Ro, who caught it and tossed it back. Axis threw his to Daddy, and soon we had balls flying in a crisscross pattern, occasionally crashing together and forcing us to chase them. It was so much fun.

“Chicken fight, chicken fight,” I declared, tossing my ball aside to try and scramble onto Daddy’s back.

Daddy hooked his arms behind him, giving me the boost I needed to reach his shoulders, where I wobbled, teetering and almost tumbling over his head, until he grabbed my thighs and steadied me.

Axis floundered, trying to climb Ro, until he ducked low enough that Axis could just sit on his shoulders.

Like me, he almost tumbled off when Ro stood, but soon we were steady.

Daddy Mack waded towards them with me on his shoulders, but when I tried to shove at Axis, he just played patty cake with me until I was laughing so hard, he easily shoved me off and sent me splashing into the water behind Daddy.

“Round one goes to Firefly!” Daddy declared.

“No more patty cake!” I declared as I came up sputtering.

“Ready to try again?” Daddy asked once I was back on his shoulders again.

“Let’s get them!” I squealed. “Charge, Daddy.”

I went into battle more prepared this time, tangling up with Axis as we tried to wrestle for leverage, giggling and squirming. I felt him start to slip, but the big meanie wouldn't let go and pulled me off as he fell in.

“Round two is a tie!” Daddy declared.

“Woof, woof, rrrrrrrffffff,” Roman barked as we shook water all over him.

“Gonna get you this time!” I declared to a grinning Axis as Roman rose out of the water with Axis on his shoulders again.

Ro and Daddy Mack were almost the same height, which made the battle harder, until Axis wiggled and stuck out his foot, trying to reposition himself. Instead of shoving, I caught it and tickled him until he rocked and flailed and finally fell off Ro's shoulders and back into the lake.

“And now it’s all tied up!” Daddy said as Axis popped up laughing.

“One more round, one more round!” I chanted as Ro woofed along with me, then ducked so Axis could climb back up.

“If no patty cake, then no tickles!” Axis declared, sticking his tongue out at me.

Roman backed up a little, forcing Daddy to wade in deeper, bobbing a little as he found his footing. When we were close enough, Axis and I tried our best to dislodge the other, squealing and shoving, rocking, wiggling, and laughing until we both fell in again.

“Still tied,” Daddy said, sticking a finger in his ear and making a funny face as he wiggled it around, trying to get the water out.

“Again! Again!” I declared.

“I don’t know, Sparkle Butt, you two might be too evenly matched.”

“Again!” I demanded, already trying to climb up, so Daddy helped me.

Up I went and down I tumbled, but Axis fell too, so we were still tied, and tied we would stay, after four more tries, until Daddy waved the white flag and declared us the winners and himself too tired for another round.

“Are you too tired for sharks and minnows?” Axis asked.

“I think I can manage that,” Daddy declared.

“Yay! You’re the shark!” Axis declared.

“Should have seen that coming,” Daddy muttered, chuckling as we backed away from him.

Then he let out the biggest, fiercest roar and charged after us, forcing us to scatter to avoid getting caught.

Squealing, I dove under when Daddy Mack got close to me and swam until I saw

spotted swim shorts and hid behind Ro just as he got caught.

He spun around, roaring, with his arms opening and closing like he was trying to chomp on me.

When I dove again, I ran right into Axis, bumping heads and coming up rubbing them.

Ro was chasing Daddy, so I grabbed Axis' hand, and we backed away so we could maybe see them coming if they headed our way.

Axis wrapped his arms around me and laid his head on my shoulder, clinging as we watched Daddy Mack evade Roman several times before Ro finally caught him and then dove, swimming straight for us.

"Torpedo puppy," I declared as we jumped apart, evading him and Daddy.

Round and round we went. Under the water, whirling and frantically searching every time we popped up, trying to keep to our own little section of the ball pit so we didn't interrupt the others' games.

