



Calling His Bluff (The Kings: Royal Flush #2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Ryden Foster is a Marine scarred by a painful past of loss and hardship, but with the support of his Four Kings Security family, he's finally healing.

As he rebuilds his life, the only thing he enjoys more than his job is sparring with Jay Starling, Ward Kingston's flashy executive assistant.

Their longstanding feud is filled with sharp banter, weaponized romance novels, and a heat neither will acknowledge.

Jay is organized, efficient, and always in control, except when it comes to Ryden, the brash Marine with a talent for getting under his skin.

When a Marine wedding and a client's murder are linked, Jay and Ryden are pulled into something far more dangerous than petty rivalry.

After a chilling encounter, Jay sees a side of Ryden he wasn't prepared for, one his heart can't ignore.

As Ryden and Jay join the Kings on a perilous mission, surviving means risking more than just their lives.

It means trusting each other with their hearts.

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CHAPTER ONE

This was not how he expected his evening to go. Not that Ryden had any grand plans other than hanging out with friends and coworkers to celebrate the grand opening of Val's tavern. Still, he hadn't expected to end up annoyed.

The Red Ax Tavern was packed with folks drinking and having a good time, some far more than others.

Ryden grunted into his glass as he took a sip of his soda.

As if being annoyed by Jay wasn't enough, he was annoyed at himself for being annoyed.

It's not like he hadn't known Jay would be here tonight, or that wherever Jay went, an entourage of admirers was bound to follow.

It was ridiculous. Did the guy always have to be the center of attention?

"What's the scuttlebutt, Marine?"

Ryden gave a start and glared at Saint. "What the hell ya sneakin' up on people for?"

"Since when does anyone sneak up on you?"

Damn. He got you there, pal. Ryden eyed his best friend. Saint was genuinely surprised. "Fair point." He sipped his drink, unable to stop his gaze from returning to

the rowdy table across the room. Saint followed his line of sight.

Jay sat on one of the tables, dressed in a loud blue paisley vest with matching pants and bow tie, and a blinding fuchsia button-down shirt underneath with the sleeves rolled to the elbows.

His blond hair was perfectly styled, and his face was flushed.

Probably winded from all that hot air he was letting out.

The guy hadn't taken a breath since he'd arrived.

"Look at him. He's such a diva."

Saint shrugged. "He's just having a conversation."

"Oh, bless your heart. Saint, those three men right there are what we call bears, and that in the middle is a sweet little pot of honey for those bears."

"I know what a bear is," Saint said, amused.

Three large, bearded, muscular men sat around Jay, practically drooling.

They wanted to devour him, and one or more would probably try to.

How could Jay not see it? Like they gave a shit what was coming out of his mouth.

They were only interested in what they could put in it.

Probably picturing him on his knees or face down, ass in the air.

Was Jay that oblivious? Did he ever consider the consequences of his actions?

“Why don’t you just tell him?” Saint asked, snatching up the stool next to Ryden.

“Tell him what?” Ryden frowned. What the hell was Saint going on about? As if Ryden had anything to say to His Highness.

“That you’re interested in him.”

“But I’m not.” Ryden narrowed his gaze. “He’s annoying.

” So fucking annoying, and pretentious and prissy, like the whole fucking world revolved around him.

Why else would he dress like he did if it wasn’t for attention?

Ryden was already blind in one eye; he didn’t need Jay’s shirt to finish off the other one.

Talk about a shit sense of self-preservation.

Ryden stood. “I’m going to say something. ”

“Oh, great! It’s about time.”

“I’m gonna tell him he needs to stop before he gets himself into trouble.

” Did Jay think someone would always be there to bail him out?

That he could do and say whatever he wanted and not worry about what came after because he had a small army of Snake Eaters wrapped around his little finger?

Fuck that . Jay needed to wake the hell up.

“Oh, no. No, no, no. Please don’t do that,” Saint said, hurrying after Ryden.

Ryden moved through the crowd, and Saint followed. His best friend didn’t see what he did. Probably because of that fucking pink shirt. Who the hell wore fuchsia and paisley? Looked like a damn flower garden threw up on him.

“Excuse us, fellas,” Ryden said, stopping in front of Jay. “But I need to have a word with Glee over here.”

The three men glanced up at Ryden but didn’t move until Ryden dropped his gaze to one of the guys. Fuck with me and find out. They practically fell over themselves to get gone.

Jay folded his arms over his chest and arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow at him. “Do you live to torment me? Do you get up every morning and think of all the ways to make my life miserable?”

“Yes, it’s my favorite hobby, along with getting my balls waxed and chest hair plucked.

My sole purpose in life is to annoy you.

” Talk about ego. Did he think Ryden had nothing better to do?

Nothing better to think about? Like, he woke up in the morning, and his first thought was Jay?

Was there ever a time when Jay didn’t expect to get his way?

He sure as hell wasn't going to get it with Ryden.

Jay sighed. "Delightful."

"This ain't the place."

Ryden ignored Saint's groan. His friend meant well, and Ryden appreciated the concern, but sometimes, Saint was clueless about these things.

Someone needed to knock Jay off his rainbow unicorn.

Jay narrowed his gaze. Ryden had seen plenty of fellas run for the hills after being on the receiving end of that stare, but he wasn't going anywhere.

Unlike most people, Ryden wasn't a sucker for those big blue eyes and pouty lips.

He wasn't wrapped around Jay's little finger the way everyone else seemed to be.

"Place for what? Talking?"

Ryden didn't care for Jay's tone. "Pickin' up men."

"First of all, I was conversing. You know? That thing mature adults do? Second of all, whether or not I pick up someone is none of your concern."

"It is when you're causin' a scene," Ryden growled low. Unbelievable.

Jay looked around, then moved his narrowed gaze back to Ryden. "Yes, I can see everyone is absolutely up in arms about it. Oh, wait! No, they're not." He leaned forward. "Because they're not all up in my business like you are."

The little shit. Who the fuck did he think he was talking to? “You keep teasin’ men the way ya do, and you’re gonna to get yourself into more trouble ’n you can handle.” Wait. Shit . Ryden regretted the words the moment they’d left his mouth.

Jay’s bright blue eyes turned to ice. “I’m sorry. Did you just say I’m asking for it?”

Fuck. That’s not— fuck . Ryden’s face burned. “Um, I didn’t mean.... What I meant....” What did he mean? Not that. Okay, it kinda sounded like that, but no. Fuuuuuuck .

Jay’s eyes welled with tears, and the smack to Ryden’s cheek left a fierce sting behind. Wow. That hurt. Holy shit.

“Ryden Foster, you are the biggest asshole I have ever met!” Jay shoved Ryden harder than Ryden had been prepared for, and he stumbled back. This wasn’t—Shit. What had he just done?

“Jay—”

Jay jumped off the table and spun to go, but Ryden grabbed his arm, stopping him.

“I’m sorry. I?—”

“Go to hell!” Jay jerked his arm away and disappeared into the crowd.

This wasn’t... He hadn’t.... “I should go after him,” Ryden said, only to have Saint stop him.

“Let him go. I don’t think that’s a good idea right now.”

“I fucked up,” Ryden admitted. “I need to go after him.” He pulled away, and Saint,

thankfully, let him go. How the hell was he supposed to make this right? Damn it. Every. Freaking. Time.

The guys were always teasing Ryden that he had a big mouth, and he did.

He'd never been one to hold back, but what he'd said had been uncalled for.

Jay pushed all his buttons for some reason, and Ryden found himself unable to hold back his reaction.

No one got under his skin like Jay did, and things between them had been escalating recently.

Ryden moved through the crowd and hurried outside into the muggy evening air.

The humidity in the summer was stifling, even at night, but what else could he expect from a state built on mostly swampland?

Damn, Jay moved fast. He was almost to the sidewalk.

Had Jay walked here? Maybe he'd parked somewhere else?

Parking in the Historic District wasn't exactly easy to find.

They were damned lucky Four Kings Security had its own parking lot.

Ryden caught up with Jay before he could leave the tavern lot.

"Jay, come on. Wait."

"I have nothing to say to you," Jay growled. "Leave me alone."

“Can we please talk?”

Jay spun to face him, the hurt catching Ryden off guard. “This ends now . I am done talking to you.”

“We work together. You kinda have to talk to me,” Ryden replied, hoping it might lighten the tension. Judging by the way Jay’s expression darkened, he’d failed. Miserably. No surprise there.

“You’re right. And as a professional, that will be the only exception.” Jay turned to go, but Ryden caught his arm again, pulling him to one side, closer to the brick wall with overgrown greenery away from the busy street.

There was never a time when St. Augustine’s Historic District wasn’t filled with tourists and locals.

The last thing he needed was an audience to witness...

whatever this was. It’d probably end up on social media, and King would have him working security at kids’ birthday parties for the rest of his life.

“Would ya just listen?” Ryden’s anger flared.

“Why do ya have to be so fuckin’ infuriatin’?”

” He expected Jay to shove him again, or blow a fuse and curse up a storm.

Instead, he closed his eyes, inhaled deeply through his nose, and then let it out through his mouth, drawing Ryden’s attention to his lips.

They were so soft-looking. What the fuck? Where the hell had that come from?

Jay opened his eyes and lifted his gaze to Ryden's. "What's going on here?" His words were quiet. "What do you want from me?"

Nothing. What could Ryden possibly want from Jay? Did he want something from him? His gut tightened. Nope. Not a damn thing. Ryden shook his head. Why did he let Jay get to him like this? It was frustrating and pissed him off.

"You don't know what you want, do you?" Jay moved his eyes to Ryden's mouth. "Well, when you figure it out..." He moved his gaze back up, his pupils dilated. "Maybe you'll have the balls to do something about it."

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Wait, what? What the hell was he implying? The fucking gall. Ryden's jaw muscles tightened, and he ignored the weird sensation spreading through him. "There goes that fuckin' mouth again."

"You seem to have an unhealthy obsession with my fucking mouth," Jay purred. "Wonder why that is?"

"Stop," Ryden warned. He wasn't going to let Jay get in his head. Not that he ever did. He was perfectly in control of the situation.

"Stop what? You're the one who keeps bringing up my mouth."

"See, this is what I'm talkin' 'bout," Ryden snapped. He leaned in, one hand on the brick wall to each side of Jay's head. "You're a fuckin' tease."

"You sure do like telling me what I am. Here's a little secret..." He leaned forward. "I've dealt with guys like you my whole life. You think you know me, but you don't know shit."

"I know you . I know your type."

"My type?" Jay laughed, leaning back against the wall. "And what type is that? Flirt? Cocktease? Trouble?" He licked his bottom lip and looked up at Ryden from under lowered lashes. "Baby, you haven't seen trouble."

With a growl, Ryden pushed away from the wall. "You think this is funny? Do you think you can do and say whatever the fuck you want and to hell with the

consequences?” Jay was sorely mistaken if he thought he could play mind games with Ryden.

“What’s going on here? Hey, you! You need to back away, pal.”

Ryden glanced over his shoulder, his frown deepening. Great. Just what this evening didn’t need, one of Jay’s many burly admirers sticking his bearded face where it didn’t belong. “And you need to mind your own business.”

The huge, bearded man narrowed his eyes at Ryden, then moved his gaze to Jay. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Jay replied. “Thank you. And don’t worry. He was just leaving.”

Yeah, no. That wasn’t happening. “I’m not going any-fuckin’-where,” Ryden replied. Here he was, trying to apologize, and Jay was being an ass. Every time. Why did things have to be so damned complicated between them?

Bearded Guy took a step closer. “You heard him. Fuck off.”

Was this guy serious, right now? Ryden turned. “You need to walk away. Now.”

“You should go,” Jay told the guy. “I’m okay.”

Was that a hint of concern in Jay’s voice? Concern for Ryden or his burly beau? Did the guy think that, because he was bigger and broader than Ryden, Ryden could be intimidated? How many others had underestimated him and then regretted their life choices?

“You heard him,” Ryden said with a smirk. “Fuck off.”

“Really? I’m way too sober for this shit,” Jay grumbled. “Can we not do this? This night’s already been ruined. I just want to go home and regret my life choices in peace over a glass of wine. Or three.”

Bearded Guy balled his hands into fists, and Ryden’s smile faded, his gaze on the guy’s fists. So it was going to be like that, huh? Normally, Ryden would have de-escalated the situation and sent the guy on his merry beardy way, but tonight was not that night.

“You don’t wanna do this,” Ryden warned him, giving the man one last chance to back out.

Jay grabbed Ryden’s arm. “Don’t.”

Ryden shrugged. “It’s his call.”

Mr. Muscles bolted toward him.

Wrong call.

Ryden shoved Jay to the side as the guy took a swing at Ryden. He ducked under the beefy fist and came up with a right uppercut. This could be over in two moves, but what fun was that? If this asshole wanted a fight, Ryden would give him one. Like Jay said, this night was already shit, so why not?

Bearded Guy was a wall of hard muscle, and the couple of blows that landed would leave Ryden bruised, but he wouldn’t hurt as much as this guy was about to. He was not in the mood.

“You fuck,” the guy growled. He lunged at Ryden, grabbing him around the waist, only to have Ryden slam his knee up into the guy’s chest and his fists down on the

man's back. The guy hit the ground hard. Ooh, that was going to leave a mark.

"Ryden, stop," Jay shouted, but Ryden ignored him. He grabbed a fistful of the guy's hair, lifting his head, and pulled back a fist.

"Stand down, Marine!"

Ryden jerked back and stood at attention. It took him a heartbeat to realize the order had come from Mason. Once a Marine, always a Marine. What was Mason doing here?

Mason marched over and hauled the bleeding bearded guy to his feet. "You need to get gone, friend."

The guy wiped at his nose. "Fucking lunatic." He stomped off, and Ryden stepped forward, only to have Jay grab his arm again. Reluctantly, Ryden stayed put. When the guy disappeared around the building, Mason turned to Ryden and threw his arms up.

"What the fuck, man?"

"He came at me first," Ryden growled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Fine. So he did. I'm not telling you not to defend yourself, but you know better than this. Where the hell's your head at?"

That was a really good fucking question. Where the hell was his head at? He instinctively turned, but Jay was gone. Fan-fucking-tastic. It was probably for the best, considering how things were going and how quickly everything had escalated.

"Ry?"

Ryden rubbed his hands over his face. “Sorry, man. I don’t know what the hell got into me.” He pressed his lips together, ready to bury it all down, but he could hear his therapist’s voice in his head reminding him to do the opposite.

Like Saint, Mason was family to Ryden. When Ryden accepted King’s offer to work at Four Kings Security, he’d done so with the knowledge that he’d be sharing an office with a man he’d tried to murder. A man Ryden had wrongfully blamed for all his misfortune.

Instead of sending Ryden to prison, Mason had refused to press charges.

Then he’d offered Ryden his apartment, while Mason’s boyfriend, Lucky, and the rest of his Green Beret buddies had offered Ryden a job.

They took him under their collective wing, introduced him to a great therapist, and helped him get back on his feet.

Six years had gone by since that night. It had taken a lot of therapy and hard work for him to reach this point. He was finally in a good place. Hell, a great place. Except where Jay was concerned.

Ryden shoved his hands into his pockets and sighed. “I said somethin’ real shitty to Jay and I meant to apologize, but instead....” He waved a hand around, indicating what Mason had diffused.

“You put your foot in it. Again,” Mason replied, shaking his head. “What is it with you two?”

“That’s an excellent question,” Ryden muttered. “Unfortunately, I don’t have an answer.” Maybe because anytime Jay popped into his head, he quickly moved his thoughts onto something, anything else. Unfortunately, Jay popped into his head far

more than Ryden was willing to admit.

Monday was going to be an interesting day at the office. They both worked in the same department within the same open-plan office space, and due to their job responsibilities, they had to see and speak to each other daily.

Jay wasn't going to let this one go, and whatever hell he gave Ryden, he'd brought it on himself.

He had to find a way to rise above it and not let Jay get to him.

They could be civil. Mature. Professional.

He could ride the rough string. All he had to do was not be reactive to anything Jay said or did.

Easy as pie.

CHAPTER TWO

“Are ya freakin’ kiddin’ me?”

It took a great deal of willpower not to look. Despite Ryden’s growls and curses carrying from across the floor, Jay kept his eyes on his book. He congratulated himself on not lifting his gaze at the sound of heavy boot stomps approaching his desk.

King’s office faced the front of the open plan office floor, which meant Jay’s desk did as well, since it was just outside and to the right of King’s office door. Jay could see everything that happened in the office at all times.

“It was you, wasn’t it?”

Jay held a finger up, finished reading his sentence, and leisurely placed his bookmark between the pages. He then put the book on his desk and looked up at Ryden.

“Is there something I can help you with, Mr. Foster?”

“For one, stop callin’ me Mr. Foster. Makes me sound like a kindergarten teacher about to hand out apple slices and juice boxes. Two, I know you’re the one responsible for this nonsense.”

Jay blinked at him. “You forget where we work. You’ll have to be more specific about the nonsense you are referring to.”

“Fair enough, but you know what I’m talkin’ about. What did you do to my computer?”

“Me?” Jay fluttered his lashes. “I don’t know what you mean. I haven’t touched your computer.” And he hadn’t.

“You don’t have to touch my computer,” Ryden hissed. “You probably just batted your lashes and got someone in Cyber to mess with it.”

That he had done.

Every email Ryden received in his inbox over the last week addressed him by a different name, which changed daily. The best part was that the whole office went along with whatever his name was that day. Jay loved every minute of it.

With perfect timing, as usual, Joker appeared and handed Ryden a tablet. “Hey, Rydell, I need you to sign this.”

Jay pressed his lips together to hold back a laugh. The indignation on Ryden’s face brought Jay so much joy, more than his morning salted caramel cream cold brew and chocolate croissant.

“Really?” Ryden swiped the tablet from Joker, signed the form, and then shoved it back at him.

Ace stopped next to Joker and grinned at Ryden. “Hey, Marine. What’s the word? Is it Grease ? Is Grease the word?”

“Ha ha. Y’all are so hilarious.” Ryden turned to Jay and thrust a finger at him. “I know it was you.” He spun and marched off toward the staff room, probably to get another much-needed coffee. Joker held his fist out to Jay, who bumped it before

everyone returned to work.

To his right, someone released a heavy sigh. Jay was so familiar with everyone at the office that he didn't even have to look to know who it was.

Jay smiled brightly. "Good morning, Mason." He swiveled his chair and chuckled at Mason's arched eyebrow.

"Certainly seems to be for you." He motioned to King's office, and Jay followed, closing King's office door behind him. He sat in one of the comfy chairs before King's desk and pulled out his phone to take notes.

On Monday mornings, Jay met with King to review the week's schedule, make any necessary changes or updates, address any issues from the previous week, and discuss new tasks. Since King was still on his honeymoon with his husband, Leo, Mason was officially in charge.

"How long has it been?" Mason drawled.

Jay was lost. "How long has it been since what?"

"Since that night." Mason gave him a pointed look.

"Oh, how long has it been since that night?"

It had been months. A lot had happened in that time. Well, with the Kings, not Jay. Sadly, nothing had changed in Jay's life in months. And that was fine. Who needed change? He'd changed his coffee and wardrobe, and that was plenty for him.

In the few months since that night, Saint had moved in with Val, Joker had broken his leg and healed, Lucky had almost died in a snowmobile incident, Ace and Colton had

gotten a puppy, several employees at Four Kings Security had been promoted, and King had gotten married.

It was a beautiful ceremony, and Jay was so happy he'd been able to attend via video.

Leo truly was a genius. Ugh, Jay needed to start dating again.

What was he waiting for anyway? It had been way too long since he'd hooked up with someone.

"Jay?"

Jay snapped himself out of it. Yikes! He was not one to have his head in the clouds at work.

Focus . "Sorry. Lamenting my very boring life choices. The answer to your question is, it's been months, and if you're about to tell me it's time to forgive him, the answer is no.

"Mason would have to pry his pettiness from his cold, dead hands.

"I was going to say no such thing. He made his bed and now he's gotta lie in it. What I was gonna say is, how long are you two gonna keep this feud up? It's been goin' on since the day he started working here, and if it gets any worse, our insurance premium is gonna go up. Again."

Jay shrugged. "I don't know. How much longer do you think he'll continue to annoy me?"

"So what you're saying is, this is gonna go on 'till the day we all retire. Good to know." Mason sighed. "And here I thought Lucky was stubborn."

Funny. Lucky often said the same thing about Mason.

The two shouldn't have worked, what with them being so hotheaded and stubborn, but they did, and it was sweet.

But Lucky and Mason were nothing like Jay and Ryden because Lucky and Mason were adults.

Ryden was a big man-child with no sense of self-preservation when it came to Jay.

Mason tapped away at the keyboard, and Jay pulled up his task manager app. It was time to get to work and forget about the annoying Marine and his equally annoying mischievous smile. Ugh, why ? Stop it!

“Looks like Jack added a new client over the weekend, so I'll need you to get all the documents together for him.

Our usual shipments are coming in on Thursday, and the Warner event has moved venues, so more paperwork.

As soon as that's finalized, schedule Red for the new risk assessment.

Speaking of Red, when you're done here, he wants to see you to review schedules and reassign people.

The event he just finished running a risk assessment on doubled in size at the last minute, which means more security.

The family has added a new employee, and since he's connected to the client and his family, we were instructed that vetting was unnecessary. You know how Red feels about that.”

Yep. Red hated when there were unknown variables. Too unpredictable. A clause was added to the contract in instances like this. Four Kings Security would not be liable because a client hired their family member and excluded them from the vetting process.

“Got it,” Jay replied, adding all the necessary tasks and reminders in his app.

They moved employees around all the time.

Flexibility was key to working at Four Kings Security because clients and events were often unpredictable, especially in Florida, where in the middle of summer, a hurricane could pop up, and suddenly, everyone was scrambling to move things up sooner or reschedule for later.

Not an easy task when hundreds or even thousands of people were scheduled to fill a large venue.

In this case, Jay had to familiarize himself with the client and the contract to find the right agents for the job.

New contracts had been signed over the last few days, along with potential clients who'd emailed their interest in a consultation, so Jay would have to schedule appointments for all of them.

Then there were the clients who were likely to call to reschedule or speak to whoever was in charge of their security.

“Did you order the treats?” Mason asked without an ounce of sarcasm.

“Last week,” Jay confirmed.

When working with K-9s, a lack of treats would lead to an uprising. No one wanted to be out of treats while on the job.

“Those pups are bigger divas than every employee here,” Mason said, this time amused.

Jay nodded. “Never come between Chip and his freeze-dried lamb liver.”

Bacon was Chip’s favorite, but Joker wasn’t about to work an event with real bacon in his pockets. It had not gone well for the last security agent who tried that. He learned the difference between a Belgian Malinois and a German Shepherd real fast.

After reviewing everything on his schedule for that week, Jay left King’s office to start his day. Several agents on the floor had left for jobs in the field, while others were scheduled for training downstairs, leaving only a few in the office.

It was Jay’s job to know everyone’s schedules.

Unsurprisingly, the most challenging part of his job was knowing where the Kings and Wild Cards were throughout the day.

Correction. Where Ace, Lucky, and Joker were throughout the day.

The others tended to be where they were supposed to be. Most of the time.

Joker was in his office because he wasn’t scheduled for an event until later that night.

Jack was out with Cybersecurity agents, working from the surveillance truck.

Red was in his office and would be at his event later that afternoon.

Jay sighed. Of course, he had no idea where Ace and Lucky were.

Ace had been in his office earlier, but his door was open, and it was quiet inside.

Everyone knew when the cousins were in the building. There was no way of not knowing. Jay finished making a few notes at his computer before heading into Red's office.

"Do you know where Ace and Lucky are? They have a training session in half an hour." Jay sat in the chair in front of Red's desk.

Red shook his head as he tapped away at his keyboard. "I don't know. They ran out of here like their asses were on fire, saying something about flan. I couldn't understand the rest."

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When Lucky and Ace didn't want the other Kings to know what they were up to, they spoke in rapid-fire Spanish, because even though the Kings and Wild Cards all spoke several languages, it was different when native speakers decided to speak at the speed of light. The cousins used it to their advantage.

The inside of Red's office was a stark contrast to King's.

There was a soft, calming, cozy feel. He had a diffuser running with essential oils, his couch had a big fluffy blanket and throw pillows.

The walls were painted a soft bluish gray, and several potted plants filled the room.

The office also received the most natural light on this floor.

It was all very zen. King's office was very functional and practical. Well, mostly.

When King and Leo got together, quirky items started to appear in King's office, like packets of Goldfish Crackers, a Lego Super Mario Piranha Plant, and socks with a Swedish Fish pattern. Jay smiled whenever he walked into King's office and saw something new Leo had left behind.

"Okay. I need five extra security agents for this afternoon," Red said. He leaned back in his chair. "You think we can swing that?"

Jay tapped away at his phone and brought up the office calendar.

He filtered for anyone classed as a security agent and looked through those to find

who would make the best fit.

“We can do that,” Jay replied. “Rodriguez and Saint were scheduled for training this afternoon. We can reschedule them. Hill is in inventory today, so we can reschedule him. Stevens was scheduled to work later today anyway, so I can call him and see if he can come in earlier. One more.” He scanned the list of names, and one name not on the list popped into his head.

Oh. No, he shouldn’t. He couldn’t. He smiled at Red.

“Ryden is free today.”

Red’s eyebrows shot up. “Ryden?”

“Yep. I mean, he has experience with this sort of thing.” Jay didn’t move his gaze away from Red’s, and he could tell Red was thinking really hard about his life choices. Say yes, say yes, say yes.

“Fine, but you’re breaking the news to him.”

Jay resisted the urge to jump out of his chair with a cheer. Instead, he stood calmly. “It would be my pleasure.”

Red hummed. “I’m sure. Oh, and you’re going to need this.” He opened his desk drawer and removed a giant binder. “Yep, it’s one of those.” He slid the binder to Jay.

This day couldn’t get any better. Jay picked up the binder and practically skipped out onto the office floor.

Ryden was at his computer and lifted his head, his eyes narrowed.

With a composed expression, Jay sat behind his desk, placed the binder on the floor next to his chair, and met Ryden's gaze.

He crooked his finger, motioning for Ryden to come over.

The suspicion on Ryden's face was priceless.

"What?" Ryden asked when he stopped in front of Jay. "What's that look for?"

"What look?" Jay batted his lashes.

Ryden groaned. "What'd you do?"

"I didn't do anything." Jay tapped at his keyboard, and Ryden's phone pinged a heartbeat later. "You've been assigned a last-minute job."

"What?" Ryden tapped his phone screen, most likely opening the client file Jay had just given him access to. "What is this?"

"You're now working the Angelica Rusticucci party."

"I'm sorry, who?"

"Angelica Rusticucci," Jay repeated. He waited, knowing exactly how Ryden would react.

"Angelica rusty cu?—"

"Really? What are you, twelve?" Jay slammed the thick binder on his desk in front of Ryden, making him jump.

“You have to admit, it’s an unfortunate surname.” Ryden waggled his eyebrows, but Jay ignored him. He was not going to laugh. Or smile. Or anything.

“Considering the man she married is worth billions,” Jay said, opening the binder. “I’m sure she’s over it.”

Ryden tapped the top page. “I hope whatever’s in here is worth the destruction of a small forest.”

“Cordelia—Angelica’s mother-in-law—seems to think so.”

The suspicion was back, and so it should be. Ryden eyed Jay, and Jay’s grin was evil as Ryden flipped through the sleeve-protected pages, his eyes widening with every page he flipped through.

“No,” Ryden groaned.

“Yes.”

“This is...this is a nightmare.” Ryden’s head shot up. “ You did this.”

Jay gasped and put a hand to his chest. “I beg your pardon, but are you suggesting that I would be so petty and vindictive as to convince Red that you would be perfect for this job because of your vast ranching experience and ability to connect with children between the ages of eleven and thirteen?”

Ryden narrowed his eyes.

“Why, yes. Yes, I am,” Jay replied. “Congratulations! You’re invited to Ainsley Rusticucci’s Roar-some Dinosaur Ranch.

You'll find the guest list on page 50, and the birthday boy's friends take up pages 59 through 63.

I've taken the initiative and given Cordelia and Angelica your number.

"He smiled sweetly. "Maybe they'll give you some birthday cake."

Ryden grumbled something under his breath, grabbing the binder and marching back to his desk.

He dropped down into his chair and opened the binder.

His facial expressions as he went through the pages were epic, ranging from horror to bafflement.

The man couldn't hide his thoughts to save his life.

At one point, Jay had to turn his head and put a hand over his mouth to keep his chuckle from turning into full-blown laughter. This was going to be ah-mazing .

Jay made several phone calls and appointments, spoke with the agents Red needed that afternoon, updated their schedules, gave them access to the client folder, and when lunch time rolled around, he was practically done with his to-do list. When he glanced up, Ryden wasn't at his desk.

The binder was still there, so he couldn't have gone far. Didn't matter. It was time for lunch.

Jay opened his top desk drawer to grab his wallet when something black moved inside.

What the—? He took a peek and something in the back of the drawer scurried .

Jay shrieked and flew out of his chair so fast that he sent it tumbling across the floor.

In his panic to escape whatever horror had invaded his space, he didn't realize his reaction had activated all the former military personnel on the floor.

“What happened?” Lucky asked, Ace on his heels, Saint and Joker behind them.

Jay thrust a finger at his desk drawer. “Burn it! Set it on fire!”

“What?” Joker crouched down and peeked inside the open drawer. “I don't see—Oh. Looks like there's a spider or something back there.” He stood and arched an eyebrow at Jay. “Really?”

“Burn it,” Jay insisted, hiding behind Lucky. “I'm sure we have some accelerant in the building.”

Mason walked over. “No one is settin' anything on fire.”

“In that case, I'll start looking for available commercial properties, research listings, book a moving company, and order packing supplies.

” Jay did not do bugs, especially roaches and anything that resembled them.

Angry-looking spiders? Hell no. Jumping spiders were cute.

On Instagram. Where they couldn't touch him. Nope. No way.

“Jay,” Mason said, his tone gentle as he put his hands on Jay's shoulders. “Breathe.”

Breathe? Breathe? Cowboy was high if he thought Jay would breathe anywhere near that thing. Just in case, he shielded his mouth with his hand. He'd seen Aliens .

“There is a hideous, multi-legged thing in my desk that clearly crawled out of some hellmouth.” He gasped as a horrible thought occurred to him.

“What if it laid eggs in my desk? Oh God.” He gagged.

“What if they're about to hatch and we're going to be swarmed by thousands of them!

” Where was his peppermint rollerball? Ugh, it was in his desk!

He was going to be sick. Wait, he had some nausea meds...

fuck they were in his desk! “This can't be happening. This can't?—”

Laughter drew his attention.

No. Nooooooo way.

He wouldn't.

Jay met Ryden's gaze. The man's lips curled into a wicked grin, and Jay lost. His. Shit. He shrieked and launched forward, only to be caught around the waist by Mason.

“Asshole! I'm going to murder you!”

Mason sighed. “Ry, come on, man.”

“What?” Ryden blinked innocently, but no one was buying it. With a chuckle, Ryden got up and walked toward the desk. “It ain’t even real.”

Jay stopped struggling against Mason. “What?”

“It ain’t real, sweetheart. It’s a fake Halloween spider.” Ryden reached into the desk drawer and pulled out something furry and black. He held the spider up by one leg as it moved. “Battery powered.”

When Jay was in Red’s office, Ryden must have put it in his drawer.

He clicked a button, and the spider stopped moving.

Then the bastard threw it at him. Jay squeaked and jumped behind Mason.

The toy spider bounced off Mason and hit the floor, landing on its back.

Ryden pressed the button so its legs started moving again.

Jay was not taking any chances. Ryden laughed on his way back to his desk.

“Laugh it up, Marine,” Jay said, giving the mechanical arachnid a wide berth as he marched to pick up his chair and drag it back to his desk. He grabbed his wallet and headed for the elevator. “I’m going to lunch! I’ll bring you back some crayons to snack on!”

“Oh, shit!” Joker barked out a loud laugh, Lucky and Ace joining him.

The elevator doors pinged and slid open. Jay stepped inside, and when the doors closed, he smiled because he didn’t need to plot revenge for the spider. Ryden was working at a wealthy child’s birthday party this afternoon, one with video

surveillance.

Knowing Ryden the way Jay did, this was going to be fun.

CHAPTER THREE

“This is my life now,” Ryden muttered as a twelve-year-old in a cowboy hat and dinosaur gloves streaked by, wielding a Nerf blaster in each hand.

The kid released a war cry that could have shattered glass—or Ryden’s hearing.

The array of foam-firing assault weapons at this children’s party was concerning.

Another Nerf bullet hit him in the ass. “Ten,” he counted.

How had this happened? What could he possibly have done to deserve this fate?

Okay, so maybe he’d done plenty in his lifetime to get him here, but in this instance, the blame lay solely with a certain annoying, pouty-lipped pain in his ass.

Ryden should have known better. This was what happened when you pissed off Jay.

“Professional my ass,” he muttered under his breath.

Ryden worked for Red in Risk Assessment, but they were occasionally called in as backup for certain events.

Children’s birthday parties were not those events.

Why? Because children were often unpredictable, unreasonable, and loud.

So loud. Then you stuck a bunch of them together, gave them toys and mountains of sugar, and what did you get?

Chaos. Short chaos that could outsmart, outmaneuver, and outrun him.

Unfortunately, since King was still away on his honeymoon, this event fell to Red.

And thanks to Jay, now Ryden as well. The family's mansion had a huge yard facing the ocean, where the party was being held.

At least it was surrounded by an eight-foot-tall fence with equally high hedges so none of the kids could Houdini their way out.

That and the dozen security agents in cowboy hats posted around the yard, keeping surveillance.

It was pretty hilarious. The father seemed to think sticking cowboy hats on the security guys dressed in black would help them blend in. They did not.

Ryden's earpiece buzzed to life, and he braced himself.

"Status?" Was that amusement Ryden detected in Red's tone? Then again, it was easy to be amused when you got to observe the mayhem from the safety of your makeshift command center inside the mansion. Bastard.

Ryden sighed as he took in the whirlwind of activity around him.

Where did he even start? "I'm surrounded by screamin' kids armed with foam weapons usin' me for target practice, a DJ playin' a country remix of the Jurassic Park movie score, and a robot Stegosaurus named 'Susan' who just tried to impale the snack table.

That's my status." He sighed again. Rich people.

There wasn't a doubt in Ryden's mind that Red and whoever was with him observing from their child-free base of operations were laughing their asses off.

It didn't matter that the kids had been warned to leave the security personnel alone, as if a spoiled twelve-year-old boy armed with a double-barrel Nerf gun who'd just eaten a chocolate dinosaur egg the size of his head gave two shits.

For some reason, Ryden ended up the target more than anyone.

They probably sensed his aversion to them.

"Copy that," Red replied gruffly. He'd so been laughing. "Keep your eyes on Susan. You lose her and we're liable."

"King would love that," Ryden muttered. "Do we have a code for that? Lost robot dinosaur?" Susan hit the side of one of the tables. "Hope we're not liable for the fruit because we just lost a melon Triceratops."

"Code Rex on the Run," Saint called out through their earpiece. "I repeat, Code Rex on the Run!"

Ryden threw his arms up. "The fuck are you talkin' about? Y'all are just makin' shit up now."

"On your six," Saint hissed. "The T-Rex is on the run!"

Ryden spun around just as a nine-foot inflatable T-Rex sped across the yard on a Segway. What the hell? What kind of party was this?

Unlike Susan, this dinosaur was not a robot. It had a human inside. Kevin. Not far behind Kevin, a small army of children driving Power Wheel Veloceraptors and Jurassic Park Jeeps chased him, waving Nerf guns. Why would you give motorized vehicles to kids high on sugar and wielding foam weapons?

“Um, what’s happening right now?” Red asked through their earpieces. “Why are they chasing Kevin?”

“Fuck’s sake.” Ryden took off to join the chase.

“Damn fool is makin’ off with the parent gift bags!

” Because no kid’s birthday party was complete without adult swag bags worth a hundred grand each.

The parents were too busy gossiping and drinking expensive wine or liquor to notice anything happening around them.

One guy didn’t even pretend to care as he watched the madness from behind his designer sunglasses. Thanks for nothing, pal.

Red cursed under his breath. “Stop him. And for the love of everything, don’t let him run into the pinata line again. Almost strangled himself the first time.”

“Where’d they find this guy?” Ryden asked, dodging a flying rubber Pterodactyl. Oh great. Now he had aerial assaults to look forward to.

“He’s friends with Bertram’s older son,” Saint replied.

That tracked, considering the guy had consumed about as much sugar as the kids. Ryden sped up, and Kevin made the mistake of looking behind him, driving right into

a giant sand pit set up to be an “excavation site.”

Kevin went down with a dramatic roar, gift bags flying everywhere. Ryden tackled Kevin before he could take off again. Trying to keep hold of a guy in a nine-foot inflatable T-Rex costume was not easy. Ryden had wrangled livestock less slippery.

“Damn it, Kevin,” Ryden growled. “Stop tryin’ to run, man.”

The more Kevin struggled, the more he fell over, kicking sand everywhere. Ryden stopped struggling and stood. He wasn’t about to get sand kicked into his eyes. He brushed the sand off his clothes as Kevin flailed, then rolled onto his back, arms and legs flailing.

“Stop. Please. It’s just sad now.” Ryden hauled Kevin to his feet as the kids cheered, then fired their Nerf bullets at Kevin, who forgot he was in a nine-foot-tall suit and tried to hide behind Ryden.

There was no use trying to avoid it. Ryden stood with his hands on his hips and just whacked any of the Nerf bullets that came at his face until it was over.

When the kids finished their foam assault, they returned to their mini vehicles and drove off, cheering and waving their small fists in victory.

This party was less Jurassic Park and more Mad Max .

“I’m sorry,” Kevin groaned, his voice somewhat muffled by the dinosaur suit. “I think I had too many lava cakes.” From the smell of him, he’d had too much of something else, too.

Saint jogged over to them, three security agents trailing behind. How conveniently tardy of them. “We’ll take him.” Saint looked like he was trying so very hard not to

laugh. Asshole.

“Next time, you’re chasin’ the high dinosaur,” Ryden grumbled.

Saint laughed. “There’s something you don’t hear every day.”

“Am I going to jail?” Kevin whined.

Ryden handed him off to Saint. “I don’t know. That’s up to the Rusticuccis.”

“Rusticucci,” Kevin giggled. “Ohmigod.”

“Yeah, okay. Let’s go,” Saint said, chuckling. “I can’t wait to tell Val about this.”

They hauled Kevin away, and Ryden snuck a photo with his phone. Yeah, okay, so this was one for the books. A ten-year-old cowboy riding a dinosaur hobby horse stopped before Ryden and tipped his hat. For the love of—Now what?

“Marshal,” the kid drawled.

Ryden tipped his hat in return. “Howdy there, partner. What can I do ya fer?”

“There are dinosaur hunters in the Raptor pen trying to wake up the volcano.”

Ryden blinked at the kid. “I have no idea what that means.”

The boy sighed like Ryden was the most frustrating person in the world. Because why wouldn’t what he said make total sense?

“The volcano. In the Raptor pen,” the boy repeated. “Dinosaur hunters are trying to wake up the volcano! You have to stop them.”

“Okay, those are the same words, just in a different order.” Ryden tapped his earpiece. “Red, I’m at a loss here.”

“Just here?” Red teased.

“Ah ha ha. Funny guy. Somethin’ about dinosaur hunters tryin’ to wake up a volcano in the Raptor pen. I got nothin’.”

“Give me a sec.”

While Ryden waited for someone to make sense of whatever was going on, he stood awkwardly, the kid staring up at him with a curled lip, like he’d looked into Ryden’s soul and found him lacking. How could something so small be filled with so much judgment?

“So, uh, what do ya feed that thing?” Ryden asked, pointing to the dinosaur hobby horse.

The kid’s unimpressed expression could have sent even the hardest person crawling away with their tail between their legs. “It’s not real.”

Wow. “Let me guess. You want to be a CEO when you grow up.”

The boy snorted. “Please. I’m going to be a senator.”

“That sounds ’bout right,” Ryden muttered. His earpiece came to life. Thank goodness. This day could not be over soon enough.

“Okay,” Red replied. “You might want to get over there quick. The volcano is a cake on a timer. It’s supposed to erupt on the table to signal cake and ice cream time.”

Great. Why did these things happen to him? As he headed for the Raptor pen, the cowboy kid followed him, riding his not-real dinosaur.

“Why’d ya come to me?” Ryden asked.

“Because you look the most like a cowboy. And those other bros probably wouldn’t fit in the dino pen.”

Ryden wasn’t sure how to take that, so it was probably best he not respond.

They reached the “Raptor pen,” a plastic fort-like structure created to look like a metal fence with fake barbed wire and caution signs.

What was the point of having a Raptor pen if it didn’t look authentic?

At least they hadn’t electrified it, though Ryden would have liked to see that.

Inside the pen, two kids dressed like they were on safari sat in the grass, and sure enough, the volcano cake, on its rocky terrain base, was angled between them.

“I’m gonna need that back,” Ryden said.

The kids eyed him.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:30 am

“He has a taser and he’s not afraid to use it,” the kid on the hobby horse said, oh so helpfully. “I saw him do it.”

The two kids scrambled to their feet before Ryden could say a word and sped out of there like actual Raptors were chasing them. Great. Now he’d have to deal with parents who thought Ryden had threatened to taser their kids and had possibly already done so.

“That was not helpful,” Ryden grumbled as he carefully picked up the volcano and headed out of the pen.

The kid rolled his eyes. “It worked, didn’t it?” He wrinkled his nose. “I’d taser them.”

“Oh, I bet ya would.” Ryden carried the volcano toward the snack table when something beeped. He stopped. “What was that?”

The kid’s eyes widened, and he took off. What the hell?

Ryden tapped his earpiece. “Red, did anyone say when this thing was set to go off?” He hurried toward the table when the top of the volcano erupted, shooting a giant cloud of red edible glitter into his face. “Never mind.”

This time, his so-called friends and coworkers didn’t bother to hold in their laughter. Ryden shook his head, red glitter raining down with every move. He leisurely walked to the table and placed the volcano down gently. Sure. Why not? He turned when something squawked overhead.

“What the...?” Ryden lifted his head, and a drone resembling a Pterodactyl swooped low, dropping a payload of foam darts onto his head.

He glared up as it circled again. “I swear to God, if that thing—” A second payload of confetti poured down on him.

He put a hand out. They were shaped like the word ‘roar’.

He would have blamed Ace, except Ace wasn’t working this gig.

The kids cheered and ran circles around him, Nerf guns in the air.

With a sigh, Ryden tapped his earpiece. “I’m goin’ to the bathroom to get this stuff off.

One of you needs to arrange security for Jay, because if ya don’t, I’m gonna murder him.

” He headed toward the house when a relatively robust older woman blocked his path.

Wonderful. Cordelia Rusticucci. The woman was one tight-curled hairdo away from being a villainous, Regency-era matriarch.

“And where do you think you’re going?”

Did she not see the obvious? Ryden pointed to his face. “To wash this off.”

“Not in the house, you’re not,” Cordelia huffed. “There’s a sink in the gardener’s shed.”

Ryden forced a smile. “Of course.” He made to go around her when she blocked his path. Again. Fuck my life. What now ?

“What’s wrong with your eye?”

“Oh, I was injured during a trainin’ exercise years ago.

” Ryden was used to the stares and questions about his eye.

When it first happened, he’d been self-conscious about it, even covered it up, but that was before he accepted it as a part of who he was and no longer cared what anyone thought. It was what it was.

“Well, it’s ghastly.”

Like your manners.

“ Cordelia .” Angelica Rusticucci, dressed in a stunning, form-fitting white pantsuit, stopped beside them, her deep frown on her mother-in-law. “The man is a veteran. Show some respect.”

Cordelia huffed. “Well, it is. They shouldn’t have put him out here with the children. What if it frightens them?”

Ryden arched an eyebrow. The only thing these kids were scared of was having their allowances taken away, and maybe having to eat broccoli.

Did Cordelia forget that the children she spoke of were ten- to thirteen-year-old boys?

The ones who didn’t find it gross yet awesome thought it was the most badass thing ever.

When they were done grilling him for details, they took off and continued wreaking havoc.

“Why don’t you see if your other son needs a fourth Scotch?” Angelica hissed.

With a huff, Cordelia marched off. When she disappeared inside, Angelica turned her attention back to him.

“I’m so sorry. Cordelia, she’s just... Well, she’s a real bitch.”

That was unexpected. Then again, Angelica wasn’t like her husband and his family.

From what Ryden recalled, Bertram had just finished signing the divorce papers for his second heiress wife when he met Angelica at one of his company’s holiday parties.

They’d hit it off and soon after were married.

She’d been a file clerk at the time. It had been quite the Rusticucci family scandal.

From the looks of it, Angelica could hold her own.

Angelica’s smile was apologetic. “Come on, I’ll show you where you can clean up.” She motioned for him to follow.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Oh my God, please don’t call me ma’am. That’s what everyone calls Cordelia,” Angelica laughed, making Ryden smile.

She was younger than Ryden, with bright green eyes and soft, red curls that fell over

one shoulder in a ponytail.

“It’s bad enough being called Mrs. Rusticucci.

There’s nothing like sitting in a doctor’s office waiting room and having the nurse call it out.

I used to get embarrassed. Now, I reply loudly, ‘It’s my name, not a condition.

”” She laughed again, and Ryden joined her.

He liked her. There was a twinkle of mischief in her eyes.

She reminded him of—nope. “What?” she asked. “You made a face.”

Man, he was shit at schooling his expressions. “Sorry, you just remind me of someone I know.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” she asked, amused as she led him to the mansion’s side entrance. “I can’t tell from your expression.”

“Uh, both?” He shook his head with a chuckle. “I’m not sure.”

She smiled slyly. “Pretty girl?”

Ryden pressed his lips together, and she gasped playfully.

“Oh, pretty guy.”

“Well, he is that,” Ryden admitted. “He’s also the one who got me assigned this job.”

Angelica barked out a laugh. “Oh no! I have to say, I don’t even know him, but I like him already.” She gave him a knowing smile. “What did you do to deserve such a fate?”

“I was an ass.”

She hummed. “And what are you going to do about it?”

How had he gone from cleaning glitter off his face to talking about Jay? He couldn’t escape the guy, even on the job. “It’s complicated.” They stopped by a door that looked like it led into a mudroom.

“The bathroom’s just inside to the left. Also, it doesn’t have to be complicated. Trust me. Your heart knows what it wants. It just takes your head a little longer to accept it.” She winked at him before walking off. “Think about it!”

Even if Ryden were to admit—which he wasn’t going to—that he felt something for Jay other than irritation, who said Jay felt the same? Okay, he was not going to think about this now. He had a kid’s birthday party to survive.

It took far longer than it should have to remove all the visible glitter, and he was sure it would be falling off him for days, along with sand from the pit. Jay was going to pay for this.

Not long after he resumed his post, the kids started to crash from their sugar highs while the few sober parents were no doubt reconsidering their life choices. Susan, the animatronic Stegosaurus, had been powered down before she could destroy any more dinosaur-shaped fruit.

Thank goodness this day was almost over. Ryden stood by a cardboard cutout of a Raptor, arms folded over his chest. A heartbeat later, Red appeared beside him,

carrying a soda and a plate with a piece of cake. Ryden couldn't help but shake his head and chuckle, remembering Jay's words.

"From Angelica. She said she thought you could use this." Red handed the soda and cake to Ryden.

"Thanks." Ryden unscrewed the cap on his drink. "I'm still gonna murder Jay."

Red nodded. "Could you maybe do it off the clock? Too much paperwork. You are aware that Jay has seen every second of today."

"Oh, I know he has." And if by some miracle he hadn't, Ace or Joker would have shown him the surveillance video. "Have you ever considered early retirement?"

Red chuckled. Despite everything, standing there in companionable silence with Red was nice. That's what Ryden loved about him. He had such a calming presence. The party was quieter now, the sun starting to set as a nice breeze came in from the ocean.

"You know, you two can't keep this up forever," Red said, his voice soft.

How did everyone know what, or who, he was thinking about? Was it that obvious? He needed to get some advice from King on how to be more stoic.

"I can try."

Red sighed, and Ryden sipped his soda before speaking up.

"Okay, yes. I know we can't keep this up forever. I just...I don't know what to do with him. He drives me batshit. Everything about him is so... ugh."

Jay wasn't like anyone Ryden had ever known.

He was as bold as his fashion choices and didn't give two shits what anyone thought of him.

The guy could hold a grudge until the end of time, but he was also funny and thoughtful and son of a biscuit eater!

He had to find a way to get Jay out of his head.

Red hummed. "Well, talking it out doesn't seem to work for you two. Maybe you two just need to, I don't know, fuck it out."

Ryden had not been prepared for that and started choking on his soda.

"Shit! You okay? Breathe, man." Red slapped Ryden's back as Ryden gulped for air and did his best not to die.

"What the hell?" Ryden wheezed. "Where'd that come from?"

Red shrugged. "It seemed to work for Lucky and Mason. Before they got together, we figured they were either going to kill each other or fuck."

"That's..." Ryden shook his head. "That ain't what's happenin' here."

"No? So Jay didn't try to lunge at you to inflict bodily harm after you put a fake spider in his desk?"

Okay, that happened. Still....

"Could you at least call a truce?" Red asked.

"I'll think about it. No promises."

Behind them, the chocolate fountain whirled, screeched, then caught fire. Ryden let his head hang. “They’ve managed to set chocolate on fire, Red. I don’t even know what to do with that.”

With a laugh, Red patted Ryden’s shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go put out the chocolate fountain. Think about what I said.”

Ryden nodded. He thought about it.

Truce my ass .

CHAPTER FOUR

“A truce?” Jay eyed Ryden, then his outstretched hand. Mmm, no. He wasn’t going to fall for it. After what Jay had witnessed on the surveillance video from the Rusticucci party, no way Ryden wanted a truce. The guy was still leaving particles of red glitter wherever he went.

“Yes, a truce,” Ryden sighed. “Stop lookin’ at me like my hand’s gonna electrocute you or somethin’.”

“How do I know it won’t?” Jay narrowed his eyes. He was well acquainted with Ryden’s sneaky sneak ways. Pfft. Their office feud had been going on for years. Years . And not once had Ryden ever called for a truce. What would that even look like?

“It’s not a trick.”

Ha! That’s exactly what someone who wanted to trick him would say.

“Yeah, I’m not buying it.” Jay went back to reading his paperback.

He didn’t have time for Ryden’s shenanigans.

Things were about to get steamy between the sexy duke and the equally hot highwayman.

The last thing Jay needed was Mr. Marine, who was not the man of his dreams, trying

to pull one over on him.

“If you’ll excuse me, I must find out who betrayed the duke and ruined his good name. Truce not accepted.”

“Fine.” Ryden turned and walked off. “It was his aunt.”

Jay slowly lowered his book. No. Had he...? No way Ryden had just spoiled the end of his book. Besides, Ryden didn’t read historical romances. Or any romance for that matter. The man seemed to be allergic to it. Not a romantic bone in his body. “You didn’t.”

Ryden turned, walking backward, his grin smug. “I read the end while you were at lunch. Oh, and she used the highwayman to do it. The duke’ll find out about that later.”

“No,” Jay gasped. With a frustrated growl, Jay lobbed his book at Ryden, who caught it with a laugh. “You jerk! I was enjoying that book!”

Ryden looked at the paperback and wrinkled his nose. Turning it, he tapped the model on the cover. “Why’s he shirtless? Does he walk around the English countryside shirtless?”

“Maybe he does.” Jay crossed his arms over his chest. Why was he even having this conversation with Ryden? The man was so frustrating!

“It takes place in the winter ,” Ryden shot back. “Look. There’s snow on the cover. He’d freeze his nipples off! Among other things. Completely unrealistic.”

Jay stared at him. “Are you seriously trying to rationalize the hot, bare-chested guy on the cover of my romance novel? Why do you think I bought it? I’m at the

bookstore, go to the romance section, and bam —sexy half-naked duke.

I'm in. I read the back, and it gets even better.

It has everything I want. Action, adventure, a dark and sinfully smoldering duke, a dangerous highwayman, intrigue, hot sex, and romance. Why wouldn't I buy it?"

"It's ridiculous." Ryden waved the book at him.

"You're ridiculous!"

"What in the hell is all this hollerin' about?" Mason stormed out of King's office.

"Are you two at it again?"

Jay stood and thrust a finger at Ryden. "That immature man-child not only spoiled the end of my book, a book I was very much looking forward to and enjoying, but then he says it's ridiculous!"

"I apologize."

Jay whirled to face Ryden. His expression told Jay he was most definitely not sorry.

"I meant to say it's pointless trash and stupid."

Jay clenched his jaw so hard it hurt. He needed to leave before he shouted out something completely inappropriate in the middle of the office. Excusing himself, he stormed into the first empty office he came across, which was, thankfully, Red's, and slammed the door behind him.

The scent of lavender filled the room, and Jay's shoulders relaxed a little as he inhaled the soothing mist of essential oil emanating from the glowing diffuser in the

corner.

He breathed in through his nose and exhaled out his mouth just like his calming app had taught him.

The fact that he needed a calming app to deal with Ryden should have been enough evidence to stay away from the guy.

Some truce. He should have known Ryden was full of it.

With a frown, Jay dropped onto Red's couch.

He wasn't going to let that asshole upset him.

Ryden wasn't even the first guy to talk shit about Jay's choice in books.

He had been fighting that battle since middle school when he read his first romance.

Even then, he hadn't cared what anyone thought because he knew the truth about the books he read, about the stories that were everything he needed—an escape.

Every story was a magical world he could lose himself in, and it felt good.

They made his heart happy. Why did people have to shit on other people's joy?

Jay had always loved to read. He read all kinds of books, but his true love had always been romance.

What was wrong with being swept away to another world where someone loved you so deeply that they would do anything for you?

Where they would sweep you off your feet and fight for you, love you for who you were, flaws and all?

Maybe they were unrealistic sometimes, but so what?

Who the fuck wanted reality? He'd had a lifetime of realistic relationships, and guess what?

Zero stars. Would not recommend. He wanted the handsome hero to rescue him, and he wouldn't say no to some mind-blowing sex.

A knock sounded at the door, and Jay straightened. It was probably Mason. Poor man. He did not sign up for this when King asked him to take the reins. The door opened and shut, but Jay closed his eyes.

"I don't want to talk about it," Jay muttered.

"I'm sorry."

Jay's head shot up. It was Ryden.

Great. What the hell did he want now? "Come to make fun of me some more?"

Ryden hesitated, then sat down at the opposite end of the couch. "I wasn't makin' fun of you."

"You were making fun of something I love. Therefore, you were making fun of me."

"Oh. I didn't think 'bout it that way," Ryden murmured. "There's nothin' wrong with what you read."

Jay glared at him. "I know that. I'm not ashamed of what I read. I love what I read and don't care what anyone thinks."

"Then why are you in here? And not to be a jerk, but the fellas tease you about your books all the time."

"It's not the same," Jay growled. "They're not mean about it. They don't insult what I read or call it stupid trash because they don't believe it. You believe it is, and you were trying to be hurtful."

Ryden rubbed the back of his neck. "You're right. I was an asshole."

"Why?" Jay shook his head. "I don't understand. Do you dislike me that much?"

"What? I don't dislike you."

"Really? Because everything that comes out of your mouth says otherwise." Jay stood and turned away. What the hell was this? He didn't like it.

His whole life, Jay had dealt with people saying hurtful things about and to him, whether it was about his wardrobe, his voice, his personality, what he read, and yes, sometimes it hurt, but most of the time, he didn't care because they didn't matter.

He'd learned early on that other people's perceptions of him were not his problem, and the words they used said more about them than him.

He also gave as good as he got. Of all people, why would he care what Ryden thought?

The hand on his arm startled him, and he turned, surprised to find Ryden standing there. Close. Too close. Heat rose to his cheeks, and he hated that he couldn't stop it.

He was not blushing because of Ryden. It was, um, anger. Yes, he was flushed because he was angry .

“I’m sorry,” Ryden said, his voice quiet. This time, he sounded sincere.

Jay swallowed hard and nodded. “It’s fine. I just...” He closed his eyes and sighed. It used to be light fun, but somewhere along the way, things between them changed, and Jay couldn’t figure out what or when, only that it had, and not for the better. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“Neither do I,” Ryden murmured, raising a hand and pausing.

He seemed to be considering something. Whatever he concluded led him to brush Jay’s bangs away from his face.

Jay stared at him, eyes wide. He’d never seen this side of Ryden.

Not that he couldn’t be. Jay had seen Ryden be kind and sweet, charming even, but it was never aimed at Jay, and he’d certainly never been this... gentle.

What was happening right now?

“I’ve been a real asshole to you, and I’m sorry, truly sorry.” His lips quirked in the corner, and Jay asked himself questions he’d never asked before. Like what did Ryden’s lips feel like? What did they taste like? How would it feel to have those strong arms around him?

Jay quickly shook himself out of it. Was there such a thing as inhaling too much lavender? Because what was he even thinking right now? “Why should I believe you? How is this different from the hundreds of times you’ve apologized?”

“Only to go and act the fool again and again. You’re right. You’re right. You just...okay, cards on the table. You get under my skin, Jay, in a way no one ever has, and I don’t know what to do with that.”

Jay blinked at him. “I do?”

“Yeah.” Ryden brushed his fingers down Jay’s cheek. “I know I get under your skin, too.”

Had he fallen asleep in the staff room during lunch again? In what world did the two of them stand together like this, touching and speaking quiet words? Jay opened his mouth to deny it, but Ryden arched a thick eyebrow at him. Damn.

“Yeah, okay. Fine. But what does that mean anyway? That we both excel at annoying each other? Perfect. Wonderful.”

“I don’t know, maybe it means there’s somethin’ else going on underneath all the shoutin’ and arguin’. Maybe....” Ryden leaned in, hesitating, as if allowing Jay the chance to step away, but Jay didn’t. Why wasn’t he moving? Instead of heading for the door, Jay lifted his chin and closed his eyes.

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Ryden brushed his lips over Jay's, and Jay couldn't help his sharp intake of breath.

Then Ryden's mouth was on his, and Jay had a fistful of Ryden's shirt in his hand, jerking him closer to taste more.

Oh fuck, it was hot . Hot and warm and sweet, and Jay needed more.

The man's scent, hard body, and hunger for Jay made him shiver right as a commotion outside made them both jump.

Shit! What the hell were they doing? Nope . No way. Whatever this was, Jay had to stop it right now. He quickly stepped back and held his hand out. "Truce?"

Ryden's brows drew together, and he frowned at Jay's hand. "What?"

"I accept your truce."

"Can we talk about this?" Ryden covered Jay's hand with his. "Jay, we should...."

"Please." Jay couldn't do this.

With a heavy sigh, Ryden shook Jay's hand, and Jay ignored the jolt of something he refused to name exploding through him. He pulled his hand away.

"So we agree?" Jay asked, hating how shaky his voice sounded.

"Yeah, truce."

“Okay. Good. Right. I should get back to work.” He didn’t wait for Ryden to respond, just hurried to the door and opened it.

Fuck, it was like everyone had decided to return to the office at the same time.

He did not need anyone asking him about his flushed cheeks, why he was out of breath, or why his lips looked swollen.

And great, Lucky and Ace were in the building, which accounted for the commotion.

The two were huddled together. What was going on? Ooh, a distraction. Perfect!

“It’s finally happened.” Lucky wiped a tear from his eye. He glanced at Ace, and his eyes narrowed. “Bro, don’t think about it. Don’t even look at it.”

“Or what? You’ll murder me?”

“No. Worse. I’ll tell Tía you were the one who threw up in her flowers the night of Checho’s party.”

Ace’s eyes went wide, he spun around, and hauled ass in the opposite direction.

“That’s what I thought.”

Jay couldn’t remember the last time he saw Lucky this excited. He was like a little kid at Christmas. What could possibly—Lucky turned, a small plate in his hands. Ah. That made sense. It was flan, and by his expression, not just any flan, but the flan.