I went under and swam as far as I could while holding my breath.

When I broke the surface, I was well away from the three of them as Daddy advanced on Axis, who ducked under and vanished.

Daddy Mack whirled around, looking. Ro barked, dogpaddling away from Daddy, who was still looking around, confused, when Axis popped up right in front of me.

"I swam through Daddy's legs," Axis declared, looking rather pleased with himself.

Until Daddy spotted us, roared, and took off after us again. I was so tired by the time he caught me that I leapt into his arms, laid my head on his shoulder, and blinked dripping lashes at him.

“I surrender, Daddy,” I declared. “I tired.”

“Me too, Sparkle Butt,” Daddy said as he turned and carried me towards the shore.

“How about we find a snack and maybe take a little nap while we wait for them to finish tiring themselves out?”

“Gonna take a long time, Daddy,” I declared as we neared the shore.

“No worries, Sparkle Butt, we’ve got all the time in the world.”

Chapter Twenty

Mackenzie

Between the snacks I'd packed, and the dinner buffet served lakeside by the camp's kitchen staff, my boys were stuffed. Axis let out a burp so loud it echoed, making Ezzy giggle and Ro crack an eye open and woof at the sound.

"'scuse me," Axis said, pressing a hand to his lips and giggling too.

"You're excused," I said. "That was a big one. I hope you left room for brownies later.

"Always room for brownies, Daddy."

I nodded at that because he was absolutely right.

Somehow, there was always room for brownies, especially if they were topped with ice cream, which was the dessert we'd been promised tonight.

Axis had spent the whole afternoon and evening in his little space, alternating between curling up with Roman, which was what he was doing now, and cuddling with me.

Ezzy was against my side right, sprawled out with one of my arms tugged around them as we stared at the reflection of the moon shimmering on the surface of the lake.

“Can we camp with you even after we leave here?” Ezzy asked.

“Of course you can,” I replied. “It would be fun to do a camping weekend.”

“With tents and air mattresses and s’mores and everything?” Ezzy asked.

“And everything,” I told them, leaning to press a kiss to their forehead.

“We’ll even cook all our meals over the campfire, collect rocks on our hikes, make blueberry pancakes in the morning, and tie hammocks between the trees so we can laze around in them and see the clouds drift over the treetops.”

“Arf, arf, arf,” Ro barked, wiggling closer and pulling Axis right along with him.

The pair curled up on my other side, just as music rolled in echoing waves over the lake.

“I think it’s almost show time,” I declared as a member of the kitchen staff carried over a tray laden with bowls of ice cream topped with warm brownie bits.

“Dessert time!” Ezzy replied, clapping as they wiggled to sit up.

“Take your time; don’t gobble,” I warned them when they grasped the spoon and brought a heaping mound to their mouth much too big to fit. “You wouldn’t wanna get sick and miss the show.”

“No, Daddy, I don’t wanna do that,” they said and shook some of the ice cream and brownie bits off their spoon.

At least out here they could run around if they got a case of the zoomies when the sugar hit, though something told me they’d be too busy staring wide-eyed at the sky

to do more than squirm once the fireworks started.

While Axis had sat up to eat, Roman leaned over his bowl, lapping at the ice cream in between plucking pieces of brownie out of his bowl with his teeth.

He too had spent the bulk of the day in his pup headspace, and I was glad for it.

Once he'd started to realize that I was more than capable of managing the three of them while they'd played, he'd been more than happy to enjoy himself while still watching over them as a good pup should.

When he'd noticed that Axis was no longer enthusiastically playing with the other littles, he'd nudged at him to try and get him moving towards the shore, then woofed for me until I'd waded back in and brought my tired and slightly sunburned boy in to rest.

He'd perked right up once we'd gotten some fruit and water in him, but I hadn't let him go back in until after he'd napped beside Ezzy on the blanket and gotten more sunscreen slathered on.

I was glad I'd remembered aloe gel when I'd packed my backpack for the day.

I'd smoothed some of that on his skin the moment swim time was over and made sure his shoulders weren't blistered anywhere.

Tomorrow would definitely be an indoor day, maybe in the art room, unless we decided to spend it lounging around the cabin. He'd be hurting if he got too much more sun exposure, especially across the tops of his shoulders and the bridge of his nose.

"Yummy!" Ezzy declared, half their bowl gone already.

So much for slowing down. I just hoped they didn't wind up with a tummy ache.

The first brilliant burst of green fireworks elicited a coo from Axis, who let go of his spoon to watch. Roman barked, while several nearby littles cheered. Ezzy squirmed to the beat of the music, still steadily decimating their bowl, while Axis pushed his aside and turned towards me.

"Daddy, I can't finish; my tummy is too stuffed to eat it all."

"That's alright, Firefly," I said. "Pass it here, and I'll put it off to the side in case you want more later."

"I won't, daddy, I ate all the brownie bits," he declared as he passed me a bowl that was nothing but ice cream soup after he'd stirred through it to get at all the brownie chunks.

Chuckling, I set it back on the tray and wrapped an arm around him as he settled in to watch the fireworks display play out.

With a hiss and a crackle, purple and silver erupted overhead, making him clap and wiggle happily.

Color after color followed, as the pauses between them grew shorter.

Roman barked at them all, while Ezzy jumped to their feet and started skipping around our blanket.

"Boom, boom, boom," they squealed, giggling. "I'm doing a firework dance!"

"Firework dance!" Axis declared, wiggling away from me to join them.

They were soon followed by Roman, who crawled behind them, barking, shaking his butt, and occasionally sitting back on his haunches to howl up at the colors overhead.

I looked on as Ezzy shook their tush, Axis swiveled his hips, and Roman howled up a storm, the trio having so much fun that other littles and pets joined in, and soon they had a conga line of firework dancers parading past the other blankets and towels laid out along the shore of the lake.

At least they'd tire themselves out, hopefully, I thought as I yawned, the exuberance of the day catching up to me, even as I finished my dessert.

I was beyond the age where sugar revved me up.

All a full belly did these days was try to lull me into a food coma, which I couldn't give in to, since we still had showers and story time to attend to once the fireworks show was over.

As far as camping trips went, this was the best idea I'd ever given in to.

And to think I'd been a bit hesitant about coming here and seeing what pride camp was all about.

The finale was a riot of colors and explosions, with wiggly little butts dancing up and down the shore as they screeched, leapt, and pointed at all the colors.

A collective awe went up when the final traces faded from the sky and nothing else followed it.

Slowly, the gaggle of littles and pets began to disperse as they slowly returned to their blankets.

My trio came trudging back, dragging sandy feet.

Axis yawned, then popped his binky back in his mouth before flopping down on the blanket and pressing his face against my thigh.

“Tired, Daddy,” he muttered around the binky, which bobbed and fell from his mouth as he yawned again. Thankfully, he had it clipped to his T-shirt so it didn’t land on the sandy blanket, but it was definitely time to start packing up so I could get them back to the cabin.

“Arf!” Roman said, nudging Axis’s side with his shoulder as he slid in behind him and looked like he was about to settle in for a nap.

Yup, definitely time to go.

“Daddy, it feels like there’s a milkshake in my belly,” Ezzy said, rubbing it as they stood on the edge of the blanket. “My tummy isn’t happy about that.”

Oh boy.

“I’m sure all of your jumping around and wiggle-butt dancing didn’t help it any,” I told them as I held out my hand to them.

They came and sat in my lap so I could rub it for them.

I hoped I could get it settled before they were forced to rush for one of the nearby trashcans.

Sighing, they rested their head on my shoulder, and I held them while around us, others continued conversations or began packing up to head back to their cabins.

While I'd have loved for us to do the same thing, it would probably be easier to wait for the rush to be over, because the parking area was about to get crazy as everyone tried to leave at the same time.