“Isn’t it the most beautiful thing you have ever seen in your entire life?” Lucky asked, walking it over so Jay could bask in its beauty.

Jay tried not to laugh. He was adorable. “It’s very beautiful.”

“Hey, Jay—” Ryden darted out of Red’s office and slammed into Lucky.

It was like watching a movie scene set in slow motion. Jay gasped, Lucky shouted, “Noooooooo!” and Ryden said, “Shiiiiit!” And then the flan hit the floor with a plop .

Everything and everyone in the office came to a screeching halt.

Oh. My. God.

“No,” Lucky whispered, falling to his knees. “It cannot be.”

Jay stared at Ryden, who looked confused. Oh, bless his heart, the man was prettier than a peach. Maybe he was seeing his life flash before his eyes, and that’s why he wasn’t moving? Jay leaned over. “Run,” he hissed.

“What?” Ryden moved his gaze back to Lucky. “Lucky, I am so, so sorry. I’ll, uh, I’ll buy ya a new one.”

Jay cringed. Ooh, wrong answer.

“Buy? Buy ?” Lucky lifted his murderous gaze to Ryden. “You think you can buy this? Does this look to you like something you can buy? No, bro. It’s not something you can buy . Do you know who made this? Do you know what kind of flan this was?”

Ryden cringed. “Um, coconut?”

“Yes, it was coconut, made by Graciela’s abuelita, who is ninety-two years old. Do you know how many of these she makes in a year?”

Ryden shook his head and took a step back.

“Not many. And they are always spoken for, but this year... this year was my year, and you...” Lucky finished scooping up what had once been a flan and now looked like a caramelized massacre. He slowly rose. “You did this.”

Ryden was that guy in every horror movie who should have listened to his girlfriend, or friend, or sibling, and not gone alone into the woods, or the basement, or wherever else it was that you knew would lead to him winding up murdered.

The man was a Marine. Surely his Spidey senses should have been tingling.

“Lucky, it’s just a dessert. I’m sure we can?—”

The war cry Lucky let out scared the ever-loving crap out of Ryden, making him jump so hard he stumbled back, hitting one of the desks.

Quickly recovering, Ryden took off, using desks and the people sitting at them as shields.

Lucky’s flan was back on the floor because Lucky needed both hands to strangle Ryden.

“I’m sorry,” Ryden said, faking a left and going right.

Mason came out of King’s office, and Jay felt for him. The guy was probably counting down the days until King returned.

“What am I lookin’ at here, Jay?”

“It’s bad,” Jay replied. “Lucky got his coconut flan.”

Mason was confused until Jay pointed to the floor. His eyes went huge. “Sweet merciful heaven.” He narrowed his eyes at Ryden. “What did you do, Marine?”

“It was an accident!”

“No,” Lucky yelled. “It was an assassination! Asesino!”

“Now I know why King takes blood pressure medication,” Mason muttered. “Ryden, clean up this mess and finish moving into your damn office before King regrets giving it to you. Lucky, in King’s office.”

Neither Ryden nor Lucky moved.

Uh oh .

Mason ran a hand through his hair and rounded his shoulders. “If you two don’t get movin’, I’m gonna call King, and the four of us are gonna have a video conference. How’s that sound?”

Lucky stormed into King’s office, and Ryden didn’t bother to look at what he was grabbing off his desk.

He just got an armful and hurried to his new office.

Jay held back a smile. Mason could be pretty scary when he wanted to be.

Of course, the threat of King hearing about everyone’s mischief had something to do with it.

The door to King’s office closed, and Jay made sure no one disturbed them. He had a pretty good idea of how Mason would get Lucky to calm down. What King didn’t

know, wouldn't make him lose his shit.

Ryden and Mason were promoted just after the holidays, but it took time for everyone to be shuffled around and for the two offices to be cleared out.

Mason had been the first to move into his new office.

With the Kings and Wild Cards deciding to pull back on their work hours to spend more time with their significant others, it meant making a few changes.

Was Jay doing everything he could to not think about what happened between him and Ryden in Red's office?

Yes. Yes, he was. For the rest of the day, he kept busy and pretended nothing had happened, because it was nothing.

Nothing to see here. He wasn't going to think about it or wonder why Ryden had kissed him, what it meant, or that Jay had returned his kiss and felt like he would catch fire from the inside out. Nope. Not thinking about it at all.

They'd agreed on a truce, so Jay would focus on getting along with Ryden the same way he did with everyone else at the office. Like the kiss never happened. Just a couple of bros working together. Friends without benefits. It was an improvement on their feud, so he'd take it.

Kiss? What kiss?

CHAPTER FIVE

What the hell had he gotten himself into?

Ryden pressed his lips together and focused on the task at hand. He closed his eyes and fastened another gleaming gold button. It had been so long....

“You don’t have to do this, you know.”

“I know,” Ryden replied, appreciating Saint’s support.

He opened his eyes and met his best friend’s gaze through the mirror on the back of the wardrobe door.

“But I need to. This is who I am, and tryin’ to hide from all the fucked-up shit that happened ain’t gonna do me any good.

” Not like he could hide from it even if he wanted to.

Ryden’s life had been such a mess. If there was something lower than rock bottom, that’s where he’d been. He wasn’t going back. Not now, not ever. He’d come way too far to screw things up now.

“Did your friend know what he was asking when he approached you?” Saint asked gently.

Ryden fastened another button and sighed. “Remember that night at the tavern? I

introduced y'all."

Breathe .

"Yeah."

"Well, we talked, and I told him everything." It had been one of the hardest conversations of his life.

Despite years of talking about his past, telling another Marine, one he'd served with, where he'd been before ending up with the Kings had been painful, but at least the feelings of shame he'd once had were gone.

Saint nodded. "How'd he take it?"

"First, he was shocked, then pissed."

Saint stood and shoved his hands into his suit pants pockets. "Sounds about right. They should have taken care of you. You lost your fucking eyesight and—" He shook his head. "Sorry."

"Your rage tells me you love me," Ryden teased, making Saint chuckle.

"Ass."

"Anyway, we talked. He was hurt that I hadn't asked him for help, but he understood. Hard to ask for help when you're too proud to admit you need it."

Looking back, Ryden would have done things so differently. But he'd been young, proud, and all kinds of messed up. But that was the past, and he'd worked hard to put it behind him so he could focus on the present and his future. Head held high, he

turned. “Thanks for comin’ with me.”

“Of course,” Saint replied with a smile. He placed his hand on Ryden’s shoulder and squeezed. “Let’s do this.” Saint headed for the office door—because, holy shit, Ryden had his own office now—and Ryden followed.

Inhaling deeply through his nose and releasing it through his mouth, he stepped outside, shaking his head at the catcalls and whistles from everyone in the office. Saint had received the first round when he’d stepped out of Lucky’s office all snazzied up in his charcoal gray suit and tie.

“Damn, Marine. Look at you,” Joker said, leaning against Jay’s desk.

Ace whistled. “Looking slick, cowboy.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Ryden waved them off just as Jay walked out of King’s office.

“What’s everyone—” He gasped, his eyes going huge when he saw Ryden.

Jay shut his mouth, and the box he’d been carrying exploded, dozens of pink highlighters soaring through the air.

They bounced and rolled on the carpet in every direction.

Something told Ryden that Ace had placed another stationery order.

Whenever bright pink office supplies showed up, it was down to Ace messing with them.

“Shit.” Jay hurried to round up the highlighters, and Ryden went to help, but Jay threw a hand up. “It’s fine. I got this. You’ll get wrinkled.”

Ryden nodded but didn't respond. Speaking of pink.

Did Jay know how flushed his cheeks were?

Not that Ryden was about to mention it. Since that day in Red's office, they'd been tiptoeing around each other.

Ryden hated it. He'd never admit it, but he missed his little office battles with Jay.

Hell, he'd even take Jay throwing a romance novel at his head.

Instead, there was polite...civility, and it sucked.

Saint's phone rang, and he picked up. "Hey, Kazi. We were just— what?"

Uh oh. That didn't sound good. Ryden turned to Saint. The tension in his friend's stance and how he ran his hand through his hair told Ryden something had happened at the tavern. That, and the fact Kazi was calling Saint in the middle of the day.

"Okay, um." Saint lifted his gaze to Ryden. "Kazi's on the way to the hospital with Val."

Suddenly, everyone was on alert, but Saint held up a hand. "Val's okay. One of the pipes in the bathroom burst, Val slipped, caught himself at a weird angle, and might possibly have fractured or broken his arm."

"You need to go," Ryden said.

Saint held his phone to his ear. "One sec, Kazi." He stepped up to Ryden, tapping the mute button on his phone. "I can't let you go alone, man."

“I’ll be fine,” Ryden promised. “If it gets to be too much, I’ll leave after my duties are over. Your man needs you. Go .”

“Duties?” Jay asked, coming to stand beside them. He looked concerned. Probably worried about Val.

“My buddy’s gettin’ married. I’m in the Sword Arch. I’m also the one who gets to tap the bride on the butt with my sword, so I gotta be there.”

“Oh.” Jay nodded.

“Go,” Ryden told Saint. “I’ll be fine. Tell Val he owes me a burger and a beer.”

Saint chuckled. “You got it.” He patted Ryden’s arm and squeezed it. “You got this.” With that, he hurried off.

“Why doesn’t he want you to go alone?” Jay asked.

Lucky stepped up to Ryden, his voice quiet. “I got your back if you need me, bro.”

Despite the flan incident that Ryden would never live down and Lucky was sure to get retribution for, Lucky was still a brother to him, and Ryden appreciated his offer.

“Thanks, Lucky,” Ryden replied, shaking his head.

“But you got a big client meeting today. I can’t let ya miss that.

” Letting out a heavy sigh, Ryden turned to Jay.

“It’s a Marine wedding. The groom is one of the fellas I served with.

Saint was my plus one for, um, support.” His hand went instinctively to his sword.

“It’s been a while. There are gonna be other Marines there.

” He smiled. “It’s fine. I’m good. I better get going. ’Scuse me.” He stepped around Jay.

“I’ll go.”

Ryden stilled. Had he... No. That couldn’t be right. He turned and cocked his head to one side. “I’m sorry?”

“I said I’ll go. As your plus one. For support.”

Jay? His support ? Since when? “Why?”

Clearly, that had been the wrong answer.

Jay folded his arms over his chest and arched an eyebrow at him. “It was a genuine offer, but if you don’t want me to go, just say so.”

After months of rivalry, a kiss Jay refused to acknowledge, and an awkward truce, Jay wanted to go with him to a wedding as support. Support for him . What was happening right now? Jay opened his mouth, and Ryden quickly spoke up.

“Okay. Seein’ as how we match and all.”

“What?” Jay looked down at his blue vest and pants with the thin red plaid lines. His bow tie was also red. “Well, damn.” His head shot up. “Totally unintentional.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure you weren’t expectin’ me to bust out my dress blues today.

Shall we go?"

"Hold on." Jay removed his phone from his pocket and, with lightning-fast fingers, typed away at his screen. A heartbeat later, he put his phone away. "Sorry, had to send out a company email and turn on my out-of-office message."

"You did all that in the two seconds you were typin' on your phone?"

"Yep. Let's go. I'm driving." Jay hurried off toward the elevator, and Ryden quickly followed.

"I can drive. The venue is less than five minutes from here."

"First of all, you seem to forget where we work." Jay pressed the elevator button, and the doors slid open.

"Five minutes can turn into half an hour the second a tourist takes a wrong turn. Second, you're not dressing like that and stepping out of a pickup truck.

No offense to your truck. It's a very nice truck, but you need to show up in something a little more... snazzy."

Snazzy. Consider his interest piqued.

Ryden frowned as he followed Jay out of the elevator and the building toward the parking lot.

"Since when is your Toyota snazzy?" Jay's little smirk should have told him something was up.

It also drew Ryden's attention to those full, pink lips.

Lips that had tasted so fucking good. Ryden had seen a lot of pretty guys over the years, but there was something about Jay, a delicateness that was at odds with his fierce personality. Then, a flash of red caught his eye.

“Holy shit. This is your car?”

Whatever Ryden had expected, it wasn't the sleek red sports car Jay approached. When Jay traded his Mini Cooper for a Toyota a few months ago, Ryden had pictured a Corolla or Camry in a cute, bright model and color. Not...this.

“Okay, I knew King paid you hella good. I didn't think he paid you Audi RS3 good.” Then again, Jay was invaluable to King. He wasn't just the man's Executive Assistant. Jay did so much more at Four Kings Security than most people knew.

Jay tapped his smartwatch, and the car engine started.

“You can drive this?” Ryden asked, looking the car over. He winced at Jay's unimpressed expression. Oops.

“No. I bought a car I couldn't drive. It's here so someone else can chauffeur me around.”

Ask a ridiculous question and get a snarky answer.

Ryden cleared his throat. “Right. Sorry.” One of these days, he'd stop sticking his foot in it. Today was not that day. He opened the passenger side door and slipped inside. Damn, this was nice. He inhaled deeply. Still had that new car smell.

Jay climbed in behind the wheel, and Ryden forced himself to look forward.

It wasn't the first time Jay wore a preppy matching vest and pants combo with one of

his stupid little bow ties.

And it wasn't like his clothes had never hugged his body before, as if they'd been tailored for his petite frame.

The white dress shirt had quarter-length sleeves, the cuffs stopping at his elbows.

Actually, today's outfit was a little dressier than usual.

“How come you're all gussied up today?”

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Jay glanced at him. "Seatbelt."

Right. None of his business.

Ryden fastened his seatbelt, the engine purring like a kitten. Jay quickly got them moving after Ryden told him where they were going. Good thing it was a short drive because the silence in the car was killing him. Finally, he couldn't take it anymore.

"Okay, look. I know I really messed up that night at the tavern. I was an asshole. I tried apologizin' and ended up makin' things worse like I usually do, and then things got out of hand after that, so I thought the truce would make it better, and then, you know, in Red's office, and I have no idea what to make of any of it. "

Jay glanced at him. "Why are you bringing the tavern up now? That was ages ago."

"I don't know. I've been kickin' myself over it ever since. It was a shit thing to say. I'm not that guy."

"Then why did you say it?"

Why had he said it? That night flashed clear as day in his head.

Jay sitting on one of the tables, dressed in one of his eye-catching outfits, surrounded by a bunch of beefy bears enthralled by him and practically salivating.

The image of one of them taking Jay home invaded his thoughts, and something had snapped inside Ryden.

“I was off that night.” Ryden looked forward again, focusing on the traffic ahead.

“It’s no excuse, I know. I shouldn’t’ve taken it out on you.

But I did, and I’m sorry.” He wasn’t about to admit he’d been struggling to keep Jay out of his thoughts lately because then he’d have to think about why that might be, and he wasn’t going there.

It might be a different story at night when he was in bed, but he sure as shit wasn’t about to dwell on that now.

“Okay,” Jay replied, entering the venue’s parking lot. He pulled into a parking spot, turned off the engine, and unfastened his seatbelt. “But don’t ever say anything like that to me again. Understood?”

Ryden nodded. “You have my word. Don’t s’pose you want to talk about the other thing?”

“Nope.” Jay stepped out of the car, and Ryden followed.

Guess they were never going to talk about that kiss. Ever. Probably for the best. He smoothed out his uniform and inhaled deeply through his nose. Jay stepped in front of him, their height difference forcing Jay to look up and Ryden to look down so their gazes could meet. It made Ryden smile.

“You look good,” Jay said. “You also have as much right to be here as any of those Marines.”

Ryden hadn’t expected that. “Thanks.”

“Let’s go, Marine.” Jay turned, and Ryden followed, amused. His heart pounded

when they headed inside the luxury Art Deco venue. It had been a long time since he'd been this nervous, but he didn't dare show it. Several guests came up to him and thanked him for his service.

Guests were taking their seats inside the Grand Ballroom, where the ceremony and the reception would be held. The decor was simple yet elegant, with many beautiful white flower bouquets and a row of chairs set among the white columns on each side of the room.

According to the invite, a cocktail hour would follow the ceremony, giving staff time to prepare the ballroom for the reception.

The place was incredible. It had been a bank until about a decade ago when it was converted into a classy venue and an upscale bar.

This wasn't their first time here. The Kings often booked this venue for charity events.

A small group of Marines stood near the flowered arch at the back of the room.

They seemed to know each other. One noticed him and said something to the others, who all turned their heads.

The one guy nodded in greeting, and Ryden nodded back.

Then they turned back around and returned to their conversation.

"Do you know them?" Jay asked.

"No." Something about one of the Marines bugged Ryden, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. "We should take our seats," he murmured, putting his hand on Jay's

lower back and ushering him into the aisle, his gaze returning to that Marine.

There was something about how the guy shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then very subtly straightened. He slipped his hand into his pocket and quickly pulled it out. It was almost like he kept forgetting what he wasn't supposed to do. It was odd.

Jay leaned in to say something, and the subtle scent of his shampoo momentarily distracted Ryden. He caught himself leaning forward, and Jay blinked up at him. Shit. He hadn't meant to do that.

"What are you doing?" Jay asked.

"Listenin'. You were gonna say somethin'?"

Nice save.

"Oh. Right." Jay leaned in, his voice quiet. "What's going on? You have that look on your face."

Fuck, Jay smelled good. What was that? Kind of flowery but not. It smelled like one of Red's essential oils, but not quite. What was it? Ryden knew that scent. He realized it was the same one from the day they'd kissed in Red's office. Ryden had been drawn in then, too.

"Hello?"

Ryden curled a finger around a lock of Jay's hair and leaned in to sniff. "What is that? It's drivin' me nuts. Juniper? Magnolia?" Damn, his hair was so soft. He pulled back and found Jay staring at him.

“Um, it’s lavender and mint.”

“Ah, it’s the mint,” Ryden said, snapping his fingers as he sat back. “That’s what was throwin’ me off.” He was familiar with lavender because Red had been using it for years, either on his person or in his diffuser.

Jay shook his head. “Anyway, I was asking you what the face was for. It’s the look you get when something’s bugging you, but you can’t figure out what it is.”

How did Jay know that? The idea that Jay had studied him enough to know his facial expressions spread an unexpected warmth through him.

As much as he wanted to tease Jay, he forced himself not to.

His gaze went back to the Marine, who leaned to the side.

The guy spotted him, and something flashed in his gaze.

Ryden held back a curse. He discreetly slipped his arm around Jay and pulled him tight against his side.

“What are you doing?” Jay asked, his hand going to Ryden’s chest to push him away, only to have Ryden cover Jay’s hand with his.

Ryden leaned in and brushed his lips across Jay’s cheek to whisper in his ear. “I’m gonna need you to pretend you’re in love with me.”

Jay’s soft gasp made Ryden smile, and he couldn’t stop his brain from returning to their kiss, how Jay had tasted, his scent, and how he’d felt in Ryden’s arms. Okay, not the time.

“What?”

“You’re my boyfriend. We’ve been together for two years. We fell in love at work. Big office romance. Just like one of your novels.”

“Are you high?” Jay hissed. “And how do you know what a big office romance looks like? You don’t read romance.”

The guy started walking toward them, his gaze going from Ryden to Jay and back. There was definitely something off, and Ryden didn’t like it.

“I need ya to do this for me,” Ryden whispered, kissing Jay’s temple. “Please.”

“Why?”

Jay had every right to be suspicious and wary, but something told Ryden that the guy wasn’t coming over for fun. Whoever he was, he was setting off alarm bells. Ryden was going to make sure Jay was safe, no matter what.

“Because I’m pretty sure the guy walkin’ toward us ain’t a Marine.”

CHAPTER SIX

Jay was so confused.

If the guy heading their way wasn't a Marine, why was he dressed like one?

Wouldn't the other guys he'd been talking to have something to say about that?

They obviously knew one another. Ryden squeezed him before releasing him, and heat rose to Jay's cheeks.

Don't think about the kiss . Don't think about the kiss .

Damn it, he was thinking about the kiss.

This day had taken such a weird turn. First, he'd volunteered to attend a wedding with Ryden. He still didn't know what possessed him to do such a thing. Now, he was supposed to pretend to be Ryden's boyfriend. Like, what even?

Ryden asking him to pretend to be in love with him had caused a flutter in Jay's stomach, the same flutter that happened to him in Red's office that day.

He didn't like it. At all. Jay's first instinct had been to turn him down flat, but something was going on, and as much as Ryden inspired the urge to scream and throw things, the guy knew what he was doing.

The fake Marine walked into the aisle where they sat, which was still empty. Most

guests stood chatting since the ceremony hadn't started yet. Before he reached them, Ryden stood, so Jay quietly followed his lead.

The guy nodded at Ryden. "Semper Fi."

"Ooh Rah," Ryden replied, nodding in response.

"How's it going, Marine?"

Ryden quirked a smile. "Outstanding."

Jay looked from one to the other. It was like some secret conversation was happening between them, one that Jay didn't understand.

Ryden had his guard up because of this guy, and as much as Jay hated to admit it, he trusted Ryden's instincts, so he was sticking close to Ryden. The guy extended his hand out.

"Martin."

Ryden took the offered hand and shook it. "Ryden."

"Good to meet you. I just wanted to check in and see if you needed anything."

Ryden shook his head. "Nah. I'm good. How do ya know Alex?"

"Through mutual acquaintances," Martin replied, tilting his head toward the other Marines.

"We meet up once a week to play basketball and have a few beers." His gaze darted to Jay and back, clearly waiting for an introduction.

With a smile, Ryden turned to Jay but didn't move out of the way completely, keeping himself between the supposed Marine and Jay.

Was he protecting Jay or trying to keep an eye on Martin?

"This is my boyfriend, Jay."

"Nice to meet you," Jay replied, holding out his hand. Martin took it in a firm grip and shook it.

"Pleasure. Well, you let us know if you need anything," Martin replied.

With another nod, he returned to his acquaintances .

They didn't bother to hide that they were discussing Ryden, and whatever they said wasn't good.

What the hell? They didn't even know Ryden.

Not to mention, he was a fellow Marine. Ryden was right. Something around here was sus.

Jay leaned in and smiled up at Ryden like the loving boyfriend he was supposed to be, seeing as how those guys were paying such close attention to them.

He turned slightly so they couldn't see his face, in case one of them could read lips.

Some of the guys at the office had learned to do that.

"You think they're up to something, don't you? "

“Absolutely,” Ryden replied, his smile not reaching his eyes. He leaned in slightly and lowered his head like he was having a little moment with his boyfriend. “I want ya to stay close. I don’t trust those guys.”

Jay nodded, but the music started before he could say anything else, and everyone took their seats.

The groom appeared at the flower arch, dashing in his Marine Corps Dress Blues, and the bride was stunning in her lace tulle, mermaid-style wedding dress.

It was a simple yet elegant ceremony, and before he knew it, Ryden was leaning in to whisper.

“That’s my cue. See ya in a minute.” He kissed Jay’s cheek and got up, excusing himself as he left the aisle to take his position.

Ugh, why were Jay’s cheeks hot again? This was so annoying.

It was just a ruse. Probably the uniform.

Who didn’t love a man in uniform? And there was something about those dress blues that just, ungh .

He’s annoying. Remember, he’s annoying. He makes fun of your bow ties, takes your books, and puts fake spiders in your desk drawer.

He’s not handsome or sexy. Why is his shoulder-to-waist ratio so ridiculous?

And since when has his jaw been so stupidly square and rugged, and oh dear goddess Gaga, seriously? Ugh. Focus. Annoying. So annoying.

Ignoring his absurd reaction, Jay watched the Marines line up, four on each side of the aisle. Having worked at Four Kings Security as long as he had, this was hardly his first Marine event.

Since the venue wasn't a place of worship, the Sword Arch could be held indoors if the bride or groom wished, which they were doing in this case.

Ryden stood at the end of one of the rows, and okay, he looked incredibly handsome.

Fine . He looked freaking sinful. Jay would give him that.

It was hard to believe this was the same man who instigated all manner of annoyances daily. Or at least he had before their truce.

"You must be so proud," a woman said quietly as she leaned toward Jay from the row behind him.

"Oh, yes," Jay replied. "He's...one of a kind."

"Doesn't hurt that he's gorgeous," she said with a wink.

Next to her, her friend leaned forward. "I hope you don't mind my asking, but his eyes. Is that from his time in the service?"

Jay nodded. "An accident during a training exercise." He wouldn't tell them Ryden was blind in that eye. Although Ryden seemed used to people asking about his eyes, it wasn't Jay's place, even as a pretend boyfriend.

"That's terrible," the friend said with a sad shake of her head.

She put her hand on his arm and squeezed.

“Well, I’m glad he has a nice young man like yourself to look after him.

They can be so stubborn. Acting like they’re invincible and don’t need anyone or anything, but we know better, don’t we? ”

“Yes,” Jay replied quietly, a knot in his throat.

Knowing Ryden’s history, the words hit him harder than expected.

He remembered what Ryden had been like in the beginning.

Not nearly as confident, boisterous, or playful.

Thinking about it now, he remembered how far Ryden had come since joining Four Kings Security.

Like Mason said, they’d been feuding since the beginning, but the heaviness that had weighed on Ryden’s shoulders at the time, the darkness that seemed to follow him wherever he went, had gone some time ago.

Then one day, in an attempt to fit in, he’d made the hilarious mistake of taking Joker’s bet and strolled into King’s office while he’d been on a call to a client and called him Daddy.

Jay had never seen Ryden move so fast. It had made Jay’s day.

Thankfully, Jay didn’t need to say more as the senior usher took his position at the end of the arch near the doors, facing the two rows of Marines. He gave them the order to draw their swords and then remove them from their scabbards to touch points with the Marine across from them.

Rose petals were thrown at the bride and groom as they moved through the arch. Ryden and the Marine across from him lowered their swords when the married couple reached them at the end of the arch, stopping them in their path.

“Welcome to the Marine Corps family,” the senior usher declared.

The bride and groom kissed, and Ryden patted the bride on the butt with the flat edge of his sword before the Marines were ordered to lift their swords again.

As soon as the married couple was clear, the senior usher ordered the Marines to return their swords to their scabbards. He then dismissed the detail.

Everyone followed the bride and groom outside into the Grand Foyer, and Jay met Ryden so they could do the same.

Was he supposed to take Ryden’s hand? There were very strict rules of what a Marine could and could not do while in their dress blues, even if they were no longer serving.

Jay was far more familiar with Army regulations since he worked for the Kings and Wild Cards, who’d served as Green Berets.

As Ryden’s “boyfriend,” Jay should know what to do. As if reading his thoughts, Ryden held out his left elbow, and Jay took hold of it, allowing himself to be escorted. It was all so surreal.

Outside in the Grand Foyer, everyone was ushered down a hall leading to another large room with a bar on each end and several high tables, including a longer one against the wall with trays of fancy little appetizers. The music started, and guests lined up at the bars for drinks.

Ryden escorted Jay to a table on one side of the room. “Can I get you a drink?”

“Um, I’ll have a mojito. Thank you.”

“I’ll be right back.” Ryden went off to get their drinks, and Jay couldn’t help but watch him go.

Because that’s what a boyfriend would do, right?

Ogle their man as he walked away. Jay was committed to playing his role to perfection.

Was it his fault he was so detail-oriented? It was both a blessing and a curse.

Ryden stood taller than many of the guests at just under six feet. He wasn’t as big or muscular as King, Red, or even Saint, but anyone looking at Ryden could tell he worked out regularly. And then there was that Texas drawl, which Jay supposed some would find sexy.

Considering their history together, Jay had no idea why he kept forgetting Ryden was from the same part of Texas as Mason.

Probably because the two were so different.

Then again, no one was as annoying as Ryden.

The man lived in T-shirts, tactical pants, or shorts.

He had no right to speak about Jay’s ensembles.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:30 am

Jay loved to people-watch, and weddings were among the best places to do so. Everyone was dressed to impress and on their best behavior, at least until the open bar started serving drinks.

At one end of the room, the Marines stood talking.

Whatever they were discussing wasn't a casual conversation.

Everyone else in the room laughed and smiled as they made idle chit-chat.

Not these guys. Ryden was right. Something was going on.

Jay might not have been military, but he'd worked with soldiers from every branch for over a decade.

It was in their stance, how they carried themselves, and their expressions.

Their eyes said more than their words ever could.

When the group dispersed, Ryden got stuck at the bar talking to one of the guests.

A few Marines left the room via the door everyone had come in from, but Martin had Jay's attention.

The room had four doors. The first was the one they'd come in from.

Door number two was closed, so it was most likely some other available venue space.

The third door led outside to the covered walkway, and the fourth went to some kitchen or catering space since that's where the servers were coming from.

It was also the door Martin disappeared through. What did the guy want with catering?

Checking that no one was watching him, Jay headed confidently to door number four. Over the years, he'd learned that people assumed someone was supposed to be there if they walked exuding confidence.

Walking through the door, he caught sight of Martin just before the guy disappeared through another door at the end of the catering area.

Where did that go? Jay quickly reached the door, pausing to listen.

He wasn't about to barge in somewhere unfamiliar.

Not hearing anything, he cracked the door open and peeked inside.

He could always say he was looking for the bathroom.

The door led into a stairwell. He'd just stepped inside when he heard voices echoing from above.

As someone who spent much of his time talking on the phone, he had an excellent memory for voices, and the one quietly bouncing around the empty stairwell belonged to Martin.

The second voice was unfamiliar, and since he hadn't heard any of the other Marines talk, he couldn't say it wasn't one of them.

Jay knew better than to wander off after some mysterious fake Marine alone, so he texted Ryden to let him know where he was and what he was doing. Then he snuck a peek up the stairs. It was hard to tell how far up they were. He stilled and listened intently.

“Everything’s ready,” Martin said. “This would have been so much easier if that asshole had just agreed.”

“Well, he didn’t, so we need to improvise, adapt, and overcome.”

Wait. Jay knew that mantra. The guy was one of the other Marines.

“How are we supposed to keep a low profile?” Martin hissed. “After this, we need to be ready to move fast. We can’t have that shit just sitting out there. We’re all dead if we don’t have the shipment ready to go in a week.”