"Now don't go falling asleep on me," I cautioned them as I continued to rub Ezzy's belly. "If you do, we'll all have to sleep out here and let the mosquitos have us for supper."

"No itchy bugs," he murmured.

"Then no falling asleep on Daddy."

"Okie," he groaned, then let out several small burps that had me worried for a moment. "Ohh, nice."

Phew.

No wearing ice cream and brownie bits for me, at least not at the moment.

A soft snore soon clued me in that at least one of my other boys hadn't been listening when I'd said no falling asleep .

With Ezzy in my arms, I couldn't see which one it was.

I could only hope they didn't slip too deeply into slumber, or waking them was going to be a bitch.

Soon only a handful of scattered groups remained along the shore, as even the kitchen crew had called it a night and headed in.

"How's your tummy feeling now?" I asked as they let out another series of little

burps.

“Much, much better, Daddy.”

“Good,” I said, running my fingers through their hair. “I think it’s time to head back to the cabin then, don’t you?”

“Uh-huh,” they said, following it up with a yawn as they tried to burrow against me.

“Okay then, you’ve got to get up and help Daddy wake Axis and Roman.”

“Wake up!” they screeched, nearly deafening me.

Axis jerked, fingers digging into my thigh a little while Roman huffed, grumbled, and sat up, growling at them.

Ezzy stuck their tongue out in response and reached out to boop Roman on the nose, only to jerk their finger back when Roman playfully snapped at them.

“We’re up!” Axis grumbled, hair plastered to his cheek as he sat up and pouted at Ezzy. “And you’re loud.”

“Daddy said to help.”

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“I think you just helped every mommy and daddy within earshot,” I told them, nudging them until they got the hint and climbed to their feet. Axis reached up, so Ezzy helped him to his feet and hugged him when Axis swayed, looking utterly tuckered out.

“Let’s get our shoes on so we can fold up the blanket,” I told them, grateful to see them all move to do as they were told without needing any more prodding.

Something told me that at least one of them was going to need help getting ready for bed tonight.

It might be easier to stick Axis and Ezzy in the same shower and wash them off myself to move things along.

My pet at least looked a little more awake than the boys, though not by much.

Too bad none of the cabins came with a shower built for four.

It would have made things far easier for me that way.

Since I’d already repacked the empty containers in the basket, I moved it aside, hastily folded the blanket, and gathered both up for the walk back to my truck.

It was a far slower trip than the way they’d sprinted to the lake when we arrived, but we got there.

Bouncing over the campground's dirt road kept them awake long enough to reach the

cabin, but they were slow to get out and even slower going up the steps.

Yup, my trio was worn out.

Hopefully that meant they'd all sleep in tomorrow morning, especially the two that tended to creep away early to get work in before we started the day.

"Okay, Axis, you and Ezzy head to Ezzy's bathroom and get undressed. Daddy will clean you up tonight and help you get into your sleep clothes so we don't end up with another accidental meeting with the floor."

"My bottom says thank you, Daddy," Ezzy declared as they moved to do as they were told.

I cupped Roman beneath the chin and brought his eyes up to meet my gaze as they disappeared into Ezzy's room.

"Do you need help too, or will you be okay cleaning up while I get them ready for bed?" I asked.

Grinning, he licked my palm, woofed, and bounded away with what I was sure was the last of his energy.

Good, that meant he'd do just fine.

A small detour into Axis' room allowed me to locate the pair of sleep pants and the T-shirt he'd left on the foot of his bed.

I was pleased to see that he'd listened when I'd asked them to lay out their bedclothes while they were getting ready for the day.

I'd known it would take a lot out of them, especially with how excited they'd been.

Ezzy's were at the foot of their bed when I stepped into the room, so I lay Axis' beside them and joined them in the bathroom, where they stood naked with their clothes kicked into a corner, the shower running and already warming up as they waited for me.

As far as I was concerned, we could deal with dirty laundry in the morning.

I'd just add my clothes to the heap when I grabbed my shower after they were clean.

My water babies had no interest in playing under the spray tonight.

They just leaned against each other and let me clean them, dry them, and dress them before I sent them out to our blanket nest. We probably should have left the mattresses out there after we'd dragged them out the first time, but it was too late to worry about that now. That was a tomorrow issue.

They were blinking owlishly, a book held on Axis' lap when I stepped out, fresh from my shower, to join them a short time later. Roman was sprawled on his side, head against Ezzy's leg, already half out of it when I accepted the book Axis handed me.

A short one, thankfully.

"Today was awesome, Daddy," Ezzy declared. "Can you read to us at night, on video, even when you're far away?"

"Not so far away, when you really think about it," I told them. "We can set up a Zoom chat room for story time and group conversations."

"What about me, Daddy?" Axis asked, looking sad and a little lost at the thought of missing story time during the late nights he played at the club.

"You'll have your story too," I assured him. "Daddy can record all the stories, so you

can listen to them any time I can't be online to read to you."

"Yay!" Axis declared, his frown quickly turning into a smile again.

Poor kid. All he wanted was to be included. Anyone who couldn't see that had to be blind. Scooting forward, I gathered Axis and Ezzy in my arms as Roman squirmed until he could lay his head on my thigh and get in on the cuddles too.

"Anything you want or need from Daddy, you just have to ask, and I'll do my best to make it possible," I told them.

"I know we'll be apart for a little while after we get home from camp, but I promise, it won't be that way always.

One day, we'll all be together in the same place, where you can have all the snuggles, playtime, and cuddles you want. "

"I don't wanna go home!" Axis declared.

"I know," I told him, stroking his hair. "Daddy doesn't want to go home either."

"I wanna go with Ezzy and Ro!"

There was a collective intake of breath, then Ezzy wiggled in my arms so they could hug him.

"I want you to come home with us too!" Ezzy declared.

"Me too," Roman said.

"Remember what Daddy said about following your heart?" I told him before pressing a kiss to the side of his head.

“Uh-huh, you said I could do whatever I wanted as long as it was what I wanted to do.”

“Then if you want to go back to Eugene, you should go, but only if that’s what you really want to do.”

“I really wanna! I don’t ever wanna be away from Ezzy and Ro-Ro again, or you, Daddy.”

“Well then, it sounds like we’ve got a lot of talking and planning ahead of us,” I said, stifling a yawn. “But for tonight, let’s have our story before Daddy falls asleep on the pages.”

“There’s no snoring in Goodnight Moon , Daddy,” Ezzy muttered.

“Well, there’s gonna be tonight if we don’t get to it,” I told them, kissing each forehead as they sat up and finally started arranging themselves the way they intended to sleep.

With Axis firmly wedged between Roman and Ezzy, it looked like the spot they’d left for me was beside Roman tonight.

Good, I could hold and stroke my pup as I drifted off thinking of how to make their request a reality.

I didn’t want to be away from them anymore than they wanted to be apart.

Axis’ sleepy declaration about wanting to move back home with them already had me thinking about looking into employment in Eugene.

There were sure to be loading docks there, and I could admit, even in my hazy, verge-of-sleep state, that I’d fallen into a rut since returning to Klamath Falls.

A change of scenery and the trio who now held my heart in the palm of their hands was exactly what I'd needed to see that I'd just been feeling sorry for myself since my band had fallen apart.

I wasn't too old to start a new chapter in my life, and there was no better motivation than Axis, Ezzy, and Roman.

I'd have to be a fool to miss out on even one moment of time with them, and if there was one thing I knew about myself, it was that I wasn't a fool.

I knew what an amazing treasure I'd found in the three of them.

They were everything I'd dreamed of having in my life and more.

And to think that I'd found them at pride camp.

The greatest camp in the world.