The door opened, and Jay quickly stepped back, his heart ready to beat out of him. One of the other Marines walked through the door. He narrowed his eyes at Jay. Oh shit.

“What are you doing here?”

“Hi,” Jay chirped. He took another step back as the guy approached.

“I asked you what you’re doing here?” The guy grabbed Jay’s arm, and Jay did his best not to sound as scared as he was. This was bad. Very bad.

“I’m just waiting for my boyfriend. I wanted a little...

somethin’ somethin’ if you know what I mean, and since that sort of thing is frowned upon while in uniform, I thought, what’s the harm if no one sees?

” Jay replied, his voice low and throaty.

He ran a finger over one of the gold buttons on the guy’s chest. “It’s not every day my man gets to wear his panty droppers. ”

The guy was suspicious, and Jay could tell he was trying to decide whether he believed Jay. “Why don’t I wait with you?”

Just then, the door opened, and Jay had never been so happy to see Ryden. Talk about timing.

“Baby! There you are!” Jay pulled his arm out of the guy’s grasp, ran to Ryden, and jumped up, relieved when Ryden caught him.

He looked confused, so Jay made sure Ryden couldn’t put his foot in it.

Jay threw his arms around Ryden’s neck and kissed him like he’d been waiting his whole life for this.

Ryden caught on quickly, and after a heartbeat of hesitation, he shoved Jay up against the wall and kissed the ever-loving fuck out of him.

Holy shit .

The heat that exploded through Jay had him instantly hard. It was somehow hotter than the first time, and although it terrified him, Jay pushed his fears aside and returned Ryden’s scorching kisses. He moaned against Ryden’s mouth as they mauled each other.

Forced to come up for breath, Jay threw his head back, and Ryden moved his lips to Jay’s neck, licking, sucking, kissing.

By this point, Jay was panting, and he could do nothing about it.

Did he want to do anything about it? It didn't help that he was having a really difficult time doing anything other than trying not to come in his pants.

"You should be reported for this," the Marine growled.

Ryden pulled back. "And who's gonna do it? You?"

The Marine glared at him.

"Unless ya wanna get an eyeful," Ryden said. "I suggest you get movin'." His voice was low and breathy, that drawl dripping with sex.

This wasn't happening. How was this happening? What the hell had he been thinking? He'd gone from refusing to think about their innocent kiss to desperately wanting to do very naughty things to Ryden.

The Marine shook his head. "Get a fucking room or take off the uniform." Upstairs, a door closed, and the Marine took off. Other than the sound of their panting breaths, the stairwell was silent.

"That was close," Jay murmured, dropping his head onto Ryden's shoulder until he realized he was wrapped around Ryden like the floor was made of lava. He slowly pulled back, and Ryden met his gaze. His lips were red and kiss swollen, and his eyes... He really did have stunning eyes.

"Does it freak you out?"

Jay frowned. "What?"

“My eye.”

Jay didn't hesitate. “No, of course not. Have I ever given you the idea it did?”

Ryden shook his head.

“Good.” Jay reached up and ran his thumb under Ryden's right eye without considering what he was doing. It was a foggy gray with a very faint, barely visible ring. Realizing what he'd done, he quickly moved his hand away. “Sorry, I shouldn't have done that.”

Ryden barked out a laugh. “Really? After what we just did?”

Heat filled Jay's cheeks. “You, um...you should probably put me down,” he replied, breathless.

“Oh, right.” Ryden put him on his feet and cleared his throat. He smoothed out his uniform while Jay did the same with his clothes. “So, uh, we gonna talk about it now?”

“I overheard Martin talking to someone upstairs.” Jay relayed the conversation he'd heard between Martin and the other Marine.

“Not what I meant, but okay. Damn. They're clearly up to something.”

“What do we do?”

“ We do nothing. I'm gonna talk to the Kings. I don't want you anywhere near this.”

Jay folded his arms over his chest. “Why? Because I'm not a big tough Marine?”

“That’s right, you’re not. I don’t want you gettin’ yourself into trouble and gettin’ hurt,” Ryden growled.

The words stung, but Jay wasn’t about to show it. He threw his hands up. “There I go again, asking for it .”

Ryden flinched, the wind seeming to have gone from his sails. “That ain’t what I said.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. That’s right. You said, ‘You keep teasing men the way you do, and you’re going to get yourself into more trouble than you can handle.

’ Those were your exact words.” Jay shook his head.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be sure to stay out of it.

” He stepped up to Ryden and poked him in the chest. “But make no mistake. The only one hurting me around here is you .” Jay spun and headed for the door, only to have Ryden grab his arm.

“Jay, wait. Come on now.”

“I got your message loud and clear,” Jay spat, spinning to glare at Ryden. “Leave the tough jobs to the real men. Apparently, I’m only good for fucking.”

“That ain’t what I said, damn it, and you know it!”

“Let. Go,” Jay replied through his teeth. “I’m going back to the office. Oh, and you asked me why I’m dressed up today? It’s because I’m meeting up with my date after work.”

Ryden released Jay like he'd been burned. "What?"

"In case you hadn't guessed, you're walking back to the office." With that, Jay slammed through the door and headed for the exit.

That's what he got for letting his guard down around that asshole. He should have known better. Ryden was just like all those other jerks. Well, Jay was done. He wasn't going to fall for another muscle-bound prick who thought he wasn't good for anything except looking pretty.

Screw them, and screw Ryden Foster.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ryden was in a foul mood.

How had his day gone from bad to worse? At least the weather wasn't against him, and the venue was nearby, or he would have sweated through his uniform from his little trek. He could have done without the attention. Not every day a Marine walked through old St. Augustine in dress blues.

The elevator doors pinged, and he marched toward his office.

All eyes were on him, but his expression was dark enough to keep everyone at bay.

Jay wasn't at his desk, and Ryden clenched his jaw.

Had he left early to prepare for his date?

Storming into his office, Ryden slammed the door behind him.

What the fuck was Jay's deal? Yes, Jay was overly dramatic on most days, but this was something else.

Ryden paced his office, flexing his fingers.

Why did he care? It was like any other day at the office, with Ryden opening his mouth and Jay getting pissy.

So much for their truce. No one got shit from Jay the way he did, and yeah, he deserved what he got for the times he'd intentionally provoked Jay's wrath, but what the fuck had he done wrong this time? Why did this feel different?

Maybe because you made out with him ? Twice.

Okay, there was that. Fuck. Ryden straightened and ran a hand through his hair.

Fucking hell. Jay jumping into his arms had surprised the shit out of him, but he quickly caught on.

That didn't change the heat between them.

The fake boyfriend part might have been an act, but the raw desire sure as shit hadn't been.

Jay wanted him as much as Ryden wanted Jay.

When had that happened? How had this day spiraled so out of his control?

Ryden had never been kissed like that. He sure as hell had never been so fucking turned on.

All he could think about while kissing Jay was how bad he wanted to taste every inch of him, of what it would feel like to be buried deep inside him.

Ever since their first kiss, Ryden had been twisted in knots.

How far would it have gone if they hadn't been in a public place? Then, there had been the tenderness after. The way Jay looked at him and touched his face... It was a whole other side of Jay he'd never seen, at least with him.

Whenever he met someone for the first time, his eyes threw them off, and Ryden could see them silently scrambling to find the right words.

It's why Ryden addressed it first and got it out of the way.

Usually, when he told them it happened during a military training exercise, they relaxed and moved on, but more than one date had ended abruptly.

Jay had never so much as blinked. Not even the day they met.

Ryden shook his head. Whatever foolish idea he'd had about something happening between them, it was time to forget it.

They couldn't even make things work as friends.

Besides, he had enough to occupy his time.

An office romance wasn't something he needed.

Fuck's sake . Office romance? He'd been reading too many of Jay's fucking novels.

Why he read the books he took from Jay was a whole other level of absurdity he wouldn't think about.

As he carefully hung everything up in the garment bag in his office closet, he made a mental note to get his uniform cleaned.

Once every item was put away, he quickly texted Saint to check on him.

He received a brief reply stating that everything was okay and they'd talk later, which meant it wasn't serious.

Knowing Saint, he was playing nurse to his injured boyfriend.

Ryden had redressed in his usual black tactical pants, socks, and military-grade boots. He pulled on his black Four Kings Security T-shirt just as someone knocked at his door.

“Come in.”

The door opened, and Mason walked in. He closed the door before sitting on Ryden’s couch and making himself comfortable. Oh boy.

“I’d ask how it went, but considerin’ you stomped through the office looking madder’n a wet hen, I can take a guess.”

Ryden dropped into his chair behind his desk and threw his arms up. “Why the fuck did he volunteer to go in the first place?”

“That well, huh?” Mason sighed. “Maybe he wanted to support you.”

“Jay? A guy who’s spent the last six years assaulting me with his romance novels? I don’t get him. How did he go from barely talking to me to volunteering as my plus-one at a wedding? Not that it matters. I can’t seem to say or do anything right around him.”

“What did you say?”

Ryden told Mason everything, from the asshole he knew wasn’t a Marine to what Jay overheard and what Ryden had said. He left out the part about them making out. Things were complicated enough.

Mason blinked at him. “Well, shit. I’m gonna address the Jay thing first because

we're gonna need reinforcements for the other. You didn't do anything wrong."

"What?" Ryden studied Mason. Clearly, Ryden must have, or Jay wouldn't have flown off the handle.

"Think about it. Every time Jay gets his tail up, you've said somethin' that he interprets as you saying he's weak or weaker than the rest of us."

Ryden's eyebrows flew up. "The fuck? I don't think he's weaker'n the rest of us. I was tryin' to keep him safe because although he's a hell of a lot stronger than he looks, he ain't a fuckin' Marine. These guys are dangerous."

"I know that. You know that. Jay..." Mason shrugged, his expression going soft. "Bein' seen as less than by guys like you is obviously a trigger. What does that tell you?"

Ryden frowned. His grip on his chair's armrests turned white-knuckled.

"Someone like me hurt him. Bad." He should have known.

"Then why work in a security company owned and run by former military personnel? There's enough testosterone around here to choke a bull.

He's been here for how long? Has this been an issue before? "

"No."

Great. So, after years of Jay working at Four Kings Security, he'd never had a problem with any former military personnel here, just him. "So why am I the asshole?"

Mason cocked his head to one side. “Good question. What makes you different? You get under his skin, Ry. Why is that?”

“The fuck should I know?” Ryden shook his head. This was not something he wanted to think about at the moment. “How’d Lucky’s meeting go?”

“Gibson never showed.”

“What the hell?” This day just got weirder and weirder. “Gibson’s been desperate for a meeting. Lucky had to move a bunch of clients around to make room for him, and he didn’t show?”

Before Mason could respond, Lucky swept into the room, closing the door behind him.

“Have you seen?” Lucky asked, grabbing the remote off Ryden’s desk and turning on the flatscreen on the wall. He changed the channel to a station showing a news flash.

“What’re we lookin’ at here?” Ryden frowned as the screen switched from the news reporter to a massive cloud of black smoke, the thrum of news helicopters circling filling the air. A ribbon scrolled the bottom of the screen.

Breaking news. Car explosion on A1A kills driver and at least one passenger.

Just as Ryden was about to ask, an image of a familiar man appeared on the screen. Holy shit.

“We’ve just received confirmation that one of the victims, Graham Gibson, owner of Gibson Global, a major import-export company in St. Augustine, was inside the vehicle at the time of the explosion. There’s no word yet on what might have caused the explosion, but an investigation?—”

Lucky muted the TV. “That is why my client never showed.”

“Fuck.” Ryden stared at him. His gut told him something was very wrong about all this. “What was Gibson comin’ in for?”

Lucky’s lips pressed into a thin line before he spoke up. “Executive protection.” He sat on the couch next to Mason and shook his head. “He wouldn’t tell me what was wrong, but when I spoke to him, he sounded...off. Something was not right. He was scared.”

Mason and Ryden exchanged glances.

“What?” Lucky asked, looking from Ryden to Mason. “You know something?”

“It’s probably completely unrelated, but something weird happened at the wedding.” Ryden told Lucky everything he’d told Mason, minus his little spat with Jay.

Lucky jumped to his feet. “Are you kidding me? Impersonating a member of the military is a third-degree felony in this state, and I know whatever that fuck he’s up to, it goes beyond misrepresentation.”

“You think the two are related?” Mason asked. “I mean, that would be a pretty big fuckin’ coincidence.”

Ryden paced as he tried to wrap his head around this.

“Gibson owned an import and export company here in St. Augustine. He was comin’ here to discuss protection, and he was scared.

Then, the same day, a fake Marine is in the area talkin’ ’bout how the asshole didn’t agree and, ‘after this,’ they had to move fast and get a shipment ready to go.

” He looked up at the same time as Mason and Lucky.

“Jack,” all three said.

Ryden snorted. He headed for his desk to call Jack when Lucky raised his hand.

“Wait,” Lucky said. “Before we stick our noses into this, we need to talk to King.”

The three of them exchanged glances. Not what Ryden had been hoping to hear.

“Not it,” Ryden said seconds before Lucky.

Mason let his head fall back with a groan. “Shiiiiit.” With a heavy sigh, he sat up.
“Fine. But you two owe me.”

Lucky winked at Mason. “I’ll make it up to you later, carino.”

“I will not,” Ryden said, chuckling when Mason flipped him off. He also wasn’t going to be the guy who interrupted King on his honeymoon with Leo for work stuff, even if the two were due to return in a couple of days.

Mason called King and put him on speaker.

“What?”

Ryden held back a smile at King’s usual gruff greeting.

“Hey, King,” Mason replied cheerfully. “Sorry to bug ya on your honeymoon, but we kinda got somethin’ goin’ on here, and we wanted to run it by you before we made any kinda move.”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:30 am

“Where’s Ace?” King asked, sounding suspiciously breathless, but Ryden was not about to think about why that was.

“He’s out on a job and won’t return until tonight. This, uh, could potentially be dangerous.”

“Okay. Tell me.”

Mason provided all the information they had, and they waited. The phone went quiet while King processed everything.

“Ry, did any of the others approach you?” King asked.

“Well, uh. Kind of.”

“Meaning?”

Oh boy. The thing about King was that it was very hard to keep secrets from him.

He had a way of getting you to spill the beans without saying a word, no matter how hard you told yourself you wouldn’t.

And it didn’t matter whether it was over the phone, in person, or via email; it was a talent the man had. A very annoying talent.

“I knew somethin’ was up when Martin looked at me.

He was walkin' over, and I asked Jay to pretend to be my boyfriend.

Later, I went to get us drinks at the cocktail hour, and Jay disappeared.

He texted me 'bout where he was and said he might need me.

I found him in the stairwell with one of the Marines.

The guy had what looked like an iron grip on Jay's arm.

Jay acted like he'd been waitin' for me.

Then he, um, jumped into my arms, kissed me, and we, uh, started makin' out. For appearances, obviously."

A choked sound escaped Lucky, and Mason coughed into his fist.

There was a momentary pause before King spoke up. "Obviously. Go on."

"The guy told me to get a room or take off the uniform, then stormed off when a door slammed upstairs somewhere. That's where Martin had been talkin' to one of the other Marines."

King went quiet. "I don't like this. You were right to bring me in.

It could be something or nothing, but we can't make that call until we know more about who these guys are.

Impersonating military personnel isn't something you do on a whim.

Bring Ace, Red, Jack, and Joker into the loop.

Have Jack discreetly look into these guys.

I don't want any of them knowing we're onto them.

Keep an eye on Jay. I got a bad feeling about this. ”

“Will do,” Mason replied. “Enjoy the rest of your honeymoon.”

“Thanks. I'll?—”

“Ward, please,” Leo moaned.

“Gotta go,” King said gruffly and hung up.

Ryden blinked at the phone. Had they...? No. King wouldn't have answered if he'd been in the middle of... “Were they?—”

“Nope.” Mason grabbed his phone and shoved it in his pocket. “Do not go there, Marine.”

“I think they were,” Lucky said, waggling his eyebrows. “Or at least about to.”

“You shut your mouth!” Ryden put a hand on his chest and placed the other on his desk for support. “Oh God. Quick, I need somethin' to replace that image.”

Lucky's expression turned wicked. “Ace, Chip, and the tearaway pants.”

“Oh God!” Ryden smacked his hands over his eyes despite knowing it would do nothing to get that disturbing image out of his head. He ignored Mason laughing his ass off. “ Why ?” Ryden moved a hand away and thrust a finger at Lucky. “You're an asshole, Morales!”

Lucky cackled. “You wanted a new image. I gave you one.”

“Of your fool cousin and his naked ass!” It was all Joker’s fault.

The moment he discovered Ace had been wearing tearaway pants for whatever sexcapades he’d had planned for Colton, he’d slipped a bacon dog treat into Ace’s pocket and sent Chip to “find it.” When Chip latched onto the side of the pants with bacon in the pocket, pulling the leg clean off Ace, Ryden had laughed so hard he couldn’t see from the tears.

Unfortunately, Chip hadn’t stopped there.

Seeing Ace attempting to run down a sandy beach, naked from the waist down, cupping himself in a feeble attempt at modesty, was not an image Ryden had wanted seared into his brain, but there it was.

Lucky dropped onto the couch beside Mason. “You know Jack and Joker have video.”

“Of course they do,” Ryden muttered, shaking his head, hoping he could knock that image of Ace loose.

The room plunged into silence, and Ryden glanced up, groaning at the shit-eating grins on his friends’ faces. Damn, and here he’d hoped maybe they’d forgotten about it.

“So,” Lucky said, tilting his head to one side, his eyes twinkling. “You and Jay made out, huh? You conveniently left that part out of your story when you told us.”

“It wasn’t relevant,” Ryden muttered.

Mason hummed. “But it suddenly became relevant when you told King?”

“You know he’s not going to let that go,” Lucky added.

“Yes, thank you. I know. Doesn’t matter because nothing’s gonna happen between us.”

Lucky arched an eyebrow at him. “Why? It’s about time if you ask me. Six years, bro. Six years of watching you two playing your little game.”

“Fuck off. No one’s playin’ any game.” Is that what everyone thought? That he and Jay had been playing games?

“What did you do this time?” Lucky asked.

“Why the hell do you assume it was me?”

Lucky pursed his lips. “So you didn’t say anything that set him off?”

“For your information, I said I didn’t want him anywhere near this because he’s not a Marine. That I didn’t want him gettin’ himself into trouble and gettin’ hurt.”

Lucky sighed. “Really, bro? You couldn’t have just said you didn’t want to see him get hurt because you care about him?”

“I did. That’s what I said,” Ryden replied through his teeth.

“No,” Lucky said, standing. “You said he would do something to get himself in trouble and implied that because he was not skilled enough or strong enough, he wouldn’t be able to get himself out of it.”

Ryden frowned. “That ain’t what I said, but even if it was implied, he’s not skilled or strong enough to face a group of Marines. Hell, none of us could take them on by ourselves and win. It’s math.”

Lucky’s expression softened. “And I understand that. I am saying that we all carry baggage, and Jay is no different. He needed to hear you were concerned for him and his safety, not that he wasn’t enough.”

Fucking hell. When had Lucky become the voice of reason? He wasn’t wrong, though. “Yeah, I guess I coulda executed that better.” Ryden had never been very good at talking about his feelings, and the fact that Jay had a way of flipping his world upside down didn’t help. “Thanks, fellas.”

“What are you going to do?” Mason asked.

“Apologize. Again. Maybe find a way to make it up to him.”

“And if he forgives you?” Lucky prompted.

“Then we move on,” Ryden replied with a shrug.

Lucky and Mason exchanged glances again.

“What? We don’t fit. Yeah, makin’ out with him was hot, but we can’t go a day without pushin’ each other’s buttons. Our truce lasted for shit. That ain’t the foundation for a long, healthy relationship.”

Mason and Lucky broke into peals of laughter. What the hell? What was he missing? Because Ryden was definitely missing something. Mason wiped a tear from his eye as he stood, Lucky following.

“You’re right, Marine.” Mason wrapped his arm around Lucky and pulled him in, popping a kiss on his lips. “I don’t know any fellas ’round here in long, healthy relationships who push each other’s buttons.”

Lucky poked Mason’s side, his grin wide. “Cabron.”

Oh. Well, shit.

“We’ll talk to Jack on our way out,” Mason said.

Lucky paused at the door. “Talk to Jay.”

“He can’t,” Mason said. “Jay’s not in the office.”

“Where is he?” Ryden asked.

“Um....”

“Mason?”

Mason’s expression was apologetic. “He’s out on a date.” He walked out, and Lucky met Ryden’s gaze.

“Don’t wait too long to figure things out, bro. Jay isn’t going to wait around forever.”

Who said Jay was waiting around at all?

Before Ryden could answer, Lucky was gone, closing the door behind him.

As much as Ryden appreciated the support, whatever was going on between him and Jay was far more complicated than whatever had happened between Lucky and

Mason.

They might have had a rough start, but they were meant to be together.

The two were more alike than they thought.

Jay and Ryden? They had nothing in common.

Jay wore trendy outfits and drank fancy coffee.

He read more books in a week than Ryden did in a year.

Ryden wore nothing but T-shirts, took his coffee black, and fell asleep on the couch watching TV.

Jay was a romantic who wore his heart on his sleeve, and Ryden sometimes wondered if Jay refused to believe Ryden had a heart.

Whatever Mason and Lucky thought, they were wrong.

Jay and Ryden had no future together, so why risk his heart knowing it would only lead to heartache?

Ryden turned off everything in his office and headed out, making his way toward the elevator. Everyone who wasn't on a job had gone home for the day. He'd just hit the button when his phone rang. With a grin, he answered.

“Hey, Frank. How's?—”

“You need to get over to the Urban Unicorn now .”

“The fuck is an urban unicorn?”

“It’s one of those fancy burger places. I’m on my way there. Joshua messaged me. He was having dinner with Jay and?—”

Ryden stepped into the elevator, confused. “Wait, Jay was on a date with Joshua?”

“What? No. Jay canceled his date and asked Joshua to meet him for dinner.”

Jay canceled his date? Ryden’s pulse quickened at the possibility that Jay might have canceled because of what had happened between them.

“I texted you the address.”

Wait. Why did Frank sound rattled? Frank was not the kind of man who got rattled. Not unless someone he loved was in danger. “Frank, what happened?”

“Someone tried to kidnap Jay.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

earlier that evening

“Thanks for meeting me, babe. I appreciate it.” Jay sipped his berry vodka crush and hummed. Yummy. This was exactly what he needed. Tasty cocktails and good company.

The trendy upscale burger place was packed, just as it was every night.

Some people thought the Urban Unicorn was pretentious or too hipster, but Jay loved it here.

It had great food and a cozy atmosphere.

He loved the industrial chic aesthetic, the brick walls, weathered wood, black metal features, and exposed pipes.

It was soothing in a way he couldn’t explain.

“I’m glad you called,” Joshua replied, smiling warmly. “What happened with Eric? He seemed...nice.”

“Eric is nice. And I’m sure he’ll be a great boyfriend. To someone else.”

Jay had been hopeful when Joshua introduced them at Sapphire Sands a few weeks ago.

Eric had been attractive, sweet, and kind.

But the moment they were left alone, Jay quickly discovered they had no chemistry.

Not one drop. Still, Jay had been determined to at least give things a try. Until this afternoon.

“After the day I’ve had, the last thing I was in the mood for was a date,” Jay grumbled. “When I called him to cancel, I think he might have been slightly relieved. Pretty sure he didn’t think it would work between us either.”

Joshua studied him. “What happened at work?”

“Let’s not talk about work.” Jay swirled the ice in his glass with his straw. Nope. He wasn’t going to talk about Ryden. Wasn’t going to even think about him.

Joshua almost choked on his drink, and Jay rolled his eyes. “I’m sorry. Did you just say you don’t want to talk about work?” He leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. “It’s Ryden, isn’t it?”

“You know I don’t discuss my job.” The unimpressed expression Jay received in response was expected, but still. A boy had to try.

“Neither do I. That doesn’t mean we don’t spill the tea on whatever ridiculousness has occurred on any given day because you work for the Kings, and one of them is married to my boss.”

True. Neither of them would ever disclose anything remotely confidential or connected to their roles as top executive assistants, not even to each other.

Now, when Ace, Lucky, and Joker got into a full WWE grudge match over the last

donut, only to have Mason strut across the floor, his mouth full of said donut?

Jay was more than happy to discuss that at great length.

Or whatever imminent demise King had threatened Ace with after another stationery shipment arrived and everything inside the box was hot pink.

It all made for riveting dinner conversation. However, Ryden was not a fun topic.

“I don’t want to talk about that infuriating man.” Jay thanked the server for his food and placed the napkin on his lap. The burgers might be pricey, but they were amazing. And the fries? Perfectly seasoned, crunchy on the outside, and soft on the inside, as all fries should be. So freaking good.

“What did he do now?” Joshua asked, taking a bite of one of his fries. “Ooh, hot!”

Jay chuckled. “They just came out of the kitchen.”

“Shut up.” Joshua fanned his tongue, then his fries. “Spill. What did he do?”

Reluctantly, Jay told Joshua everything that had happened in Red’s office, including when Ryden first kissed him, their truce, and the great job Jay had been doing ignoring it all, until the end of their fake boyfriend make-out session.

Joshua gaped at him. “Wait, what? He kissed you? Wait, you two made out?” He seemed to shake himself out of it before he whispered hoarsely as if Ace might pop out from beneath the table, because if there was juicy gossip to be heard, Ace somehow developed superhuman hearing and appeared. “You never told me he kissed you.”

“Like I said, it was nothing, and I was trying to ignore it.”

“So you ignored it by making out with him?”

Jay waved a hand in dismissal as if it was no big deal and not one of the hottest moments of his life. “That’s not what’s important.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s everything . I can’t believe you guys made out.”

“It wasn’t real.”

Joshua arched an eyebrow at him. He didn’t have to say a word because they both knew what Jay had said was complete and utter bullshit. Jay sighed. He held up a finger and downed the rest of his drink before requesting another from their server as he passed by.

“And what happened after?”

Jay told Joshua the rest. Why wasn’t his best friend outraged for him? Joshua couldn’t possibly think... No, of course not.

“So, what you’re saying is you overreacted.”

Jay blinked at him. “Excuse me?”

“I know you hate to hear this, so brace yourself.” Joshua leaned forward again. “You were wrong.”

“Define, ‘wrong,’” Jay said, eyes narrowed.

“As in, the only thing Ryden is guilty of is looking fine in that uniform.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“Yes.” Joshua picked up a fry and popped it into his mouth. “Also, I’m glad he doesn’t want you involved.”

“You don’t think I can take care of myself?”

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that to me, your best friend.

We’re talking about a whole other level of skill here.

These are huge ass military dudes who’ve done shit we can’t even imagine, and it’s obvious they’re up to something bad.

Whatever it is, it’s the kind of danger you leave to the Kings.

That’s what they do. Your job is to support them so they can do what they do.

It’s not to become the Ralph Lauren-wearing Equalizer. ”

“You know, you used to be so sweet and timid. Frank’s ruined you.”

Joshua barked out a laugh.

“Or maybe it’s Colton,” Jay mused. “He’s feisty.”

“That’s more likely. He’s a force of nature.”

Was it possible Jay had overreacted? He thought back to that moment and everything that had been said, including how Ryden had said it. He lifted his gaze to Joshua.

“You think I overreacted?”

“You did,” Joshua replied gently. “Ryden was just looking out for you. He doesn’t

know...everything. Plus, as sexy as that drawl of his is, he's not the greatest at communicating his feelings, especially when it comes to you. It's like you intimidate him or something."

It was Jay's turn to laugh. "I intimidate him? Come on. Look at me. Intimidating is not the first thing guys like him think of when they look at me."

"You're wrong. Again," Joshua said, mischief in his eyes.

"You're just loving this, aren't you?"

"I am. I'm taking this moment," he pretended to pluck something from the air. "And I'm filing it away for later." He then proceeded to place the pretend file in his pocket.

"You're ridiculous."

Joshua ignored him. "And, of course, he's intimidated.

Think about it. When you first met, he was in a rough place.

"His gaze turned sympathetic. "Jay, he was one bad day away from falling apart. Hell, he'd already fallen apart and was trying to put himself back together.

And there you are at your desk, looking gorgeous and put together. "

"How'd you know I looked gorgeous?"

Joshua snorted. "Really?"

"Yeah, all right. I looked fabulous."

“So, there you were, looking fabulous and sweet, dressed in bright colors, a beacon of light in a sea of black T-shirts and hard badasses. You knocked him for a loop. Then he finds out you’re not just a pretty face.

You’re smart, confident, and fearless. Everyone at the office loves you, including the Kings, including the King, and they would be lost without you.

The man didn’t stand a chance. So, naturally, every time he opens his mouth around you, in goes the foot. ”

Jay’s heart pounded in his ears. Was it possible?

When King introduced them, Jay had known very little about Ryden because it had been no one’s place to tell Ryden’s story.

But Jay knew the Kings, and that kind of somber lack of detail from them meant Ryden’s past was heartbreakingly painful and not to be discussed.

Over the years, Ryden had opened up some about his past, enough for Jay to piece certain things together, but he still didn’t know everything.

But then why would he? Jay hadn’t earned that kind of trust from Ryden, unlike Mason, Lucky, and the others.

And whose fault is that ? Jay swallowed around the lump in his throat. Quickly, he pulled himself together.

“Then why hasn’t he said anything? It’s been six years. And all he’s done is drive me to throw books at him.” Jay had lost some good novels to that jerk. Besides, the blame didn’t fall solely on Jay. Ryden was as much to blame for their feud as Jay was.

“I know you say you two have nothing in common, but you’re both so damned stubborn that it’s taken you all this time to even admit to yourselves there’s something between you two.”

“I liked it better when we gossiped about other people,” Jay grumbled, making Joshua laugh. Damn it. His best friend was right. “I guess this means I owe him an apology.”

“I guess it does.” Joshua took a big bite of his burger and moaned around it. “Oh my God.”

“Right?” Jay bit into his burger, and the two of them sat having foodgasms for a heartbeat.

When they could talk again, it was about the random funny shit that happened around the office.

Jay was lucky to have a best friend as genuine and amazing as Joshua.

Not to mention someone who wasn’t afraid to call Jay on his bullshit.

It was also nice to be able to decompress about work stuff with someone who did what Jay did and was connected to the Kings.

Most people had no idea how vital Joshua’s and Jay’s roles were within their respective companies.

They assumed they spent all day answering phones, sending emails, or fetching coffee.

Joshua was Colton’s right-hand man. He knew everything the president and CEO of a

multibillion-dollar worldwide shipping company knew.

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And Jay? If it concerned Four Kings Security, he was aware of it.

He knew all the passwords and combinations, everyone's salary, and who was sleeping with whom.

He knew every client by name and had access to every single file.

Jay was the only one with the same level of security clearance as the six co-owners of the company, but outside of the Kings and Wild Cards, no one had a clue because that's how good Jay was at his job, and he took great pride in that.

"I ate way too much," Joshua groaned, following Jay outside into the crisp night air once they'd finished their meal and Jay paid the bill. He loved this time of year when it was still warm and sunny in the afternoons, but there was a slight chill in the mornings and evenings.

Jay laughed. "Isn't that what you said before ordering a lemon, raspberry, and mascarpone donut the size of your head?"

Joshua groaned again. "Please stop talking about food."

They walked down the brick path and through the archway that led out onto Charlotte Street, where their rideshare would pick them up.

They'd only had a couple of drinks, but it was always easier to take a rideshare into the historic district than attempt to find parking during dinner hours. "Thanks again for tonight."

“You know I’m always here when you need me,” Joshua replied. He leaned forward to see around Jay. “There’s a van that’s crawling this way. What kind of car is our ride?”

Jay shook his head. “It’s a gray Honda Accord.”

“Ah, okay. Not it then.”

The van drove slowly down the one-way street, passing them.

The driver was probably looking for an address.

With businesses tucked away in various locations throughout the district, it could be challenging for tourists and delivery drivers to find specific addresses.

The van stopped, lights on, and Jay expected someone to roll down the window and ask for directions.

Instead, the door opened, and two men in black balaclavas and black hoodies jumped out.

“Run!” Jay grabbed Joshua’s wrist and bolted, running across the street as fast as he could, Joshua in tow as the men gave chase. They took a sharp turn into the parking lot of what Jay ironically realized was the wedding venue he’d been at earlier today with Ryden.

Ryden....

God, Jay wished he were here right now. Okay, yeah, Jay got it.

A Marine probably wouldn’t have to run. His heart threatened to beat out of his chest

as adrenaline rushed through his system.

He headed for the end of the parking lot, and they jumped over the short wall, running behind the other buildings.

For the first time, he was grateful that the buildings in the historic district were packed together, one ending where another began.

The lush shrubbery and trees provided cover in several areas where there wasn't enough lighting.

They silently ran through the trees behind the cathedral. If they could make it to the plaza, it would be filled with people and have much more lighting. They'd almost made it out onto the sidewalk when something hard slammed into him.

Jay hit the ground hard, and Joshua landed next to him. One of the men rolled Jay over, and Jay brought his fist with him, catching the guy on the side of the head. He reeled, cursing loudly as he fell onto his side.

No time to waste. Jay kicked at the guy on top of Joshua and spun, ducking as his assailant swung a fist. From the corner of his eye, Jay could see that Joshua was on his feet, his back to Jay.

If these assholes thought they were going to go down easy, they were in for an unpleasant surprise.

Jay readied himself. He hadn't spent the past twelve years at Four Kings Security at his desk reading.

He'd been given lessons on all the different ways he could defend himself.

“You’re coming with us if you know what’s good for you,” the bastard snarled.

“Yeah, I don’t fucking think so,” Jay replied, darting out of the way when the guy launched forward. Missing, he spun around, and Jay punched him in the solar plexus. Hard. The guy doubled over and wheezed just as his masked friend cried out and fell on the grass, holding his knee.

“What the fuck!”

“Who sent you?” Joshua demanded, kicking the guy in the stomach for good measure.

“Fuck you,” the guy spat.

Had someone sent these guys to kidnap him? Jay turned to his attacker, who took a quick step back. He made to reach for something in his hoodie pocket, but Jay tackled him to the ground, punching him across the face. There was a very good chance these guys were packing.

“We gotta go!” Joshua grabbed Jay’s arm, and they took off.

“What is it?” Jay asked, breathless, as they ran across the street to the plaza.

“We’re about to be outnumbered,” Joshua said. “What do we do?”

Jay looked around when it hit him. “Holy shit. We’re a block away from the office.”

Joshua blinked at him. “What?”

“Yeah, there’s King Street.” Jay took off with Joshua at his side. He had no idea if the men who’d tried to kidnap him were behind them or if they’d gone back to get their

van. Something told him they weren't about to give up.

They ran as fast as they could towards the Four Kings Security building.

Most of the staff would have gone home by now, but security was always on site, and Jay had his keys and codes if he needed them.

They'd just run into the parking lot when a truck screeched to a stop in front of them, the bumper so close that when Jay threw out his hands, he hit the hood.

He shot his head up, his eyes going wide and his heart skipping a beat when he realized who was behind the wheel.

The truck door flew open, and Ryden jumped out.

He bolted over to Jay, and Jay didn't think about it or hesitate.

He threw himself into Ryden's open arms, relief flooding through him as he grabbed fistfuls of Ryden's shirt, clinging tight.

Ryden wrapped his strong arms around Jay, and at that moment, Jay knew he was safe.

"Fuck," Ryden breathed out. "Are you two okay?" He didn't try to pull away, and even if he had, there was a good chance Jay wouldn't have let go. His face was buried in Ryden's chest, soaking in his warmth and strength.

"We're okay," Joshua said. "Looks like those guys decided not to follow."

The screech of tires skidding to an abrupt halt made Jay jump.

“It’s okay, darlin’,” Ryden said softly, running a hand soothingly down his back. “It’s just Frank.”

Jay lifted his head and turned, but he kept ahold of Ryden, watching as Frank darted over, grabbed Joshua, and lifted him off his feet to squeeze him.

“Thank fuck,” Frank said gruffly, gently putting Joshua on his feet. He cupped his face. “Are you okay?”

Joshua nodded. His smile was wide. “We kicked ass.”

Frank chuckled. “I knew you would.”

“We should take this inside,” Ryden said. “In case those assholes are still around.” He ushered Jay toward the doors, leaning in to murmur. “I was on my way to, uh, what was it? The Suburban Sasquatch?”

Jay let out a shaky laugh despite the current circumstances. “You mean the Urban Unicorn?”

Ryden snapped his fingers. “That’s it.”

Jay shook his head. If he didn’t laugh, he’d cry. Having been trained and having to use what you’d learned were two very different things. The adrenaline was still pumping, and he didn’t want to think of what would follow once everything caught up with him.

Upstairs, Ryden led them to his office, turning on the lights when they stepped inside. He motioned to the couch, but Jay shook his head.

“I need... I don’t want to....” He tightened his grip on Ryden’s T-shirt, grateful

Ryden didn't ask. He led Jay inside but didn't sit. "How'd you know?" Jay asked him.

"I called him," Frank said, sitting on the couch with Joshua and pulling him close. "After Joshua messaged me."

Jay blinked at Joshua. "How?" When they hadn't been running, they'd been defending themselves.

"My smartwatch," Joshua replied, holding up his wrist. He pointed to one of the app shortcuts on the screen. "I have an app that lets me send a 9-1-1 message to whomever's programmed in. Two taps and it notified Frank."

Jay made a mental note to get himself that app.

"Was it them?" Ryden asked Jay.

Jay shook his head. "These guys were not Marines, but that doesn't mean they didn't send them."

"You know who's behind this?" Frank asked, standing. Joshua quickly jumped to his feet and took hold of Frank's hand.

Ryden gave them all a brief rundown of what was going on, leaving out everything that had happened between him and Jay. All of it Jay knew, except the part where it could be connected to one of their clients who'd been killed in a car bombing earlier that day.

Jay gasped. He stared up at Ryden. "Who?"

"Graham Gibson."

“Oh my God.” Jay put a hand to his mouth. “Poor Mr. Gibson.”

“Wait, Graham Gibson of Gibson Global?” Joshua asked, his frown deep.

“You know him?” The moment Jay said the words, it struck him. “He has a contract with Connolly Maritime.”

Joshua nodded. “He is—I mean, was, one of Connolly Maritime’s subcontractors. Colton had lunch with him yesterday.”

“Shit.” Frank ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t like where any of this is going. Does King know?”

Ryden nodded. “We talked to him today. Jack’s looking into these guys. For now, you all stay safe and watch your backs.”

Joshua worried his bottom lip. He met Jay’s gaze. “When King assigns you protection, please don’t say no.”

Jay blinked at his best friend. “Say what now?”

“The moment King finds out, he’ll want to assign someone to protect you.”

Joshua wasn’t wrong, but he’d worry about that later. “I can’t think about that right now.” He hadn’t even wrapped his head around tonight. His adrenaline rush was fading, and he began to shake.

“I’ll look after him,” Ryden promised.

Jay stared at him wide-eyed.

“At least for tonight. Tomorrow, we’ll talk to King and work everything out. Please, Jay. One night.”

Jay didn’t have the strength to argue. More importantly, he didn’t want to. Who knew what nightmares this would lead to? Literally. “Okay. I’ll stay with you.” His cheeks grew warm at his words, but he was suddenly too tired and too cold to care. “Can we go now?”

“Sure.”

Jay waited while Frank and Ryden whispered to each other on one side. Joshua hugged him, murmuring in his ear.

“Don’t be stubborn. Let him take care of you.”

“You mean, protect me,” Jay murmured.

“That’s what I meant.” The mischief in Joshua’s eyes when he pulled back said he knew exactly what he’d meant.

Joshua left with Frank, and Jay wrapped his arms around himself.

He’d spaced out, unaware of when Ryden had stopped in front of him, until Ryden brushed his fingers down Jay’s cheek, snapping him out of it.

He lifted his gaze, a lump forming in his throat.

He’d never seen that expression on Ryden’s face—a mixture of concern and...

something else. Affection? Jay wasn’t sure what to do with that.

“Ready?” Ryden asked softly.

No. Jay was so not ready, but he nodded anyway.

It was fine—just one night. It wasn’t like they were going to sleep together or anything. Tomorrow, Jay would feel better, and everything would be back to normal—or at least as back to normal as was possible after someone tried to kidnap him. Yep, it was fine. He was going to be fine.

Cue the dumpster fire .

CHAPTER NINE

The surprises just kept coming.

Earlier at work, before Frank called, Ryden had wondered how long it would take Jay to talk to him after what happened at the wedding.

That's when he wasn't thinking about Jay's tongue in his mouth.

Then Frank's call sent his thoughts into a tailspin, forcing him to fight images of worst-case scenarios as he hopped into his truck, only to have Jay end up in his arms minutes later. Talk about an emotional rollercoaster.

Jay had clung to Ryden like he had no intention of letting him go, and Ryden still hadn't wrapped his head around it.

He'd even promised Joshua that he'd look after Jay, though he hadn't thought much about what that might entail.

He was on his way to his house with Jay and had no idea how things would go.

The two of them were rarely alone together, and when they were, like at the wedding, things didn't turn out so well.

"Thank you," Jay said, startling Ryden out of his thoughts.

"For what?"

“For letting me stay with you tonight, and for being on your way to help me, especially after...” Jay’s brows drew together, his frown deep.

“The way I acted at the wedding.” His bottom lip jutted out slightly.

He was adorable when he pouted. “It’s been brought to my attention that I might have overreacted. ”

Ryden held back a smile. Might have? That had definitely been Joshua’s doing, though Ryden would bet his next paycheck that there had been no “might-haves” in that conversation. “Do ya wanna talk about it?”

“Not tonight,” Jay replied quietly, his gaze fixed outside his window.

Did that mean Jay planned on talking to him about it at some point? His words confirmed Mason’s suspicions that Jay had been through something painful that Ryden had a bad habit of triggering. An ex-boyfriend, maybe?

“You’re probably wondering how I got away from those guys.”

Ryden shrugged. “I figured you used whatever techniques the Kings taught you.”

This time, Jay moved his gaze away from the window. He studied Ryden. “How do you know they taught me anything?”

“Come on now, Jay. I ain’t just another pretty face,” Ryden teased, making Jay shake his head with a soft laugh. “There’s no way the Kings wouldn’t have insisted on some trainin’ or self-defense. Not with how much they care about you.”

“You’re right. They all helped in their way, but King was the one who insisted.”

Not surprising. It hadn't taken long for Ryden to see that King and Jay had a special relationship, one that was different from the others, which made sense considering Jay was King's executive assistant. A rather disturbing thought occurred to him. "You two, um, you've never?—"

"Oh God, no! Why would you even? Ugh." Jay shuddered. "King is like the big brother I should have had."

"Should have had?" Wait, did Jay have a brother? He'd never mentioned one.

"I'm not talking about it," Jay murmured, his attention returning to the passing scenery outside his window.

"Okay, yeah. No problem."

If Jay did have a brother, was he the one who was the asshole? Ryden didn't like the idea that he had something in common with someone who was enough of a dick for Jay not to want to talk about him. It wasn't like Ryden was being an asshole on purpose.

Jay had a way of getting under his skin, the same as he seemed to do for Jay. It drove Ryden up the wall. Maybe he needed to learn to have more patience, or at least figure out what he was doing to upset Jay.

The rest of the car ride was quiet but not uncomfortable.

Jay seemed lost in his thoughts, but he also looked exhausted.

Even with the training or self-defense the Kings had taught Jay, he had to be shaken up over what happened tonight.

Was he putting on a brave front? Pretending he was fine?

Jay might work for the Kings, but not in the same capacity as the rest of the security agents.

He was kept far from the danger. Maybe Jay just needed a little time.

Any time Ryden thought he'd figured out what was happening between them, Jay proved him wrong. The moment Ryden thought Jay was letting his guard down, something he said or did would set Jay off, and then Ryden would get annoyed and feel the need to poke at Jay even more. It wasn't pretty.

Ryden turned onto his street and was immediately at ease.

He never got tired of his neighborhood. It was so painfully Floridian.

Rows of pastel-colored houses with white trim and gray shingle roofs, manicured lawns, pretty palms, and colorful gardens occupied by stone animals, terracotta pots, and cheerful gnomes.

It was peaceful and quiet, populated mostly by retirees, snowbirds, and a few military vets. It was Ryden's sanctuary.

"You live here?" Jay asked, surprised.

"Yep." Ryden turned into his driveway, chuckling at Jay's stunned expression.

"I bought this place a little over three and a half years ago. Well, I'm still payin' off the mortgage, but I plan to get that out of the way as soon as possible.

Plus, I got a great deal on it. The poor thing needed some TLC after being damaged

in one of the hurricanes.

The previous owners were snowbirds from up north who couldn't travel anymore due to health reasons.

They put off sellin' it for years." Ryden studied Jay. "What were you expectin'?"

Jay shrugged. "I assumed you lived in an apartment or a condo."

"A bachelor pad?"

"Maybe?"

Ryden exited the car and waited for Jay to close his door before setting the alarm.

"Nah. Once I settled in at Four Kings Security, I started savin' for my own place.

Apartment livin' ain't for me. I like the quiet, but I also like to keep busy.

I'm always workin' on some little project, messin' around in the garage or the yard, tendin' to the lawn or the gardens. "

Jay peered at him. " You garden?"

"Yeah. Why's that so hard to believe?" Ryden rounded the front of the truck and led the way to the front door. "I grew up on ranches. Lots of fresh air, nature, and animals."

"I know. I just never took you for a gardener."

Ryden snickered. "I'll bet there are lots of things you never took me for."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

So defensive . Ryden turned and gently caught Jay’s wrist, tugging him into his arms, his heart annoyingly happy when Jay didn’t pull away.

It was a start. “Now, don’t go gettin’ your feathers ruffled.

I didn’t mean nothin’ by it. I’m just sayin’ we don’t know all that much about each other’s private lives.

Who knows what kind of Martha Stewart qualities I might be hidin’? ”

Jay relaxed, his smile growing wicked. “Like your collection of pipe cleaner animals?”

Ryden let out a mock gasp, a hand going to his heart.

“How dare you. I’ll have you know it’s an underrated art form.

” He playfully booped the tip of Jay’s nose before turning to unlock his front door.

Since he’d left the living room lights on, he moved to one side so Jay could step in.

Jay’s expression told Ryden that he was surprising him at every turn.

What exactly had Jay been expecting? That he’d walk into a living room littered with empty beer cans, dirty clothes strewn all over the floor, and empty food containers on the coffee tables?

“What surprises you more, my abode or how tidy it is?”

Jay's cheeks turned a lovely pink. "I shouldn't be so presumptuous."

Ryden shoved his hands into his pockets and looked around, trying to take it all in from Jay's perspective.

It wasn't exactly minimalistic, but it was simple and clean.

His walls were pale gray with white skirting boards and crown molding.

Rich blue accent pieces and furniture, along with the throw pillows on his plush gray recliner sectional, added a pop of color to his kitchen, dining room, and living room.

"I'll admit, Fitz helped me with the decoratin'.

He was a little horrified by my lack of throw pillows when I first moved in.

The guy has a thing about throw pillows.

And candles. As you can see, this is the living room.

There's the kitchen and dining room. The door to the yard is in the laundry room just off to the right of the kitchen.

That room to the right is the main bedroom.

The guest room and connecting bathroom are down the hall. Make yourself at home."

"Thank you."

"I'll grab you some clothes to sleep in.

There's a new spare toothbrush in the cabinet over the bathroom sink.

" Ryden said, walking into his bedroom. He searched his dresser drawer for something that might fit Jay.

The T-shirt wouldn't be a problem, but his pants would be too long.

Not much he could do. He grabbed a soft navy T-shirt and a pair of soft charcoal pants that Jay could at least roll up.

Did Jay need socks? He was about to grab a pair from his drawer when he heard Jay's loud gasp.

"Oh my God."

Ryden darted out of his room. "What— Shit . That's not the guest room." He hurried over just as Jay switched on the lights in the spare bedroom across from the guest room. "I can explain." There was a reason he hadn't told Jay about this room. The guy probably thought Ryden was nuts.

Before Ryden could utter another word, Jay ran into the room and straight across to the wall, his eyes huge. He spun to face Ryden, throwing an arm out, pointing at the wall.

"Where did you get those shelves?"

Ryden opened his mouth and then closed it. "Um, what?" Had Jay not seen the many cans of fruits and vegetables in the shelving unit? Not to mention the rest of the floor-to-ceiling shelves lining the room filled with food, water, and emergency supplies.

"The shelves. Where did you get them?"

“I made them.”

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“Shut the front door! This is amazing! I’ve been trying to find the right storage system for my cans for ages, but anything remotely close to it is too big for my pantry.” Jay turned back to the wall and sighed longingly. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Really?” Ryden wasn’t sure what to think, so he said it. “You don’t think it’s weird that I turned my spare bedroom into a prepper’s pantry?”

Jay blinked at him. “We live in a state with an entire season dedicated to hurricanes. Not to mention the laughable storage space in most places. It took me months to find an apartment with a decent-sized pantry. Plus, you’re talking to a guy who organizes his clothes by color.”

“I can make you one if you like,” Ryden said, leaning against the doorframe. He chuckled at Jay’s gasp.

“Are you serious? Don’t play with a boy’s heart like that.”

Ryden shrugged. “All I need are the measurements. I have a small workshop out back. I can even paint it any color you like.”

Jay let out a little squeal and did a happy dance that made Ryden laugh. He was so fucking cute.

“Hell, if I’d known all it took to make you that happy was a shelf for your cans, I would’ve offered to make you one years ago.”

“If I had known you possessed such skills, I would have let you,” Jay purred, sending

a shiver through Ryden.

Uh-oh, Ryden might be in trouble.

Jay headed toward him when something caught his eye. He backed up, reached up, and moved one of the fruit preserve jars over one. “You had a raspberry in with your strawberry.”

Who was this guy? He knew Jay was meticulous and took organizing to another level, but Ryden would have never expected them to have pantry prep in common.

Jay smiled at him, and it almost knocked him off his feet.

It wasn't the first time Jay had smiled at him, but this was different.

His guard was down; he looked relaxed and... happy. It was a genuinely sweet smile.

“Are those for me?”

Jay's words snapped Ryden out of it, and he pushed away from the doorframe. He held the clothes out.

“Yeah. You might have to roll the pants up.”

“Thanks.” Jay took the clothes from him, their fingers brushing and sending a jolt of awareness through Ryden.

The startled look on Jay's face told Ryden that he'd felt it, too.

A shiver seemed to go through Jay, his cheeks turning pink again.

With a quick nod, he spun around and crossed the hall to the guest room.

He opened the door and slipped inside before closing it behind him.

Ryden stood there for a heartbeat, wondering if he'd imagined what happened. He was about to head to his room when Jay opened the door.

“Goodnight.”

Then he disappeared.

Um, okay? “Goodnight,” Ryden called out.

Shaking his head, he went to his room and changed into his pajamas.

Okay, this was fine. He was good. It was all good.

Maybe they were on their way to becoming friends.

That was a good thing, right? Yep. Friends.

Friendly friends. Friends who, um, friended.

That was a thing. So they'd made out earlier today, and now Jay was in his house, sleeping in his guest bed. No big deal.

Tomorrow, everything would go back to normal. He just needed to relax, forget about what happened with Jay at the wedding, and get some sleep. If Jay had successfully avoided talking to him about their first kiss, no way he was about to talk about them making out.

It took Ryden forever to drift off to sleep, thanks to his brain supplying all kinds of unhelpful fantasies about the gorgeous, pouty-lipped man wearing his clothes just down the hall. When he finally fell asleep, a soft knock on his bedroom door woke him up.

“Huh?” Ryden said, his voice rough from sleep.

Jay opened the door and stood there, the moonlight coming in from the window enough for Ryden to see him fidget.

He rubbed one foot with the other but didn’t say anything.

He needed something but couldn’t bring himself to say it.

Whatever it was, it had Jay coming to his room in the middle of the night.

“What’s wrong? Everything okay?”

Jay shook his head, his gaze going to his bare feet. “I...I had a horrible nightmare, and I don’t want to be alone.”

“Come ’ere,” Ryden said softly.

Jay’s head shot up, and he watched intently as Ryden pulled the blanket back and patted the mattress. He could practically see the wheels in Jay’s head spinning furiously.

“No funny business,” Ryden promised.

Jay hesitated for a heartbeat before closing the door behind him.

He hurried over to the bed and climbed under the covers.

He lay there, unmoving, staring up at the ceiling for what seemed like ages, the tension so thick that Ryden was afraid it would choke them.

Everything always felt scarier and bleaker at night, Ryden should know. He rolled to face Jay.

“It’s just for tonight. Whatever you need, I’m here.”

Jay worried his full bottom lip again before closing his eyes.

He rolled onto his side to face Ryden and, after some slight hesitation, shifted closer.

Ryden slipped his arm around Jay’s waist, his heart skipping when Jay reached up and touched his fingers to Ryden’s lips.

His gaze dropped to Ryden’s mouth, and then he leaned in and pressed his lips to Ryden’s.

Knowing Jay sought comfort, Ryden let him take the lead, parting his lips for Jay. Their kiss was slow and sweet, and Ryden hummed when Jay slipped his arm around him, deepening their kiss. He tasted of mint, his hair was sleep-tousled, and his body warm and soft.

They tangled their legs together, and Ryden did his best to ignore how right it felt. He couldn’t get used to this, couldn’t let himself believe there could be more between them. It was just one night. Tomorrow, they’d return to being...whatever they were before today’s events.

Jay pulled back, his eyes closed as he sighed softly.

He opened his eyes, and Ryden brushed the hair away from his face, moving his fingers down his jaw to caress his cheek.

There was so much to say, but it was best left unsaid.

Things were complicated enough, and they were reaching a point where they might become friends.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Ryden promised. “And not because I think you need protectin’ or can’t take care of yourself.”

Jay covered Ryden’s hand with his. “I’m sorry for the way I acted. I know you were looking out for me. If it had been any of the other guys, I wouldn’t have gone off like that.”

“What if we start over?” Ryden held his hand out. “Hi. I’m Ryden Foster. It’s nice to meet you.”

Jay laughed softly. He took Ryden’s hand. “Nice to meet you, Ryden. I’m Jay Starling. And yes, I know my first and last names are related to birds.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to mention it, but it could have been worse. Your last name could have been Bushtit.”

Jay barked out a laugh. He smacked a hand over his mouth, his shoulders shaking from laughter. When he seemed to get a hold of himself, he shook his head, his blue eyes sparkling. “I don’t want to know how you know that.”

“What about Jay Boobies? It has a sort of...perky ring to it.”

“Oh my God! Stop.”

“Bananaquit.”

Jay’s smile was wide. “Now you’re just making things up.”

“Nope. It’s a bird. So is Dickcissel.”

“Let me guess. Between gardening and making pipe cleaner animals, you also birdwatch.”

“It’s very relaxin’.”

“Stop it,” Jay said, poking him. “You do not birdwatch.”

“You’re right. I don’t birdwatch, but I did get stuck watchin’ a nature documentary at my doctor’s office once.

The nice lady next to me was a birdwatcher who told me all about the Bushtit.

Do you know how hard it was not to laugh every time Granny said Bushtit?

Extremely.” He hummed. “Come to think of it, she might have been doing it on purpose. She had that frisky look about her. Like she might have a black loofah hangin’ from the roof of her golf cart.

Loofahs are the new upside-down pineapple. ”

“Oh no!” Jay covered Ryden’s mouth with his hand. “We are not going there, you hear me? I don’t need to have that mental image of my grandma.”

Ryden snickered behind Jay’s hand.

“You’re such a shit,” Jay laughed. “I’m going to move my hand. No more talk of upside-down pineapples or black loofahs.” Ryden held up a finger, and Jay sighed. He moved his hand away. “What?”

“I’m just letting you know that the only meanin’ behind the purple loofah in the guest bathroom is that it was the only color they had left in the store.”

Jay arched an eyebrow at him.

“Okay, there was a blue one, too, but it had a shark on it.”

“Admit it, you were tempted to get the shark,” Jay teased.

Ryden pressed his lips together, and Jay’s eyes went wide before he laughed so hard that he was in tears. Then he scrambled out of bed, and Ryden threw the blanket over his head, hearing Jay from his bathroom.

“Oh my God, you got the shark!”

The next thing he knew, the mattress bounced, and a little shark head popped up under the blanket.

“Let’s be friends!”

Ryden groaned. He flipped off the blanket. “You are never gonna to let me live this down, are you?”

Jay held up the shark loofah. “No, I am not.”

“Come on. Look at that little toothy grin. Tell me you would’ve walked right by and left his little sharky face in the bin all by his lonesome.”

“He is cute,” Jay admitted. He placed the shark on the nightstand before lying back down, his smile still in place. He popped a kiss on Ryden’s lips. “He’s not the only one who’s cute.”

Wait, what ?

Jay shifted, fitting their bodies together and hugging Ryden close, his head under Ryden’s chin. He let out a contented sigh, and a heartbeat later, he was asleep.

This was bad.

No, it’s good. So damned good.

Which was why it was bad.

The scent of Jay’s shampoo hit him, and he managed to stifle his groan.

He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. Fuck, Jay smelled so good.

Smelled good, felt even better, and tasted amazing .

With a sigh, Ryden let his cheek rest against Jay’s head.

He might as well enjoy this moment because, come tomorrow morning, all this would be nothing more than a heartbreakingly beautiful dream.

CHAPTER TEN

Jay rolled onto his side and slowly blinked his eyes open, his gaze landing on a toothy grin. What the hell? Wait. It took him a heartbeat to remember Ryden's sharky friend, and Jay couldn't hold back his smile until he remembered where he was.

Shiiiiit . Jay's eyes widened. O.M.G. He was in Ryden's bed. The thought should have sent him running, but instead, warmth spread through him. Was this a good life choice? Did he care if it wasn't?

A soft sigh came from behind him, and he carefully rolled over to face Ryden, his heart squeezing at how handsome he was.

Jay had sneaked a long peek at Ryden on multiple occasions at work.

Okay, he might have ogled him a few times, but Jay had refused to acknowledge how good-looking the man was.

His hair was shorter than usual, thanks to the neat and trim military cut he'd had to get for the wedding, but the scruff Jay liked so much had grown back quickly.

Last night had been so...strange. Usually, a bad dream wouldn't send Jay fleeing from his bedroom, but this nightmare had been terrifyingly vivid.

He'd been too scared to lie down and go back to sleep, so he'd come to Ryden's bedroom without thinking of what he'd do when he got there.

With his heart still pounding, he'd stood in the doorway, unsure what Ryden would do.

He certainly hadn't expected the tenderness and comfort offered. Jay had been so wrong about him.

Guilt ate away at him for all the times he'd been so terrible to Ryden, snapping at him or throwing books at him, even if Ryden did get his revenge by keeping them or playing pranks on Jay.

It wasn't like Ryden hadn't done his fair share of instigating a reaction out of Jay.

How many times had he teased Jay about his outfits?

Or his taste in books, coffee, music... Only now did Jay question Ryden's motives.

Thinking back to any of those times, Ryden hadn't been cruel or malicious. An ass, maybe. A juvenile, for sure. But purposefully cruel? Not once. He'd been hurtful the day they kissed, but even Jay would admit that things between them recently had escalated.

Their relationship was complicated, but Jay could no longer deny the attraction. Not that they had to do anything about it. Talk about a terrible idea. Neither of them needed any more drama in their lives.

"You're thinkin' an awful lot over there, sweet pea," Ryden mumbled, his throaty voice laced with sleep. Ugh, the man's voice and that accent. So not fair. How was Jay supposed to ignore the sexiness? You've been doing it for years. Why stop now? Mmm, but had he?

Jay arched an eyebrow at him. "Sweet pea?"

“It’s a flower,” Ryden said, eyes still closed. “The term of endearment came from a pretty fragrant flower, not the tiny green vegetable.”

“Yes, I know. Just wondering why you chose sweet pea.”

“Because they’re pretty and smell sweet.” Ryden opened his eyes and smiled, stealing Jay’s breath away. “Mornin’, sweet pea.”

Jay might have said good morning back. He wasn’t sure.

Maybe he’d mumbled something that sounded like a response.

Mostly, he was busy trying to get his pulse back down to a normal level.

Ryden reaching out to take a lock of Jay’s hair and twirling it around his finger certainly didn’t help.

Was his face red? He hoped his face wasn’t red.

“How about I make you some breakfast? I make some killer scrambled eggs.”

“You cook?” Jay asked. He needed to stop being so surprised by everything Ryden said. The man was allowed to have talents, and it seemed he had many. Oh, do not go down that rabbit hole.

“I’m no Red, but I manage.”

“Thank you. Mind if I hop in the shower?”

“Go for it,” Ryden murmured, still twirling Jay’s hair.

He moved his gaze to Jay's mouth and then to his eyes.

The urge to lean in and kiss Ryden was overwhelming, but Jay managed to restrain himself.

Far too much had happened in the last twenty-four hours for him to unpack.

Besides, he'd only made out with Ryden at the wedding to keep up with their ruse, and last night, he'd been seeking comfort.

Their kiss in Red's office didn't count, so if he kissed Ryden this morning, it might lead to something else he couldn't pretend never happened, and Jay wasn't ready for something else.

They lay there, just looking at each other.

Jay could tell Ryden wanted to say something, but he didn't.

Was he waiting for Jay? Waiting for him to talk about what happened last night?

To make the first move this morning? Jay had no idea what he wanted.

Okay, that was a lie. He knew what he wanted, but that didn't mean he should give in to his desires.

Besides, maybe Ryden didn't want to start something with him.

"We should get movin'," Ryden finally said, and Jay nodded. He got up, his gaze landing on the little shark. With a smile, he picked it up. He turned and held it out to Ryden.

“Don’t forget your little friend.”

Ryden snickered as he sat up. “Why don’t you keep him? I think he likes you better anyway.”

That shouldn’t have made Jay as happy as it did.

It was just a silly kid’s loofah, but somehow, it made his heart soar.

He took his new little friend, dropping him off in the guest room before grabbing his clothes and heading for the bathroom.

A nice, cool shower was just what he needed to distract himself and not think about Ryden or how their relationship had changed so drastically in such a short time.

By the time he’d dressed and fixed his hair, Ryden was in the kitchen, freshly showered and in his Four Kings Security uniform, which shouldn’t have been hot, considering this was hardly the first time he’d seen Ryden in it, but it was. Incredibly so.

The black tactical pants accentuated his ass so very nicely, and the black T-shirt with the company logo on the front breast pocket hugged his athletic frame. The fabric stretched across his broad shoulders, the shirt sleeves showcasing his sculpted biceps. He looked so solid. Strong.

And...oh my God, he was dancing at the stove as he scrambled eggs.

Jay put a hand to his mouth to keep himself from making a sound.

He needed to watch Ryden get down to whatever ’70s song was playing on his phone.

It sounded familiar, but Jay couldn't put his finger on it.

Ryden dancing was nothing new. He danced all the time—at work, family parties, and events—but this was the first time Jay saw him .

Jay had always assumed Ryden was showing off, using his moves to get attention, but no one was watching now. Well, Jay was watching, but Ryden didn't know that. He danced like he always did. Not for attention, but because he enjoyed it.

Ryden shook his ass, then did some fancy footwork as he swirled the scrambled eggs with what looked like a rubber spatula. He didn't miss a beat as he served the eggs, then turned with the empty frying pan in hand.

“Holy shit!”

“Sorry!” Jay quickly threw his hands up. “It's just me.”

Maybe standing silently behind a Marine hadn't been the best idea. He was lucky Ryden hadn't turned the frying pan into a weapon. Ryden let out a breath as he leaned one hand on the counter.

“Sorry,” Jay repeated. He cocked his head to one side. “You didn't know I was here?” Ryden had killer instincts, and like the rest of the Kings, it was rare to catch him by surprise.

“I'm in my house. Why would I have my guard up?” Ryden asked. He tapped next to his right eye. “That, and you were standin' in my blind spot.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.”

“Stop apologizin'. It ain't a big deal.” Ryden put the frying pan in the sink and

carried their plates to the kitchen counter.

He motioned for Jay to sit. As soon as he did, he placed the plate of scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, and toast in front of Jay.

Placing his plate next to Jay's, he turned and grabbed two mugs that Jay hadn't seen.

One was black coffee, and the other a frothy latte. Jay beamed up at him.

"You made me a latte?"

Ryden's cheeks went pink. "Yeah, uh, I know you like all the fancy stuff."

"Thank you," Jay said, taking the mug from him. "How did you froth it?"

"Um, what?"

It was so hard not to laugh at Ryden's deer-in-headlights impression.

"The latte. It has foam. How did you froth it?"

"With one of those frother wand things."

Jay studied him. "But you drink your coffee black. Why do you have a milk frother?" He took a sip of his latte and hummed. "Mmm, this is good."

Ryden sat at the counter next to Jay, his cheeks still flushed. "It was a gift."

Wait a minute. Jay stilled. Was it possible? No, probably just a coincidence. Still. He had to know. He jumped out of his seat and darted around the counter to the kitchen cabinets. Where did Ryden keep his mugs? He started opening the doors.

“What’re you lookin’ for?” Ryden asked, confused.

Jay was about to say when he found what he’d been searching for. He plucked the familiar floral mug from the shelf, his stomach doing flips.

Last Christmas, Jay had pulled Ryden’s name for Secret Santa.

Knowing Ryden drank nothing but black coffee, Jay decided the guy needed to up his coffee game, so he got Ryden a cappuccino set.

It included a beautiful floral mug that said, “Good morning! I see the assassins have failed,” along with a milk frother, French roast coffee, and chocolate dust. He’d expected Ryden to chuck it the moment he got home.

“You kept it.” Jay turned, smiling at Ryden. The flush on the man’s skin was adorable.

“Course I did. Why would I throw out a perfectly good mug?” Ryden murmured.

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“Right.” Jay returned the mug to the cabinet and closed the door.

He returned to his seat, his heart filled with happiness over such a trivial thing.

They’d just finished breakfast when Ryden’s phone buzzed, and a heartbeat later, so did Jay’s.

He removed it from his pocket and frowned at the text from King. “King’s back at the office?”

“He texted you that he wanted you to come in?” Ryden asked.

“Yes. That means he came home early.” It was only a day or two, but Jay hoped King hadn’t cut his honeymoon short because of him. He would hate to have done that to Leo.

“We’d better get goin’,” Ryden said, grabbing their plates and sticking them in the dishwasher.

They were both lost in thought on the way back to work, and Jay couldn’t help but wonder if Ryden was thinking about them.

What came next? Were they supposed to return to work and act like nothing had happened between them?

Was Ryden waiting for Jay to say something, or had last night been about comfort and nothing more?

Did Jay want something more? He'd just told himself he wasn't ready for something more.

Damn it. He was going in circles. Jay was no closer to an answer when Ryden pulled into his spot in the Four Kings Security parking lot.

Upstairs, King sat behind Jay's desk and did a double-take when he saw Jay and Ryden together. His questioning gaze wasn't as concerning as his sitting behind Jay's desk.

Several years ago, Jay had picked up a nasty bug and was forced to call in sick.

King decided to access his calendar and ended up deleting the company's entire schedule instead.

Thankfully, Jack was able to recover everything.

He promptly forbade King from touching Jay's computer.

The man might be an unstoppable force of nature, but he had a talent for breaking technology just by looking at it.

"Hi, King," Jay cheerfully greeted. "I'm so happy to see you! I hope you had a wonderful honeymoon. What are you doing at my desk?"

King frowned at Jay's monitor. "I'm trying to access my calendar."

"Why?" Jay came around to stand next to King. Oh, thank goodness. He hadn't yet managed to access the scheduling system.

"So I can clear it for the next two weeks."

“Might I remind you of what happened the last time you tried to access your calendar from my computer?”

King glared at Jay’s monitor as if it had been responsible for what happened. “I do, and it was one time. You keep things in weird places.”

As in, not on his desktop. King’s desktop gave Jay heart palpitations every time he saw it.

“I already cleared your schedule,” Jay said.

“Saint will be filling in for you for the three events you had scheduled. Your client meetings have been added to Mason’s schedule, and he and your clients have been notified of the changes.

The three in-person meetings that require your attention are now being held virtually.

The video conference links have been sent to the clients, who’ve all confirmed their attendance.

I also placed an order to restock your fish snack supply.

You were running low on Goldfish Crackers.

I also ordered the new Crisps for him to try. ”

King sighed in relief. “I’m so glad you’re here.” He sat up and frowned. “Wait, there was something else.”

“Yes. Nash’s birthday is next Thursday, and you sent him two prime-seat tickets to the Rolling Stones concert.”

“I did?”

Jay smiled. “By you, I mean me, but from you and the guys, so yes.”

“Outstanding.” King stood and held his arms out, and Jay hugged him tightly.

“Welcome back, King.”

“It’s good to be back.” He squeezed Jay and then released him. When Jay turned, he snickered at Ryden’s floored expression.

“Why don’t you meet the boys in the conference room?” King told Ryden. “I need a word with Jay. We’ll meet you all there in a minute.”

Ryden nodded and hurried off while King motioned to his office. Jay walked in and sat on the couch, waiting for King to close the door and take his seat behind the desk.

“I’m sorry you had to come back early,” Jay said. “I hope Leo wasn’t upset.”

“Coming back early was Leo’s idea. One, he was worried about you; two, he’d had his fill of travel. He was ready to come home. He probably won’t leave the house for weeks. You know how much he needs to decompress and recover from traveling.”

Jay nodded. He understood. As excited and happy as Leo was to honeymoon in Japan with his new husband, the overstimulation and anxiety would eventually cause him to seek the comfort of his own home. He’d probably crashed hard when they got home.

“That’s why I sent him a super comfy human dog bed for your living room and a Swedish Fish-themed gift basket. I also asked Colton to set up puppy visits with Leo so he can spend some time with Cocoa.”

King's warm smile reached his eyes. "Thanks, Jay."

"You're welcome. We take care of one another. That's what families do."

"Speaking of taking care of family," King said, eyes narrowed. "We're going to find these assholes. I promise you. I will make them regret ever having laid a hand on you. But first, how are you holding up?"

How was he holding up? Jay let out a shaky breath. "This kind of thing comes across my desk more often than it should, and now that it's happened to me... It's so surreal."

"Maybe you should take some time off."

Jay shook his head. "I want to help you all catch whoever's behind this because whatever's going on, it's bad."

"Before we get into that, tell me about you and Ryden."

Jay blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

King arched an eyebrow at him.

"Don't give me your judgy eyebrow."

"What? I don't have a judgy eyebrow."

"You totally have a judgy eyebrow. It's the left one."

King touched his left eyebrow. "I don't think an eyebrow can be judgy."

Jay snorted. “Yours can.”

“I’m not judging. I’m...concerned. When Ryden told me what happened at the wedding, he didn’t leave anything out.” He gave Jay a pointed look. Which meant King knew about them kissing and making out.

“I had to make it look real.”

King hummed. “Of course. Go on.”

Was he seriously going to keep this from King? Jay knew better. “Last night, we slept together.”

King’s eyes went huge, and Jay held a hand up.

“Not like that. I was sleeping in the guest room, and I had a horrible nightmare. The kind that was so vivid that I didn’t want to be alone.

So I went to his room, and he invited me to join him in bed.

There was no funny business, just comfort.

” Jay couldn’t help his dopey smile or how he melted at the memory.

“He was so sweet.” He felt his cheeks go warm.

“Okay, I kissed him. For real, this time. Not that the first time wasn’t real. ”

“First time?” King was so confused. “There was a first time? When was this?”

“Um, a little while back in Red’s office. It’s not important. We kissed, for real, twice.

But that's all."

"I thought you hated him."

Jay met King's gaze, his lips quirked in the corner. "I think we both know I never really hated him."

"You used to throw books at him."

"I know, and yes, he can be very frustrating, but last night, I discovered he could also be funny, silly, and adorable." Jay dropped his gaze to his fingers.

"I might have...been a little judgy myself. Last night, I felt safe." He lifted his eyes and met King's gaze again. "I can be myself around him."

"Have you told him about Finch?"

Jay scowled. "No, I have not."

"Don't you think you should tell him?"

"I will," Jay promised. "When all this is over. Besides, what if Ryden doesn't feel the same? I'd be bringing all that up for no reason." He snickered. "You're doing it again."

"He deserves to know whether something happens between you two or not. And yes, I am judging you this time because we both know that Marine is goofy over you. He fell head over heels the moment he saw you."

"What?" Jay's heart pounded in his ears. What was King talking about?

“Do you remember what he said when I first introduced you two?” King asked, sitting back in his chair and lacing his fingers over his stomach. He looked a little too smug for his own good. Ugh, why did King always have to be right?

“Um, he didn’t say anything.” It had been a somewhat awkward meeting. Jay had been his usual perky self, smiling big and holding out his hand. Ryden had taken it and just...stared at him.

“Because he’d been struck by lightning. When we left you, I’m pretty sure he was kicking himself.

Kept muttering under his breath. Then he asked how long you’d worked here and tried to be all subtle about whether you were dating someone.

He failed miserably. You have no idea how much that man swoons over you when you’re not looking.

He’s just awful at the whole communicating his feelings part.

” King shook his head. “At least when it comes to you.”

Jay’s heart did a little happy dance. All this time.... “If something did happen, would you be okay with it?”

“It’s not my place to get involved,” King sighed. “You work in different departments, so it’s not against the rules. Now, if he broke your heart, I can’t say I wouldn’t make his life miserable.”

“You would not,” Jay grinned wickedly. “That would be my job.”

“You’re right,” King chuckled. “That would be much scarier.” He stood. “I hope you

two know what you're doing.”

“I hope so, too,” Jay replied quietly, following King out of the room.

In most areas of his life, Jay was confident, and if he wasn't, he worked on it until he was.

When it came to men, he'd made some regrettable life choices, but in the end, he believed someone would come along who'd love him for him and wouldn't try to change him.

Was it possible the man of his dreams had been in front of him for years, and he hadn't known it?

Or maybe deep down he'd known but refused to accept it.

For the first time in his adult life, Jay wasn't so confident because, if last night was anything to go by, he could fall hard for Ryden, and Jay wasn't sure he could risk that kind of heartbreak.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Talk about a weird morning. Then again, the last several hours had been one surprise after another.

He certainly hadn't expected to have Jay in his bed last night.

Had he fantasized about having Jay in his bed, which he would neither confirm nor deny, it hadn't involved kissing tenderly, cuddling, or discussing shark loofahs.

Ryden had always been aware of Jay's sweet, affectionate side, and if he were honest with himself, he'd admit he'd been a little jealous of all the folks on the receiving end.

He only had himself to blame. Instead of acknowledging that he'd been attracted to Jay and being an adult about it, he'd acted like some schoolboy with a crush.

Then again, they both had a talent for pushing each other's buttons.

Didn't matter. He had no time to think about any of that right now. Those assholes had tried to hurt Jay, and they were going to pay for it. But first, they had to be found. By now, Jack had likely dug up what he could on them. Time to find out what they were dealing with.

Ryden walked into the conference room and closed the door behind him. Turning, five heads shot up simultaneously, making him jump. These fuckers had been hanging around one another way too long.

“Fuck’s sake. That was terrifying. I would appreciate it if you all stopped acting like you’ve been body-snatched. King will be along in a minute. He’s talking to Jay.”

Ace straightened, a shit-eating grin on his face.

Great. Here we go. Ryden braced himself.

“How was your evening?”

Who did Ace think he was fooling? Ryden arched an eyebrow at him and crossed his arms over his chest. “Why don’t you tell me, Anston? You obviously saw the surveillance footage.”

“The surveillance footage didn’t show us what happened after,” Ace replied. “It was a really sweet embrace, though. You two look so cute together.”

“Shut up,” Ryden grumbled, sitting at the conference table far from the front where the others were huddled. He should have gotten himself another coffee. He’d not had enough caffeine for this. “You wanna know what happened last night?”

“Yes, please.” Ace leaned forward.

“Oh, so much happened. A whole lotta nunya business.”

Joker snorted. “Told ya he wasn’t gonna spill.”

Thankfully, the door opened, and King walked in, followed by Jay, whose gaze went straight to Ryden.

The smile that appeared on his face made Ryden’s breath catch.

Damn, he was beautiful. Jay sat in the chair beside Ryden, facing the others, and King made his way to the front, choosing to stand at the head of the table rather than sit.

“Before we get to what Jack found, Jay insists on being involved. Try to contain your shock.”

No one was shocked.

“Since Mason and Red are off-site with clients, Saint, you’re officially assigned to Jay as his protective detail. I’ll get a contract drawn up after this.”

As expected, Jay did not look happy. At all. Saint gave Jay an apologetic smile.

Jay shook his head. “King, I don’t?—”

“This is not up for debate. You want to be involved? You’re assigned round-the-clock protection. Official. That’s the deal.”

“I could do it,” Ryden said.

King barked out a laugh that quickly turned into a deep frown. “Absofuckinglutely not .”

“I figured that from your expression. Didn’t expect you to say it out loud, but sure, no, I get it.” Ryden cleared his throat. This was going to get awkward. He could feel it.

Jay groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Can you please put that thing away, King?”

Ace jumped back, his horrified expression making Ryden laugh. “Put what thing away?”

“King’s judgy eyebrow,” Jay grumbled.

“I do not have a judgy eyebrow.”

“You do,” Joker said. “It’s the left one.”

“Oh, for the love of—Fine. I have a judgmental eyebrow. That does not change the fact that Saint is going to be Jay’s protective detail because everyone in this damned room has fallen in love with someone they were supposed to protect.

Saint’s already in love, so I don’t have to worry about another damned romance happening during an assignment. ”

“Um, excuse me.” Jack put a finger up. “But I think you’ll find none of us were officially on duty or assigned to protective detail when said romances happened. Ace is the only one who fell in love with his client while on protective duty.”

Ace threw his arms up. “What the hell, bro? It only took him like a fucking decade to get over it.”

“Who says I’m over it?” King growled.

“Fuck my life.” Something seemed to occur to Ace. “Wait, you were protecting Leo when you two hooked up.”

“First of all, we didn’t ‘hook up.’ We were in an underground government black site, not a nightclub. Secondly, I wasn’t hired to be his protective detail. I was asked to keep him safe as a favor. There was no contract.”

“There was a verbal one,” Ace offered smugly. “Between you and General de Loughrey.” King narrowed his eyes, and Ace grinned wickedly. “I’m just saying. Your romance with Leo falls into a very gray area.”

King crossed his arms over his chest. “You’re about to fall into a very gray area.”

“That makes no sense,” Ace said, clearly amused.

“My point is, I’m not taking any chances.” King waved a finger between Ryden and Jay. “Keep it in your pants. At least until this is over.”

Jay’s cheeks flushed a bright pink, and Ryden wasn’t sure whether to run for the hills or crawl under the table.

Did everyone think they were sleeping together?

Since when? Glancing around the room, no one seemed surprised by King’s words.

Wow. Ryden had always considered himself very observant. So much for that.

“On to business. What have you got so far?” King turned his attention to Jack, who picked up his tablet and started tapping away. The screen on the wall came to life, and profile images of the Marines who’d been at the wedding appeared.

“These five here,” Jack said, highlighting everyone except their fake Marine, “were all discharged, but I haven’t found info on their official discharge.

I’m still working on gathering intel, but they were involved in several special ops missions, so I need to tread carefully.

Our friend Martin, as Ryden suspected, is not a Marine. He’s not military at all.”

“So, who is he?” Ryden asked.

“Martin Smith. He and his Marine pals are consultants for Bullard Business Import and Export Solutions, an international shipping corporation based in Luxembourg with offices in Tampa Bay, Fort Pierce, and Miami.”

King frowned. “Some of the biggest shipping ports in Florida.”

It was all starting to come together, and Ryden didn’t like the picture forming one bit.

“So we have a bunch of Marines who just happen to be in town for the same wedding who work for a company with offices in major shipping ports, and then yesterday, the owner of Gibson Global, a major import-export company in St. Augustine, gets blown up.”

“Martin mentioned that he knew the groom through mutual acquaintances,” Jay said. “How they all met once a week to play basketball and have a few beers.”

Jack nodded. “That mutual acquaintance is the groom’s brother-in-law, Drew, whose boyfriend, Kyle, works for—drumroll, please—Gibson Global.”

“Well, that sure as hell isn’t a coincidence,” Joker said.

“Did I mention,” Jack added, sounding very pleased with himself. “That Drew is a Marine? That’s how the groom met his bride. She’s Drew’s sister. Drew wasn’t at the wedding because he’s on deployment, but Kyle was there.”

Jay sighed. “So it was them. Martin said, ‘This would have been so much easier if that asshole had just agreed.’ and then the other guy replied, ‘He didn’t, so we need to improvise, adapt, and overcome.’ They must have tried to get Gibson to agree to something, and when he didn’t, they killed him.”

Lucky nodded. “It fits. Especially with how desperate Gibson was for a meeting with us about executive protection.”

Joker pursed his lips. “Do you think Kyle is working with them?”

“I don’t think so,” Jack replied. “I’ve been looking into his financials, checking security footage of him at Gibson Global, and following his digital footprint.

Nothing suggests that he is anything other than a regular guy who works in the loading dock.

When Gibson was killed, Kyle was at work, and he gave no indication he knew what had just gone down with his boss. ”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Ryden said. “If Kyle isn’t workin’ with them, there’s gotta be something else. You said Kyle works in the loadin’ dock. Has there been any weird activity with his access? Could they have stolen his access code or card?”

Jack shook his head. “I checked the company logs, and he was on site every time his access card was scanned.”

“What do we know about Bullard?” King asked Jack.

“You mean other than the fact that the company doesn’t exist?

” Jack tapped the screen, and what almost looked like a stock photo of a building appeared.

“They did a damned good job making it look real, but it’s a front for whatever shady shit they’ve got going on at these shipping ports.

I wouldn't be surprised if they were looking to expand. ”

Ryden frowned. “But St. Augustine doesn't have a cargo shipping port. It's mostly air cargo and small marinas.”

Jay threw his arm out and grabbed Ryden's wrist. “Oh no.”

“What?” Ryden asked, covering Jay's hand with his. He could feel everyone's eyes on him, but he didn't care. Something had Jay freaked out.

“St. Augustine might not have a cargo shipping port, but there's a big one not far from St. Augustine.”

The blood drained from Ace's face. “Shit. I need to call Colton.” He darted from the room without another word.

“What just happened?” Saint asked.

Ryden cursed under his breath. “JAXPORT. Joshua said that Gibson had a contract with Connolly Maritime, and Colton had lunch with Gibson the day before he died.”

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“JAXPORT is the largest container port in Florida,” King said. “It’s also the nation’s largest vehicle-handling port.”

“Why wouldn’t they go for Jacksonville first?” Lucky asked, confused.

“Good question,” Ryden murmured. They were already involved with the other major ports in Florida. Why leave out one of the biggest?

Jack shook his head. “Connolly Maritime is a huge, global shipping company. It’s worth billions.

You can’t just call and schedule an appointment with the CEO and owner.

Not to mention, the companies that Connolly Maritime works with are heavily vetted.

These guys have been operating under everyone’s radar long enough to have established themselves in three major ports.

They’ve done their homework, and they’re careful.

A simple online search will show Colton Connolly is married to a former Green Beret and co-owner of a large security company with government contracts.

Gibson was an easier target. I bet they tried to use Gibson as a way in, and when Gibson refused, they took him out. ”

“Oh my God,” Jay gasped, his eyes filled with fear. “What if they weren’t trying to

kidnap me ?”

Everyone turned their attention to Jay.

“Joshua was with me. Next to Colton, Joshua is the most important person at Connolly Maritime. Most people don’t know that.”

Ryden hummed. “Somethin’ ain’t addin’ up.

These guys are good at what they do. They’ve been operatin’ under the radar this long.

They’ve worked special ops. Why send a couple of thugs to kidnap Joshua and maybe Jay, and why kill Gibson?

Those are two very reckless decisions that draw public attention. Makes no sense.”

Jay sighed. “Maybe they’re desperate? Let’s face it. Joshua and I are easier targets.”

Ryden placed his hand on Jay’s shoulder. “That’s what they thought. I bet they weren’t expectin’ their hired goons to get their asses handed to them.”

Jay snickered. “Well, I don’t know about handing them their asses, but yeah, I guess so.”

King let out a heavy sigh. “Either way, it’s all guesswork, but I agree with Ryden. Their background experience contradicts this level of recklessness. These bastards are up to no good, and it has something to do with shipments, most likely illegal.”

“A shipment they need to get out fast,” Jay added.

Ryden ran through everything they knew. “With Gibson dead, the police are going to be investigatin’, which means lookin’ into everyone and everything connected with Gibson.”

“We should take a look around Gibson Global,” Joker said. “Discreetly.”

King nodded. “Take Chip, Jack, and Ryden. We’ll determine our next step after some reconnaissance. I’ll talk to Frank and get Joshua some protection.” He turned to meet Jay’s gaze. “Contract. Now.”

“But they probably weren’t even after me,” Jay argued.

“You’re on their radar, and that’s enough for me. Let’s go.”

Jay sighed and stood. He followed King out of the room. While Jack and Joker put together a plan for tonight, Ryden pulled Saint to one side. “Hey, man. Sorry, I didn’t call you last night.”

Saint gave him a knowing smile. “No problem. You were busy.”

Was Ryden blushing? His face was a little warm. He quickly shook himself out of it. As much as he and Saint talked about everything, he didn’t want to talk about Jay right now, especially not here. “How’s Val?”

“As good as can be considering the cast he has to wear. His mood is a whole other story. Let’s say that Kazi’s sunny disposition is being thoroughly tested.”

“Poor guy.” Not that Ryden was surprised. As the former fire chief, Val wasn’t about to let something as trivial as a broken arm stop him from running his tavern. He was probably driving his poor staff up the wall.

Saint grinned wickedly. “I’m kinda looking forward to seeing what happens when Mr. Sunshine and Rainbows finally pops.”

“You’re evil,” Ryden replied with a chuckle. “I like it.”

“I’ll take good care of him,” Saint promised, his expression soft.

The words were unexpected, and Ryden swallowed hard. “Uh, thanks. I know you will. Watch your six, yeah? These assholes are bound to reassess and regroup. You call me the instant somethin’ feels off, you hear?”

“You got it.” Saint lowered his voice. “And don’t think you’ve gotten away with not telling me about last night. But I get not wanting to be in the same building as Ace or Lucky when you tell me.”

Ryden snorted. “No shit.”

“But it’s good, yeah?”

The warmth that flooded through him should have been annoying, but it wasn’t. “Yeah, it’s good. At least, I think so. We haven’t talked about it.”

Saint nodded when Joker called out across the room.

“Get over here, Marine.”

Saint squeezed Ryden’s arm before leaving, and Ryden joined Jack and Joker to review tonight’s plan.

It would be a simple recon mission: stay out of sight, gather intel, and let Jack do his thing.

When they agreed about time and place, Ryden left the conference room.

King's door was closed, and Saint wasn't out there, so he was probably with King going over the contract and his new assignment.

Ryden walked past Red's office and then doubled back. What was Jay doing in there? Ryden slipped through the door and closed it behind him, the click making Jay jump. He spun around, a hand going to his chest.

"Is there a reason you're trying to scare the life out of me?"

"Just wanted to check in on you. I know you're not happy about havin' a protective detail."

"I'm not, but it's not like I didn't know King was going to insist." He frowned as he leaned back against Red's desk.

"So what's got you worried?" Ryden asked, coming to stand in front of Jay.

"Everything? What if they go after Joshua again? What if they come after me and Saint gets hurt?"

"That's the job. Everyone here knows that. You know that."

"Yeah, but it's different now. Someone I care about is risking their life for me . If I hadn't followed Martin?—"

"Then we wouldn't know these guys were up to somethin'. We wouldn't know that Joshua and Colton could be in danger, that you could be in danger."

Jay sighed. "You're right."

“Of course I am,” Ryden replied, his smile wide. “I’m always right.”

Jay hummed. “If you say so.” He dropped his gaze to his fingers. “You’re going to Gibson Global tonight.”

“Yeah. Joker, Chip, and I will look around while Jack pokes around their security and surveillance system.”

Jay nodded. He looked like he wanted to say something but wasn’t sure if he should. When he lifted that gorgeous blue gaze, it did something weird to Ryden’s stomach.

“Please be careful.”

That wasn’t what had put that uncertainty in Jay’s eyes. Ryden took a step closer. “You worried about me?” He chuckled at Jay’s huff. He was so damned sweet.

“Of course I am. I’m worried about the others, too.”

“But you didn’t kiss the others or spend the night in their bed,” Ryden murmured, slipping his arm around Jay’s waist and closing the distance between them. He loved the way Jay’s cheeks flushed.

“What are you doing?” Jay asked, sucking in a sharp breath.

“Gettin’ cozy. We should probably talk about last night, huh?” Ryden cupped Jay’s cheek, stroking his soft skin with his thumb. “It was nice, wasn’t it?”

After some hesitation, Jay nodded. “It was.”

“And would you be opposed to it happenin’ again? The kissin’ part, I mean.” He brushed his lips over Jay’s. “Though you’re welcome in my bed anytime, darlin’.”

Jay put a hand on Ryden's chest. "Hold your horses there, cowboy. You want me back in your bed? You're gonna have to do more than just sweet talk me."

"Is that so? Well, what's a cowboy gotta do to sweep a pretty fella like you off his feet?"

Jay tapped his lips, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "Now, what would be the fun in telling you?" He poked his tongue out and licked across the seam of Ryden's lips, making him groan.

"You like teasin' me, don't you?"

"I do," Jay said. "Might just be my new favorite thing. Now go. I need to change out of yesterday's clothes."

"Want some help?" Ryden slipped his fingers under Jay's shirt and tickled his sides.

"Oh my God," Jay laughed and playfully smacked Ryden's hand away. "No, I do not." He arched an eyebrow at Ryden. "I know what kind of help you're suggesting, Marine. These panties aren't dropping just yet, so get marching."

"Ooh, I like when you give me orders," Ryden said, his voice husky. With a chuckle, Ryden stole a kiss before darting out of the room, Jay calling out after him.

"Yeah, you better run, Marine!"

Ryden laughed and went to the break room to grab himself some more coffee. He had no idea what was happening, but he liked it a lot. Jay wanted to be swept off his feet?

Challenge accepted.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gibson Global was off Ponce De Leon Boulevard on a large section of land with plenty of trees, a small marina, and a few small businesses sparsely scattered, all of which worked to their advantage.

Since the company's cargo ships and containers were located at Connolly Maritime, and the investigation was ongoing, the modestly sized one-story building was empty.

Even without an investigation, the company would likely be closed while the family dealt with the repercussions of Gibson's death.

Jack parked the smaller surveillance van on a side street several yards away and took care of the security cameras around Gibson Global using his laptop.

"Gibson's personal computer is offline," Jack said, stuffing his laptop into a black backpack. "We need to get in there to access his files."

"What kind of security are we dealin' with?" Ryden asked, smiling when Chip slapped his paw on Ryden's leg and stared at him, making Ryden chuckle. "Your dog is not subtle."

Joker snorted. "Not when scratches and you-know-whats are concerned."

"The system is nothing I can't bypass," Jack replied.

"Can you disable it from here?" Ryden asked, giving in to Chip's demand for ear

scratches.

“For the most part, but I’ll need to disable the alarms manually from the security panel. I’ll let you know once it’s done. Comms in.” Jack pulled the black baseball cap low and stepped out of the van.

Ryden secured the tiny earpiece in his ear. “Comms check.”

“Loud and clear,” Jack replied.

“Loud and clear,” Joker echoed. He playfully flicked Chip’s ear, chuckling at Chip’s impressive side-eye. “So, you and Jay.”

Rydan glanced at Joker. “Really? You too?”

“What?”

“Why’s everyone so interested in what happens between me and Jay?”

Joker leaned back in his chair. “Well, for one, Jay’s like the little brother we never had. Also, you two have been dancing around each other for years now. It’s like the most frustrating dating show ever. Will he? Won’t he? What’s he going to throw next?”

“You watch datin’ shows?”

Joker arched an eyebrow at him. “Do I look like I watch dating shows?”

“How should I know? I can never tell with y’all. Ace watches Hallmark movies.”

“Because Colton loves them.”

“And Jack watches The Great British Bake Off .”

“Because Fitz loves it,” Jack replied through their earpiece. “He and Red nerd out about it. It’s also very relaxing.”

“See?” Ryden shrugged. “Why’d it be such a stretch that Gio might watch datin’ shows and, by extension, you?”

“Gio watches documentaries and quirky whodunit shows.”

“Really?”

Joker nodded. “Yep. And don’t think I don’t know you’re trying to distract me from my question.”

“You Bridgerton ladies done spilling the tea,” Jack teased.

Joker rolled his eyes and shook his head.

They secured their black baseball caps and blended into the shadows, wearing black T-shirts, tactical pants, and boots.

Chip silently trotted alongside Joker as they made their way to the back of Gibson Global.

A small light blinked twice, and they hurried to the open door where Jack waited. Gloves on, they got to work.

Inside, the building was dark, with just enough light coming through the windows to prevent them from bumping into things. Joker and Ryden removed their flashlights from their pockets, quickly and carefully scanning the doors for the right office.

“What’re we lookin’ for?” Ryden whispered as they passed the reception area.

They headed straight for the door with Gibson’s name on it.

Jack removed what looked like a keycard from his pocket and tapped it against the reader.

How Jack had gotten his hands on a keycard so quickly was beyond Ryden, but that was why Jack was the head of Cybersecurity.

The office was sizable but neat, with the usual office furnishings. Shelves lined one wall, a leather couch sat against the other, and Gibson’s sizable executive desk and chair faced the door. Thankfully, his laptop was still there.

“Look for any connection between Gibson and these guys,” Jack replied. “I’m going to the security office to cross-reference the access logs against any footage of Kyle scanning his card. I could only remotely access a month’s worth of footage.”

“Ry, check his laptop,” Joker said, motioning to the desk. “I’ll search the desk drawers and the filing cabinet.”

Ryden opened the laptop and frowned. “Um, I don’t have the password.” Just then, the screen changed, and the desktop appeared.

“You’re welcome,” Jack said through their comms.

“Show off,” Joker muttered, his lips quirked at the corners. They moved quickly and efficiently while Chip sniffed around the office or guarded the door. Just because the building was closed didn’t mean someone wouldn’t show up, especially if they weren’t careful with the flashlights.

Yikes. Jay would break out into hives if he saw this desktop.

Dozens of vaguely named folders were scattered haphazardly across the screen.

The man's computer was nowhere near as neat as his office.

So far, nothing struck him as weird. The folders primarily contained commercial invoices, pro forma invoices, packing slips, certificates of origin, waybills, customs forms, and other documents typically found in an import/export company.

"Nothing's jumpin' out at me," Ryden said as he moved on to the next folder. "Y'all got anything?"

"Found his agenda." Joker flipped through the pages. "There are several meetings on his calendar, but none of the names belong to any of our guys. Here's his lunch meeting with Colton."

Ryden found the accounting software and opened it. Maybe he'd find something there. A quick scan revealed an alarming picture. "Holy shit. Gibson is in the hole for almost twenty million dollars."

"What?" Joker hovered over Ryden's shoulder, and Ryden pointed to the red numbers. Clicking on a link opened a spreadsheet containing several file attachments, including one from an insurance company.

"Damn. Two months ago, an entire cargo ship's worth of shipping containers sank, and the insurance company denied his claim."

"Why?" Jack asked from the other end.

"It says Gibson Global's policy doesn't cover defective ships or owner negligence,

but Gibson argued that the ship had undergone rigorous inspections and denied any negligence on his company's part."

The screen flickered, and numerous documents flashed rapidly across the screen.

"Really?" Joker grumbled. "Micromanage much?"

"I know," Jack sighed. "It's a problem." The screen stopped, and a copy of the insurance claim Gibson had filed appeared on the screen.

"Looks like there was an explosion that caused damage to the hull. The ship didn't sink, but the containers of costly cargo did.

All of them. That's why the insurance company doesn't want to pay. They're claiming owner negligence."

Ryden shook his head. "This is makin' less sense. Why would these guys want to be involved with a shipping company over twenty million dollars in debt?"

"This is why." Joker showed Ryden a letter he'd pulled out from the back of the agenda.

"What is it?" Jack asked.

"It's an offer," Ryden replied as he read the letter. "From Bullard to buy Gibson Global, and they offered a hell of a lot of money. Way more than the company is worth even without the debt."

Joker hummed. "Not suspicious at all."

"Do y'all think this is what Gibson refused?"

” Ryden asked, thinking out loud. “But why would he refuse this much when he was so far in debt? He couldn’t’ve known what these guys were up to.

As far as he was concerned, it was a legitimate offer.

So he refuses to sell, and what? They kill him, and any chance of buyin’ the company? I don’t get it.”

“We need to talk to Colton,” Joker said. “The letter is dated the day before Gibson died, which is also the day he had lunch with Colton.”

Ryden nodded. “Agreed. Jack, any luck on your end?”

“I found something odd. Two months ago, Kyle scanned his card to get into Gibson’s office, except at that time, Kyle was out on the loading dock. Whoever it was, they knew where the security cameras were. They got into Gibson’s office and accessed his laptop.”

What the hell was going on? “So someone else used Kyle’s card, or a copy of his card, to access Gibson’s office. Where was Gibson?”

“It was after five, so he and the rest of the office employees were gone for the day.”

“Wait. Two months ago? As in, around the same time the explosion happened?” Ryden asked. They were on to something here.

“As in, the week before,” Jack replied.

Man, the coincidences were piling up. “Do we know what they were lookin’ for?”

“Checking now,” Jack replied. “They downloaded several files onto a flash drive,

including a bill of lading for...shit. It was for the ship with the cargo that sank.”

Joker straightened. “Okay, we need to get out of here.” He gave Chip the command.

Ryden left the desktop exactly how he’d found it, then powered down the laptop.

He closed it and quickly followed Joker.

They met Jack in the hall and headed for the door they’d come in from when Chip stopped. Everyone froze.

Sniffing the air, Chip moved to the door. He stuck his nose against the base of the door and then sat. Ryden’s blood turned to ice.

Oh fuck.

“Move, move, move!” Joker grabbed Ryden, spun him, and shoved him.

The four of them hauled ass through the building toward the main entrance, with Chip leading the way.

They’d just burst through the front doors when an explosion rocked the world around them, a cloud of heat and smoke enveloping them.

The next thing Ryden knew, he was soaring through the air.

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Ryden hit the ground hard and sucked in a sharp breath at the pain in his jaw when it scraped against the gravel.

With a groan, he rolled onto his side, looking up to see Chip standing several feet away on the grass.

When Ryden's ears stopped ringing, he heard Chip bark.

It was only then that he spotted the half-charred body on the ground.

"No, no, no." He scrambled to his feet and ran over, his heart in his throat. With a shaky hand, he turned the body over, relief flooding through him. Wait...

"Martin?" What the hell was he doing here? Turning, he met Chip's gaze. "Where's daddy?"

Chip took off, and Ryden found Joker on his back in the grass, with Jack close by, groaning as they slowly stirred.

"What the fuck?" Joker grumbled, sitting up.

Ryden motioned behind them. "It's Martin."

"What?" Joker let Ryden help him to his feet, and together, they helped Jack up. They looked like they had been through hell, but from what Ryden could see, there were no major injuries.

“We need to get out of here,” Jack said.

They hurried back to the surveillance van and got in. A few minutes later, they were on the road, sirens filling the air. Several police cars with flashing lights flew by, followed by a couple of fire trucks.

“What a clusterfuck,” Joker moaned, hissing when he touched his brow and the bloody scrape. “What the hell happened?”

Jack shook his head. “I don’t know, but I was in the security office. Even if I hadn’t caught someone approaching the building on camera, Chip would have alerted you.”

“The device was at the back entrance,” Joker said. He moved his gaze to Ryden. “But you found Martin out front.”

“Chip found Martin. But I think Martin was dead before the explosion. There was also no sign of any detonator in his hand or anywhere around him. I didn’t have time to check the area, but like I said, I think Martin was long dead before the explosion.

” And because they’d snuck in through the back, they wouldn’t have known he was there.

“This is fucked,” Jack growled. “So, either someone dumped the body before we got there or while we were in there.”

“Do you think whoever dumped Martin knew we were there?” Ryden asked.

Joker sighed. “It’s hard to tell what the hell their plan was other than dumping Martin’s body and blowing up the building. But they couldn’t have known we were there.” He pulled out his phone and tapped the screen.

“Who’re you callin’?” Ryden asked, though he had a pretty good idea.

“King. He needs to know what happened and that we’re okay before he sees or hears about this from someone else.

Hey, King. Yeah, uh, things went a little sideways.

Before you say anything, it wasn’t us. Someone tried to blow up Gibson Global with us in it.

I don’t know if we were the targets. Ryden found Martin dead on the property near the building.

Wherever they dumped him, he got caught in the explosion.

Ryden thinks Martin had been dead long before the explosion. Yeah, I think so too.”

This was messed up. Things were getting complicated. While Joker spoke with King, Ryden removed the first aid kit from the wall bracket and cleaned the scrape on his jaw. It wasn’t bad, but it stung like hell. It could have been so much worse. If Chip hadn’t been with them...

No sense in dwelling over what could have happened. When Ryden was done, he removed some extra disinfectant wipes and got to work on Joker’s brow. He got an arched eyebrow from Joker, but thankfully, he didn’t get ornery about it. The guy was about as predictable as a tornado.

“Okay. Thanks. Yes, we’ll do that.” Joker hung up and sighed. “King doesn’t want us to go to our homes tonight. He’s worried about us being followed.”

It wasn’t a big concern for Ryden because he lived alone and only had himself to

protect, but Joker and Jack had family waiting for them at home. Ryden wouldn't want them anywhere near this, which gave him an idea.

"Y'all can crash at mine. I have a spare bedroom and a comfy couch."

"Yay, a sleepover," Joker squealed.

"Asshole," Ryden laughed, punching his friend in the arm. "You wanna nice bed to sleep on, or you wanna sleep on your sorry excuse for a couch in your office?"

"Hey, that couch is plush," Joker argued.

Jack snorted. "It's like a hundred years old. You brought it with you from your old apartment when we first moved into that office building. Chip peed on it so many times when he was a puppy."

Ryden wrinkled his nose. "Are you telling me I've been sitting on puppy pee for years?"

"Fuck off," Joker laughed. "That happened years ago, and I had the thing professionally cleaned. Fine, we'll crash at yours."

The guys called their men on the way to Ryden's and arranged for Fitz, Gio, and their pups to stay at Colton's until they knew more about what was happening.

Jack drove them the long way around while Ryden and Joker kept an eye on the roads to ensure they weren't being followed.

Ryden didn't think they were, but it was better to be cautious, which was why Jack parked the van down the block.

They walked the rest of the way, vigilant of their surroundings.

Once they got inside, Joker and Chip told them to stay by the door as they thoroughly checked the apartment. They weren't taking any chances.

As soon as Chip had given the all-clear, Ryden relaxed.

"I'll grab some clean clothes for y'all and throw yours in the wash.

" He would have to invest in more T-shirts and pajamas at this rate.

The guys each took a bathroom and hit the showers.

Ryden didn't have to tell them to make themselves at home.

They'd been over plenty of times for poker or Sunday Night Football .

Ryden tossed some clothes onto his bed for Jack and hung the other set on the doorknob of the guest bathroom for Joker.

While the guys showered, Ryden started a load of laundry and tried to wrap his head around what had happened tonight.

How the hell had a simple recon mission gone so wrong?

The guys joined him in the kitchen, and Ryden sat at the counter while Joker raided his fridge.

He removed several items to make himself a sandwich. Ryden arched an eyebrow at him.

“What? Almost getting blown up makes me hungry,” Joker replied, arranging all the ingredients on the counter.

Ryden snorted. “Fuckin’ Snake Eater.”

“Want me to make you a sandwich?” Joker asked, holding a slice of bread up. “I don’t have any crayons to put in it. Sorry.”

“Dick,” Ryden laughed. “Okay, am I the only one thinkin’ that maybe Martin fucked up one too many times, and his buddies decided to cut him loose before he fucked up anymore?”

“You’re not the only one,” Jack said. “The fact that they killed him and left him to get caught in the explosion tells me they’re pinning Gibson’s murder on Martin. All it’ll take is for one person at Gibson Global to recognize Martin, and case closed.”

Ryden hummed. “You think Martin killed Gibson?”

Joker took a big bite of his sandwich and nodded.

“It makes sense, right? Even if Gibson refused to sell to them, I don’t see them being reckless enough to blow up the guy.

I’m not saying they wouldn’t have taken Gibson out, but they would have been more subtle.

I agree. Martin fucked up one too many times and got himself dead. ”

Ryden turned to Jack. “You think you’ll be able to find out more about these guys?”

“I’ve enlisted some help,” Jack replied.

“Does that help favor fish-shaped snacks?” Ryden asked, chuckling when Jack shrugged.

“He’s the only one better at this than me.”

If there was any information out there on these guys, Leo would find it. Ryden yawned. “Okay, I’m going to bed. I’m sure King wants us in nice and early tomorrow.” His friends agreed. Tomorrow, they’d make a plan.

Whatever these guys were up to, it was bad, and Ryden doubted they were going to make a play for Jacksonville, which meant the bastards were going to regroup, and who knew what the hell they were trying to move out of Florida? These guys had to be stopped before anyone else got hurt.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I can drive myself.”

Jay headed for the driver’s side of his car only to have Saint block his path, his beefy arms crossed over his chest. It was strange having Saint around all the time, especially in his condo.

He’d insisted Saint make himself at home, but even so, walking into his kitchen in the morning, half asleep, to find a man there had scared the hell out of him.

This is what it was like. Yes, it was for Jay’s safety, and if Jay hadn’t known Saint, he might have been able to put his mind to it and forget the guy was there, but he did know Saint, not just as a colleague. He was Ryden’s best friend. Why did all his thoughts circle back to Ryden?

Saint didn’t budge. “I didn’t know you’d taken up defensive driving.”

“The moment I got my Florida driver’s license.” Jay arched an eyebrow at his new burly shadow.

Saint barked out a laugh. “Touché.”

“You’re not going to let me drive, are you?”

Saint shook his head and ushered him over to the passenger side. Jay reluctantly handed the keys to him, and Saint opened the passenger door.

“You might as well stop fighting it.”

“Fine,” Jay grumbled, getting in. “I will allow you to chauffeur me then.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” Saint replied, amused. He closed the door, hurried to the driver’s side, and got in. As soon as their seatbelts were fastened, they were off. Five minutes in, and Jay couldn’t help it.

“Have you heard from him?”

Saint let out a heavy sigh. “No.”

Don’t jump to conclusions. It was probably really late by the time they finished, and they were waiting until today for updates. Still, Jay worried his bottom lip. “Do you think it went okay?” They had no idea who these guys were—other than dangerous—or what shady shit they were up to.

“He was with Jack, Joker, and Chip. You know they had his back.”

“I know.” Jay turned his attention to the window. “I don’t like this.” How had attending a wedding turned into a covert military operation? It was unreal.

The wedding... Where he’d wrapped himself around Ryden and kissed the shit out of him. Jay hadn’t expected him to taste so damned good. All he could think about was doing it again. And again. And again. Among other things.

“So, you and Ry.”

Jay glanced at Saint. “What about me and Ry ?”

“You two dating?”

Jay's heart skipped a beat. "What did he say?"

"Nothing."

"Sure." Jay didn't buy that for a minute. He'd worked with the two long enough to know they discussed everything. It's like they were taking lessons from Ace.

"No, really," Saint laughed. "We haven't had a chance to talk, what with everything going on, but he did say he felt good about it."

"Really?" That shouldn't have made Jay as happy as it did. "I feel good about it, too," he admitted. A thought occurred to him. "Did he...tell you he was interested? Before all this, I mean."

"Oh no. He was deep in denial. I mean, deep. Like, the deepest recess of the ocean deep."

Jay snickered. "I guess I was, too." Whenever Ryden was around, his presence, smile, laugh, or scent usually caused some form of physical reaction in Jay, whether it was a shiver going through him or heat spreading through his body.

Unwilling to accept it for what it was, Jay had become an expert in denial, telling himself it was a reaction to Ryden's annoying behavior.

"You think it could work out between you?" Saint turned into the parking lot of Four Kings Security headquarters.

"I don't know. I think so. How well does anyone know how things will turn out when it's all so new? We don't know each other."

"You two have been working together for years now. A good part of that has been

pushing each other's buttons, but it's not like you never talked or hung out at parties and events. Remember the night at the tavern?"

Jay sighed. "Why would you bring that up?"

"I know what he said was inexcusable, but I think the reason he was such an asshole that night was because he was jealous."

"What?" Jay sat up and stared at Saint. "Jealous?"

"You should have seen the look on his face while he watched you, sitting there, flirting and having fun with those guys, making them laugh. I think he was jealous, and in his hot-headed, very Ryden way, instead of talking to you about it, he stuck his boot in his mouth in glorious fashion."

That sounded like Ryden. "He apologized. Said he'd been off that night."

"Yeah, I think it had been building and simmering under the surface." Saint smiled softly.

"You know, underneath it all, he's a great guy, and I'm not just saying that because he's my best friend.

" His smile faded. "He's been through so much, and yeah, he's made many mistakes, but he's built a new life for himself.

I think he finally is himself. He deserves to be happy. "

"And you think I can make him happy?"

Saint's smile returned, and it reached his eyes. "I do." His smile became wicked. "I

think you've both found your match."

Jay chuckled and climbed out of the car. They certainly kept each other on their toes.

"Thanks, Saint."

"Anytime." Saint locked the car and handed the keys to Jay. They headed inside the building, greeting the security guys as they put their stuff through the X-ray machine.

"Hey, Rodrigo," Jay chirped at the large, bearded man behind the controls of the X-ray machine. "How's Mariana doing at the new job?"

"Oh, she loves it. Thank you for the flowers, by the way. She was so happy."

"I'm glad." Jay stepped through the metal detector. "Good morning, Pat."

"Morning, Mr. Starling." Pat waved the wand over Jay, then stepped to one side, his smile bright. "Daniela loves her castle. Can't get her out of that thing."

"Well, she does have a kingdom to reign over," Jay teased.

Pat laughed. "Tell me about it. Her mother and I are her subjects. Does her father get to be her knight in shining armor? Nope. She picks the dog."

"I mean, I would pick Olaf to be my floofy white knight, too." Jay wished them a good day as he and Saint headed for the elevator, where Jay tapped his ID card.

"How do you keep it all together?" Saint asked, sounding awed.

Jay shrugged. "It's my job, but I love connecting with everyone here. We're a family. That means treating people like they're family, not just saying it. Actions speak louder than words."

The gifts came from Four Kings Security, but everyone knew Jay made all the arrangements.

He never said as much, but as amazing as their bosses were, everyone knew Jay kept them organized and informed.

His job was to make their jobs and lives easier, which meant taking care of things like birthdays, anniversaries, engagements, and graduations so the Kings could focus on what they did best: providing safety and security.

Upstairs, he went to his desk and tucked his bag under it.

After making himself his second tasty morning latte, he returned to his desk and logged into the system.

Everything for the day was set. He was always several months ahead of schedule and spent most of his days dealing with adjustments, new appointments, cancellations, and ongoing contracts, among other tasks.

Jay hummed as he took a sip of his latte. These minutes before everyone arrived and the day officially started were everything. He could sip his latte in blissful peace, the morning sun shining through the blinds in the many windows around the floor.

Over the last few years, he'd added various potted plants and flowers.

He'd read several studies discussing how having plants in the workplace could help improve mental health, increase productivity, and enhance focus.

The plants hadn't just made their space more aesthetically pleasing, but everyone seemed a little lighter.

Jay had even caught Ryden checking the plants on more than one occasion. Now he understood why.

Soon, the floor was bustling with staff. They all greeted him cheerfully or stopped by his desk for a brief chat. Jay checked his many emails, shot off replies, and prepared King's files for the day. He opened his desk drawer to grab a notepad.

What the...?

Jay pressed his lips together and stared at the fuzzy little green thing inside his desk drawer. He took it out and did his best not to laugh. O.M.G., he didn't.

"Jay, can you—" Saint tilted his head. "Um, what's that?"

Good question. Jay studied his desk's new occupant. "It's a chameleon, I think."

"What's it made of?"

"Pipe cleaners." Jay flicked the fuzzy red tongue and snickered. It even had big googly eyes.

Saint opened his mouth, then closed it. "That's...interesting. Is this something you do now?"

Jay laughed. "No, it's something your best friend does."

Saint blinked at him. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, for a minute there, I thought you said Ryden made that."

"He did." The imagery of Ryden sitting at his kitchen counter with a bunch of pipe cleaners, making this tiny guy, was almost too much for Jay's heart. The man was

adorable.

“Why?”

“I was teasing him about having a collection of pipe cleaner animals.” Jay glanced up at Saint. “Did you know he gardens, too?”

“I knew about the gardening. He and my dad talk about plants all the time. It’s weird. I didn’t know about...that.” He pointed to Jay’s little friend. “Not gonna lie, I’m a little concerned.”

“It’s cute.”

“It’s something alright,” Saint muttered. “Are you sure we’re talking about the same guy? Marine? Eats a metric ton and never gains weight? Big mouth?”

“Yes,” Jay snickered. “Why is it so hard to believe he made this?” None of the guys Jay had dated in the past would have made a chameleon out of a pipe cleaner. “He’s trying to sweep me off my feet.”

Saint eyed him. “And this does it for you?”

“Yeah, it does. It’s sweet. Don’t knock people’s romantic gestures.”

“What? No. I’m not—What’s happening right now?”

Ace stopped in front of Jay’s desk. “What’s that?”

“It’s a pipe cleaner chameleon,” Saint replied. “Ry made it.”

Ace blinked at Saint. He looked so confused. “I’m sorry, what?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:30 am

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

Jay rolled his eyes. “Is there a reason you’re both hovering? And don’t you dare tease him.” He gave Ace a pointed look. Ace opened his mouth, and Jay narrowed his eyes. “Anston Sharpe, you leave him alone.”

“Oh, come on, Jay.” Ace threw his arms up dramatically. “This is too good an opportunity to pass up.” He pointed at the chameleon. “Look at it, Jay. Are you looking? Do you see that? That is pure ball-busting gold.”

Jay just arched an eyebrow at him.

“Fine. Ruin my fun,” Ace grumbled and stormed off.

Saint shook his head as he watched Ace disappear into his office. “Your power is terrifying.”

“I know.” Jay preened. “Now, what did you need?”

“I emailed you my expense report from last week, like you asked.”

“Perfect, I’ll get that?—”

The elevator opened, and Jay’s heart skipped a beat when Ryden stepped out with Jack, Joker, and Chip. Then he saw Ryden’s jaw, Joker’s head, and Jack’s chin.

“Oh my God, what happened?” Jay quickly but carefully returned his little friend to

his desk drawer before jumping out of his seat and darting over to Ryden. Gently, he took hold of his chin and turned his face. “Does it hurt? Are you all right? Does it need treatment?”

“Um, no, yes, and no,” Ryden said, amused.

How could he take this so lightly? What the hell had happened last night? Chip whined, and Jay dropped his gaze, unable to resist those big puppy eyes. No matter the circumstances, he couldn’t ignore his best boy.

“I’m so sorry,” Jay cooed, giving Chip lots of love and pets. When Chip felt he’d received sufficient attention, he trotted off to demand love from someone else.

Joker turned to Jack, his eyes twinkling with mischief despite his frown. “Looks like we’re chopped liver from here on out, pal.”

“Aw, I’m so sorry. Do you need some love and pets, too?” Jay asked sweetly.

“Maybe I do.” Joker sniffed. “It’s fine. These days, I’m getting my pets elsewhere.”

Jay snickered, and Saint joined them as they headed to King’s office. As soon as Joker stepped into the doorway, King stood.

“Conference room.”

Judging by King’s reaction, he knew what had happened.

It made sense that the guys would have called him last night to fill him in on whatever had caused their injuries.

Red, Ace, and Lucky were already there when they arrived at the conference room.

Ace lifted his gaze, looking ready to joke when he saw their faces. He stood, his frown deep.

“What the hell happened?”

King closed the door behind them and stood at the head of the table facing them. “What happened is those bastards blew up Gibson Global.”

“Yeah, with us in it,” Joker growled. “Chip alerted us in time. We got the hell out. The building blew just as we made it outside. We got knocked on our asses, but other than a few cuts and bruises, we were damned lucky. Martin, not so much.”

What ? A lump formed in Jay’s throat, and it took everything he had not to throw his arms around Ryden.

What if they hadn’t gotten out in time? If their injuries had been worse.

Ryden could have died. Jay swallowed hard and forced himself to remain still.

Ryden must have sensed something, because he reached out under the table and took Jay’s hand, giving it a quick squeeze.

When he went to pull his hand away, Jay grabbed it, holding on tight.

After taking a deep breath, he released Ryden’s hand.

“What do you mean?” Lucky asked. “Martin was there?”

Ryden nodded. “Yeah, Chip found him. He must’ve been either in the buildin’ or close to it ’cause he got caught in the explosion. The weird thing is, he was already dead.”

“You think they killed him?” Red frowned. “But why kill Martin, dump his body at Gibson Global, and blow it up?” He narrowed his eyes. “Unless they were trying to pin Gibson’s murder on him.”

King hummed. “Maybe Martin got a little too sloppy, and they figured this was the best way to point the police away from them and get rid of Martin. Two birds with one stone.”

Joker dropped into one of the chairs. “We need to talk to Colton. Ask him about his meeting with Gibson.”

“He should be here any minute,” Ace replied, looking at his watch. As he said the words, the door opened, and Colton appeared. Talk about timing.

“Thanks for coming,” King said, motioning to the chair beside Ace.

“Of course,” Colton replied, kissing Ace’s cheek before taking a seat.

It was amazing how the room’s atmosphere changed when Colton stepped in.

He was tall and elegant, his appearance pristine from his perfectly styled blond hair to his expensive Armani suit.

He exuded confidence. The boardroom was his battlefield; anyone who saw him could tell he dominated it.

Jay’s boss might be different from Joshua’s in every way, but they had one thing in common. They each had a powerful presence.

King motioned for Ryden to continue.

“Colton, did Gibson mention being in debt or an offer from Bullard Business Import and Export Solutions?”

“He did,” Colton replied with a nod. “That’s what our lunch meeting was about the day before he died.

After learning about the incident involving Graham’s cargo ship, I offered my support, but he was already dealing with the insurance company.

When they declined his claim, he came to me for advice.

He was devastated. This was his family’s business, and until then, the company had been doing very well.

Graham didn’t want to sell, especially to Bullard.

There was something about the man who made him the offer he didn’t like.

I told him not to take the deal and that Connolly Maritime would invest in Gibson Global. ”

“You were going to bail him out,” Joker confirmed.

“Invest,” Colton corrected, though his lips quirked into a smile in the corners. “I’ve known Graham for years. He was a good man with a solid business model. He didn’t deserve what happened to him.” Colton’s brows drew together. “I find the circumstances surrounding the loss to be...questionable.”

King looked thoughtful. “How so?”

“Graham had been in business for years. He was meticulous, and his crew was highly

experienced. I'm not saying a cargo ship can't lose its cargo.

It happens more often than you think. Pirates, hurricanes, storms. Anything can happen out there in the middle of the ocean.

But none of those conditions were present, and according to one of the crew members, the cargo containers started falling from the stern. ”

“So, the opposite end of where the explosion was,” King said.

Colton nodded. “I suspect that was why the insurance company denied his claim. The investigator must have concluded that certain things didn't add up.”

Jay still didn't understand. “Why would they kill Gibson because he refused to sell?”

“Not to mention that killing Graham has led to Connolly Maritime doubling down on security,” Colton added. “They must have known this would happen.”

Ryden tapped his fingers on the table. He met Colton's gaze. “Did Gibson say who from Bullard approached him?”

“Yes. A Martin Smith, I believe. The man came on a little too strong for Graham's liking. Something about the man had him on edge.”

Jay noticed that Jack was typing away at his tablet the entire time they talked. Was he trying to find more information on their guys? Did the explosion at Gibson Global and the dead man found there hit the news?

Joker sat back in his chair, his arms crossed over his chest. “I think King is onto something. First, Martin gets on Ryden's radar at the wedding.

Their research would have shown that Ry and Jay worked for Four Kings Security and Colton's husband.

If they'd been trying to find an in with Connolly Maritime, Martin jeopardized that plan.

Then, he tries to force Gibson to sell. Instead, Gibson goes to Colton.

Martin kills Gibson in a very loud way, and it results in Connolly Maritime doubling down on security.

There's no going back. Connolly Maritime is out of the question. ”

Red nodded his agreement. “So they kill Martin, dump his body at Gibson Global, blow it up, and now the police will look into Martin, who witnesses would have seen at Gibson Global when he went to make Gibson an offer. It's easy to assume he'd be angry at Gibson for refusing to sell. That's motive.”

“They have to be regrouping,” Jay pitched in. “I just don't know why these guys were working with Martin in the first place. They didn't look pleased with him at the wedding.”

“Ah ha!” Jack grinned brightly at King. “Your husband is a genius.”

“I know that,” King said matter-of-factly, making everyone laugh.

“Right. Thanks to our Leo-shaped friend, we discovered that Martin was a new addition to the group. The original sixth member was a Marine who served with the other five. Martin joined at the last minute after their guy was killed during a ‘business trip’ near the Colombia-Venezuela border.”

“Yeah, because that’s where all legitimate companies go to do business,” Joker muttered.

“What else did you and Leo find out about these guys?” King asked.

Jack’s expression turned dark. “Our Marines were Raiders.”

“Fuck,” Joker ran a hand through his hair. “Special ops.”

Jay’s stomach dropped. Oh no.

“Yep.” Jack tapped at the screen. “We got parts of a classified document un-redacted and discovered they received an other than honorable discharge during the Siege of Marawi in 2017. A year after that, Bullard Business Import and Export Solutions appeared.”

Ace cursed under his breath. “How much do you want to bet that they don’t so much as consult for Bullard as they created it to cover up their illegal operation? Is that all you could find on them?” he asked Jack.

“A lot of what we’ve found is in connection to previous missions, but something big happened during that siege because not even Leo can find intel on it. All we’ve got are puzzle pieces that don’t fit together.”

Oh damn. He was going to have to do it. Jay’s anxiety shot up, and he met King’s gaze.

King didn’t say a word. He didn’t have to.

His hard blue eyes said it all. The ball was in Jay’s court.

Jay closed his eyes and tried to summon courage.

He hated this. But they needed him to step up, no matter how uncomfortable or how many painful memories it brought up.

“I...I know a Marine Raider who was at the Siege of Marawi,” Jay said, hating how small his voice sounded.

All eyes were on him, but Ryden was the one Jay turned to for comfort. He held out his hand, his discomfort easing some when Ryden laced their fingers together.

“Who?” Ryden asked softly.

Jay inhaled deeply. He closed his eyes and fortified himself before opening them again. “Finch. My brother.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Wait, what ?

Ryden tried to wrap his head around what he'd just heard.

Holy shit. Jay did have a brother. Why had Jay never mentioned Finch?

Snapping himself out of it, Ryden glanced at the others.

The only one who didn't look surprised was King.

Made sense. If someone was going to know anything about anyone, it was King.

"You have a brother?" Ace's voice was tinged with disbelief as he blinked at Jay, his expression mirroring everyone else's confusion.

How could Jay have known them for so long and never mention a brother? And a Marine. It was odd, considering where he worked. Everyone seemed to have the same questions in their eyes. There had to be a reason Jay had kept such a significant piece of his life hidden.

"I'm sorry I never talked about Finch," Jay replied quietly. "It's...complicated." His gaze darted to Ryden before moving back to King.

"Are you sure?" King asked. "Because we can find another way."

Jay shook his head. “We both know this is the best option. If anyone knows anything about what happened, it’ll be Finch.” He pulled his hand out of Ryden’s and moved it to his lap. Ryden had never seen this uncertain, vulnerable side of Jay. So much was starting to make sense now.

“You think he’ll agree to come in?” King asked.

“Are you kidding? And miss an opportunity to pick my life apart in person?” Jay grumbled. “He’ll be here.”

King sighed. “Jay?—”

“It’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

The room was silent, and Ryden figured they were all probably thinking the same thing.

Who was this guy, what had he done, and was there any ass to be kicked?

Okay, maybe the last part was just him, but still.

Considering how protective these guys were of Jay, perhaps he wasn’t the only one feeling the itch to kick Finch’s ass.

“Excuse me,” Jay said, standing. “I need to make the call.”

As soon as he left, Ryden stood and faced the others. “What the hell was that about?”

“Why wouldn’t he tell us he had a brother?” Ace asked King.

“That’s Jay’s business,” King replied. “He has his reasons, and we need to respect

that.”

Ryden ran a hand through his hair. “And we’re supposed to trust this asshole? A guy we didn’t even know existed because of how badly he hurt Jay?”

“It’s Jay’s decision,” King said. “If Finch agrees to a meeting, we’ll be civil.” He gave Ryden a pointed look. Damn, King didn’t miss a beat.

Ryden crossed his arms over his chest. “I’ll refrain from punchin’ him in the face. At least until we have the necessary information. After that, no promises.”

“Guess that’s the best I can hope for,” King muttered, though he didn’t seem too broken up about Ryden’s reply.

If King didn’t like this guy, there was a damned good reason.

A light knock had them all turning as Jay stepped back into the room.

The look on his face made Ryden want to wrap him up in his arms. Yeah, he really didn’t like this Finch guy.

“He’ll be here,” Jay said.

“Okay. Thank you, Jay.” King turned back to the others. “Everyone, take a break until Finch gets here. We’ll fill him in when he arrives and go from there. These guys are most likely going to regroup and move quickly.”

Jay nodded but didn’t say anything. He just turned and walked out. The rest of the men in the room whispered amongst themselves as King approached Ryden.

“Keep an eye on him, please. If we bring Finch into this, Jay will insist on staying

involved no matter how complicated their relationship is. He'll need someone to lean on, even if he acts like he doesn't."

"Got it." Ryden left the room and searched for Jay, walking past his closed office door and doubling back when he remembered he'd left it open. Quietly, he let himself in. Jay sat on Ryden's desk, lost in thought. "Hey, sweet pea."

Jay gave a little start, showing how deep in thought he'd been, considering Ryden had been standing only a few feet away. His soft smile had Ryden closing the distance between them in two strides.

"I hope you don't mind my hijacking your office for my sulking."

Ryden held back a smile. He stepped up to Jay, his pulse rocketing when Jay moved his legs enough for Ryden to stand between them. Letting Jay take the lead, Ryden stood quietly and waited. Jay slid his arms around Ryden's waist and leaned in to rest his head on Ryden's shoulder.

"Are you okay?" Ryden asked, running a hand down Jay's back.

Jay nodded. "It's been years since we've talked. Part of me thought he'd laugh in my face when I asked, but he didn't. He just reacted in true Finch fashion. 'You were right to call me. This is too dangerous for you. Leave it to the real men.' Ugh."

Ryden stiffened. "What?" He paused, wondering if he should say more.

Fuck it. When did he not say what was on his mind?

"He's why you feel insecure sometimes." Maybe he'd pushed Jay's buttons on purpose in the past, but Jay's reaction to some of it had come from somewhere else that had nothing to do with Ryden.

Jay pulled back, and he studied Ryden's face.

When he found whatever it was he seemed to be searching for, he nodded.

“Not all the time, but yes. Finch is four years older than me, which meant that eventually, we ended up at the same high school. I was a freshman when he was a senior. No one could believe we were related. I was the cheer captain, captain of the spirit club, drama club, and a member of the debate team. He was captain of the football team. All the girls wanted to date him, and all the guys wanted to be him. The whole year, he and his football buddies made my life hell. So not only did I have to put up with his bullshit at home, I had to deal with it at school, too.”

“What about your parents? Didn't they know what was goin' on?”

Jay shrugged. “Not really. I mean, they were very protective of me, and when they were around, Finch behaved. But they were busy working parents. My dad was a named partner at a prestigious law firm, and my mom ran a big charity. At first, I thought maybe it was typical sibling rivalry, but it got worse as I got older, especially since my parents knew I was gay before I came out.” His smile was wicked. “I wasn't exactly hiding.”

“Is that why he was an asshole? Because he knew you were gay?”

“It certainly didn't help.” Jay sighed. “We'd get into arguments all the time at school.

He and his friends would make snide comments or crack jokes whenever they walked by me.

One day, we were at a school assembly, and someone threw a dildo at me.

I knew it was one of his friends. I got sick of it, so I went over there and asked Finch

what his problem was.

He said everything about me was his problem.

That just because I liked dick didn't mean I had to act so gay.

I'd grown a pretty thick skin by then but having my big brother yelling at me and calling me a fag in front of the whole school...

." Tears welled in Jay's eyes. "I was hurt and so embarrassed. Then I got angry, so I punched him. It got ugly, and a couple of teachers had to pull us apart. The principal dragged us to his office and called our parents. We stopped talking after that. When he graduated, he joined the military, saying it was to get away from me."

Ryden did his best not to grind his teeth, but it was hard. "Not gonna lie, I might punch him. Don't care if he's a Marine."

Jay smiled softly. "You're sweet." He pulled Ryden down and brushed his lips over Ryden's with a hum. "I can think of something way more fun you can do with all that pent-up energy."

"Oh? What do you have in mind?" Ryden asked, taking in Jay's warmth and softness.

Jay slid his hands up Ryden's chest and wrapped his arms around his neck. With a cute little smirk, he leaned in and brought their lips together. Heat erupted through Ryden, and he gave himself over to Jay, letting him take the lead and tell Ryden what he needed.

Ryden moved his hands down to Jay's ass, squeezing it and bringing Jay hard against him as their kiss turned hungry and almost desperate. Fuck, he tasted so good.

“We should stop,” Jay said, breathless, against Ryden’s lips.

“We should,” Ryden replied. They were in his office, which he hadn’t locked, so anyone could walk in at any moment. Yet neither of them stopped.

“What are you thinking right now?” Jay asked, breathless.

“You don’t wanna know.”

“I do. Tell me.” Jay moved his head to one side to give Ryden access to his neck, groaning when Ryden kissed the spot under Jay’s ear, loving how it made Jay shiver.

“I’m thinkin’ of what I’d do to you if we were all alone,” Ryden purred, sucking and licking at Jay’s neck.

“What would you do?” Jay whispered, as if speaking louder would make Ryden’s words come true. Would Jay want that?

“I would unbuckle your belt, shove your pants down, and groan at how wet you were for me, your cock just drippin’.”

“Oh fuck,” Jay groaned and shifted his position on the desk, making Ryden grin.

“Then I’d get down on my knees and swallow you whole, suckin’ your dick until you could barely stand, and just when you’re about to blow your load in my mouth, I’d turn you around and shove my tongue in that sweet little hole of yours.”

Jay gasped and shuddered in Ryden’s arms. “Fucking hell.”

“Darlin’, I would eat you out like you were my last meal, and when you start shakin’ from desperation, beggin’ to come, I’d stand up and bury my big fat cock deep inside

this gorgeous ass,” Ryden said quietly, rubbing the hard bulge in his pants against Jay’s leg.

“I would fuck you so good; the only words that will leave these lips will be my name as you beg me for more.” He moved his fingers to Jay’s plump bottom lip. “That’s what I was thinkin’.”

Jay moaned and nipped at Ryden’s fingers. “Now, who’s the tease?”

“Oh, I ain’t teasin’, sweet pea. You say the word, and I will wreck you.”

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“Fuuuuuuuck .” Jay let his head drop against Ryden’s shoulder. “You’re an asshole.”

Ryden chuckled. “This is news?”

“You can’t say things like that and make me all, you know.” He wriggled on the desk, making Ryden chuckle. “When we can’t do a damn thing about it.”

“Hey, you asked me what I was thinkin’. All I did was answer your question.”

Jay worried his bottom lip. “Lock the door.”

“What?” Ryden’s stomach flipped.

“Lock the door,” Jay hissed. “Hurry up.”

Ryden did as he was told, locking the door to his office.

When he turned around, he had an armful of Jay.

Oh fuck . They were back to kissing, and there was nothing sweet about it this time.

Ryden held Jay as he moved in the general direction of his couch, opening one eye to make sure he didn’t fall on his ass and take Jay with him.

Jay kissed Ryden like he’d been starved for his mouth for years, and maybe he had been.

“Jay, we can’t... Someone will hear.” What the fuck is wrong with you, man? Shut up and let the gorgeous guy on his knees sex you up!

Jay kneeled between Ryden’s legs, fumbling to unfasten Ryden’s belt.

Snapping himself out of it and throwing caution to the wind because, holy shit, Jay was on his knees for him , Ryden quickly undid his pants and shoved them down.

His boxer briefs were wet from his precome and when he lifted his hips again so Jay could pull down his underwear, his cock was rock hard.

Jay’s low groan had Ryden about to come undone when he wrapped a hand around Ryden’s length, looked up at him from below those beautiful lowered lashes, then swallowed Ryden down the back of his throat.

Ryden slapped a hand over his mouth to keep himself from making any noise despite how badly he wanted to shout out how fucking incredible this felt.

His eyes almost rolled into the back of his head.

Fuck, fuck, fuuuuck . Oh God, it felt so fucking good.

Having had his fair share of blow jobs over the years, he could safely say that none had ever come close to what Jay was doing to him.

Jay slid one hand under Ryden’s shirt to tweak his nipple, making him jump and thrust his hips up, making Jay moan.

He took Ryden’s wrist and moved his hand onto his head.

The man was going to fucking kill him. Ryden grabbed a fistful of Jay’s hair, taking

the hint and holding Jay down while Ryden fucked his mouth.

“Fuck, darlin’,” Ryden whispered, his voice breathy.

“I’m not gonna last.” Which was probably a good thing, considering the number of people on the other side of that door.

Feeling his muscles tighten, Ryden covered his mouth with his free hand and thrust one more time as he came down Jay’s throat.

His orgasm ripped through him, and he thrust his hips up into Jay’s mouth a couple more times before releasing him, his chest rising and falling in pants.

Jay wiped the corner of his mouth with his thumb and straddled Ryden’s lap.

He cupped his face and ran a hand through Ryden’s hair, the tender gesture squeezing Ryden’s heart.

Oh. Shit. He hadn’t just been in denial about feeling something for Jay; he’d been falling for him.

All those years of teasing him, pushing every button, Ryden had been sinking deeper into those big blue eyes, and now he was drowning.

“Shh,” Jay planted little kisses up Ryden’s jaw. “Don’t overthink it.” He kissed Ryden, and this time it was soft and sweet. “I’m looking forward to you wrecking me tonight.”

The thought alone had Ryden’s dick twitching. He took hold of Jay’s waist and squeezed. “Oh, I would very much love that, sweetheart.”

Jay smiled, and it stole Ryden's breath away.

He was about to ask Jay to come home with him after work when a knock sounded at the door.

Jay quickly got off him, straightening his clothes and fixing his hair while Ryden jumped off the couch and pulled up his pants.

When Jay nodded, Ryden unlocked the door, relieved when Saint stepped in.

He looked from Jay to Ryden, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

His knowing grin suddenly turned into a frown. Well, that didn't bode well.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I thought you should know Finch is here."

"Thanks," Ryden replied. "We'll be right out."

Saint nodded and left, closing the door behind him.

Jay sighed. "Well, that killed the mood."

"Hey, look at me." Ryden placed his fingers under Jay's chin, lifting his head so their eyes could meet. "Whatever happens, I have your back."

"Thank you." Jay leaned in and kissed Ryden. It was quick but sweet. "I meant what I said. Tonight."

Ryden nodded and followed Jay's lead, heading for the office door. Jay's cheeks were pink, but he'd smoothed down his hair and clothes, making him impeccable again.

Shoulders back and head held high, Jay left the office looking as confident as he always did. They were both a little flushed and breathless, so it was obvious they'd been up to something in there, but no one said a word, not even Ace.

Outside, a guy Ryden had never seen before spoke to King.

It had to be Finch. To say he was the opposite of Jay in every way would have been an understatement.

The guy was as big as King, with pitch-black hair, a chiseled jaw, amber eyes, and muscles that stretched his shirt's fabric within an inch of its life.

Everything about the guy screamed military, except for the length of his hair, which was long enough to curl around his ears. He had the kind of smile that could charm the pants off anyone if he weren't such an asshole.

When Finch caught sight of Jay, he did a double-take, his smile widening. Wait. Was Finch happy to see his brother?

"Well, hey there, Jaybird," Finch drawled. "Looking pretty as a peacock, as always. Come here and give your big brother a hug."

Jay rolled his eyes, squeaking when Finch grabbed him and pulled him into a bear hug. Releasing him, Finch chuckled at Jay's annoyed huff. He lifted his gaze, and something odd flashed through his eyes. Brushing past his brother, he held out a hand to Ryden.

"Semper Fi."

"Ooh Rah," Ryden replied, taking Finch's hand and shaking it.

“Finch Starling. And you are?” His gaze raked over Ryden in a way that couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than what it was.

Interest.

What in the holy hell?

“Ryden. Foster.”

Finch met his gaze and held it. “Looking forward to working with you, Marine.” He squeezed Ryden’s hand, his thumb briefly brushing Ryden’s skin before he let go. Ignoring Jay’s startled expression, he turned back to King. “Where do you want me?”

“Conference room,” King replied, looking uncharacteristically perplexed. He hadn’t missed the exchange and, like Ryden, had no idea what to make of it. “I’ll lead the way.” He walked off with Finch on his heels.

If Ryden didn’t know better, he’d say Finch was interested in him. Jay’s brother was straight. Wasn’t he? It was why he gave Jay so much hell. Ryden turned to Jay and leaned in, lowering his voice.

“I thought your brother was straight.”

“He is.” Jay shook his head. “That was just...weird.”

“But y’all haven’t talked in a long time, right?”

Jay worried his bottom lip. “A few years ago, he tried calling me, but I refused to answer. I texted him that I didn’t want to talk to him.

” He moved his gaze to Ryden. “You think...?” He shook his head again.

“No. Nope. My brother took every opportunity he could to make my life miserable for being gay. He’s messing with me. ”

“How is flirtin’ with me messing with you?” It wasn’t as if Finch knew something was going on between them, and even if he did, the man was straight.

Jay narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know, but he’s up to something.

I can feel it. Why would he answer my call, much less agree to help?

Then he flirts with you like no one’s watching?

Yeah, he’s up to something. Don’t let your guard down around him.

If he thinks he can mess with me now like he did in high school, he’s about to regret his life choices. ”

Oh boy. Something told Ryden this operation was about to get much more dangerous.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The day had started amazingly, and now it was going to shit.

Jay couldn't even take the time to enjoy thinking about what he and Ryden had done in Ryden's office.

When he went in there, needing a moment to himself, an array of emotions coursed through him.

He hadn't expected Ryden to come in after him, but having him there in front of Jay, looking so concerned, ready to take on his brother, Jay decided, fuck it.

And yes, maybe Ryden's words about what he would do to Jay played a role in what happened.

Jay had been so freaking turned on. All he could think about was Ryden naked, buried deep inside him.

Neither the time nor the place .

Right. Back to everything being shit. Jay only had himself to blame.

King had given him an out and offered to find another way, but Jay had insisted he could handle it.

Had he made a big mistake? It didn't matter.

Innocent people were getting hurt. If putting these bastards behind bars meant an uncomfortable reunion with his brother, then so be it.

He'd do what he had to, and then they could return to their separate worlds.

That didn't stop Jay from being curious.

What did his brother think he was doing?

They hadn't spoken in years, yet he walked in here all smiley and asking for a hug like nothing had happened, like they were best buds.

And the flirting? What in the name of Beyoncé's bedazzled bonnet was that about?

Not to mention, he'd picked Ryden to flirt with.

Out of everyone on the floor, his suddenly not-so-straight brother picked Ryden? Unfuckingbelievable.

King stood at the head of the table and motioned to Finch, who positioned himself to King's right like he'd been there this whole time.

He blended in with the others, dressed in khaki cargo pants, a black T-shirt, and combat boots.

Meanwhile, Jay sat at the end of the table, wearing an orange paisley vest with a matching tie.

Nope. No. He was not going down that path.

Flipping his bangs out of his face, he sat back. He looked fucking fabulous.

“Everyone, this is Finch Starling,” King said. “I’ve thanked him for joining us and caught him up on what we’ve got. Finch served with these men, and it’s not good.” He nodded at Jack.

Jack tapped at his tablet, and the screen on the wall turned on, displaying the profile pictures of the Marine Raiders they were dealing with earlier.

Jay was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that his brother had served with these men who were up to who knew what illegal activities, including being connected to two murders.

Had they been close? Could his brother have been involved?

No. Finch might be an asshole, but he wasn’t a murderer.

Finch stepped up to the screen and pointed at the men one by one.

“Fleming, Walton, Rivera, Jones, Dennis, and the original sixth member, Long. Officially, we were deployed to the Philippines for technical support and to offer surveillance, intelligence, and reconnaissance training—no boots on the ground. We also provided military equipment, weapons, and two surveillance aircraft. Participating in combat was prohibited by Philippine law.”

“Unofficially?” Joker asked knowingly.

Finch grinned. “Unofficially, we were a little more hands-on.”

Jack pulled up the redacted documents he and Leo had found. “We suspect what they’re up to now is connected to whatever happened that led to their other than honorable discharge, but this was all we could find.”

“You’re not going to find anything else,” Finch said.

“Come on, boys. I don’t have to explain special ops to you.

No paper trails, digital footprints, or evidence of any kind.

No witnesses and no room for failure. This was a complicated, bloody, and ugly battle.

Good Marines were lost. These men were suspected of selling US military weapons to the very terrorists we were sent there to fight.

I had my suspicions, but my hands were tied, and there was insufficient evidence.

Hence, the other than honorable discharge. ”

King sighed. “So it’s safe to say they’re selling illegal weapons to foreign hostiles, shipping them out of Florida ports.”

“That would be my guess,” Finch confirmed.

“These guys are good at what they do. They’ve been doing this for years and haven’t been caught yet, but they’re not invincible.

They lost one of their own. Desperation must have had them replacing their Marine brother with that asshat.

Someone probably vouched for him. They might be regretting their life choices but have adapted.

You said you had a map of the ports where they’ve set up fronts? ”

Jack brought up a map of Florida with the cities and ports Bullard operated out of circled in red. Finch studied it. He tapped his finger against the screen.

“This is where they’re headed.”

“Tampa,” Ryden confirmed.

That made sense. From what they knew, those guys needed to move fast, and with Jacksonville out of the picture, they’d regroup and head for the nearest best thing. Tampa was the biggest port in the state.

Lucky held up a finger. “I don’t understand why they did not just ship their weapons out of Tampa in the first place.

I mean, they are already established there.

If this shipment is so important and they needed to move it fast, why come here?

Why try to establish a connection with such a big company like Connolly Maritime?
”

“That I can’t tell you,” Finch replied with a sigh. “But if they’re taking these kinds of risks, it means they have a reason for not having gone through Tampa in the first place. I think they’re running out of time and have no choice. They’ve also got a head start. So, what’s the plan, fellas?”

The tension returned as several of the guys exchanged glances.

Was Finch serious? Well, someone was getting too big for his britches.

Did he think he could stroll in here and take over?

Just because he'd been a warrant officer, same as King, didn't mean the guys would fall into line and follow him.

Trust had to be earned; as far as Jay was concerned, there was no trust here.

Finch shook his head. "You called me in, so I'm in. I know these guys and how they operate. They are ruthless. You need me." He didn't so much as look in Jay's direction. "Don't roll your eyes at me."

You're not the boss of me . If he wanted to roll his eyes, he'd roll his eyes. "You told us what we needed to know. Thank you very much. Nice to see you, you don't have to go home, but you can't stay here. Wherever home is."

Finch's shit-eating grin had Jay straightening.

"Anastasia Beach."

Jay almost fell out of his chair. What? What? "You're living here ? In St. Augustine?" The last time Jay talked to his brother, he was in Jacksonville, so not far from Jay at all. But when had he moved to St. Augustine? Not that Jay cared. It was none of his business. "How'd you get here so fast?"

Finch shrugged as he leaned back against the wall, hands in his cargo pants pockets. "I was in the area."

Oh, that's some BS right there. Jay narrowed his eyes. "In the area. That's quite the coincidence." That and he could tell his brother was holding something back. Finch's expression always gave him away. Like Ryden, Finch had one of those faces with subtitles. There was no hiding his thoughts.

"Not really. It's hard to live here without coming into the historic district." The

wicked gleam in Finch's eyes didn't bode well, and Jay braced himself. What the hell was going on? Why would Finch move to St. Augustine? It certainly wasn't to be closer to Jay.

"Why are you here?" Jay demanded.

Finch motioned to the room. "You called me, remember?"

"You know what I mean, smartass. Why are you here ? In my town."

"I wasn't aware this was your town, Jaybird, or that I needed my baby brother's permission," Finch replied, sounding amused.

King cleared his throat. "Why don't we all take a break?" He motioned for the rest of the guys to follow him. Everyone except Ryden quickly followed.

Ryden stood, his gaze going from Jay to Finch and back. He was unsure what to do, and Jay was touched that he'd stayed behind to support him.

"I'll be okay," Jay promised. He stood, rounded his shoulders, and narrowed his eyes at Finch. "I need a minute alone with my brother."

Ryden nodded. He glanced at Finch, who winked at him. Winked .

Are you kidding me ?

"Sure." Ryden squeezed Jay's shoulder. "I'll be outside if you need me." Then he disappeared, closing the door to the conference room behind him. Jay pretended he didn't see Finch following Ryden's every move with his eyes or the fact that he had blatantly zoned in on Ryden's ass.

“Why are you here?” Jay repeated, getting right to it.

The sooner they got this over with, the sooner his brother could go on his merry way, and they could pretend they weren’t living in the same city.

Had his brother planned on calling him? Clearly not, since he’d already been around who knew how long and hadn’t reached out. Then again, would Jay have answered?

“I’m working in private security.”

Private security? Everything fell into place. “That’s why you’re in St. Augustine and agreed to help. You want a job. More importantly, you want me to get you a job.”

Finch snorted. “Jaybird, I don’t need you to get me anything.”

“Is that why you’ve been calling me?” Jay demanded, planting his hands on his hips.

“So I could hook you up?” It made sense that his brother would go into private security once he’d completed his service, and knowing his brother as well as he did, Finch would want to work with the best. After all this time of not talking to him, he showed up because he wanted something from Jay? The fucking nerve.

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“No, it’s not why I’ve been calling you. Thanks, by the way, for ignoring my calls.” Finch pushed away from the wall and folded his ridiculously muscled arms over his chest. Somehow, he’d gotten even bigger than Jay remembered. Probably to fit all that ego. Or hot air. Both. Definitely both.

“What were you expecting?” Jay asked. “A happy reunion?”

Finch narrowed his gaze, but Jay was immune to that icy stare. It might have intimidated him as a kid, but things were very different now. “I was expecting my brother to at least pick up the damn phone.”

“Really? After what you did?”

“After what I did?”

What the hell was his brother so damned surprised about? He was the one who’d been an asshole to Jay. “Well, it wasn’t anything I did.”

Finch scoffed. “Of course not. Because the Darling Starling can do no wrong.”

“Ugh, gross. Don’t call me that,” Jay grumbled. “You know how much I hate it.” Which was why Finch did it. Their parents’ high-society friends used to call him that when he was little. “Mom and Dad went along with that stupid name, not thinking about the pressure it put on me.”

“Oh, poor you.” Finch put a hand to his chest, his bottom lip jutted out. “It must have been so hard having everyone’s love and attention, doing whatever you pleased,

knowing everyone would find it just so adorable.”

Jay gritted his teeth. “Go home.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Jaybird. I like your friends.” His grin suggested he more than liked Jay’s friends or, rather, one friend in particular.

“Since when are you into guys?” Jay motioned to Finch’s general person. “What is this? You’re not gay.”

“Really? I didn’t know there was a timeline. And since when is it gay or straight?” Finch snorted. “This from the guy who spent his teen years yelling at me not to put him in a box.”

Damn. He hated when Finch was right. Now Jay was even more pissed off, but Finch didn’t notice.

Finch shrugged. “I’ve been into men and women for years now, Jaybird. I came out as bi before I was discharged. You would have known that if you’d answered my damn calls .”

Jay’s head was about to explode. Finch was bisexual? Was that really why he’d been calling Jay? It didn’t matter. Being bi didn’t change the fact that Finch had been a dick to him for years. Instead of talking to Jay about it, Finch had decided to take his denial and frustration out on Jay.

This was too much. He needed time to process, preferably with a giant, delicious, iced coffee or, better yet, a ginormous glass of wine. Wine would be so much better. In the meantime, though, he had to make one thing very clear to his brother. He jabbed a finger in Finch’s direction.

“Stay away from Ryden.”

“Why?” Finch cocked his head to one side, studying Jay. “You two a thing?”

Jay straightened. “What? Not?—”

“So he’s single.”

“No,” Jay replied through his teeth. What part of fuck off did his brother not understand?

“But you said you weren’t dating. Is he dating someone else?”

“Of course not.”

“So you’re just fucking.”

Jay’s face was suddenly on fire. “No.” Not yet anyway. Jay planned to rectify that very soon.

“Good. So he’s available.”

Dead. Jay was going to murder his brother dead. “If you try anything with him, I will end you,” he growled.

“Ooh.” Finch pretended to cower. “I’m quaking in my boots.”

Jay was not impressed. It was like they were kids all over again. His brother might not have changed when it came to Jay, but Jay had changed plenty. “You should be.”

“I’m not scared of you, Jaybird.”

“You always did underestimate me.”

“Let me guess,” Finch drawled. “You’re gonna sic your little army of Snake Eaters on me. Gotta say, I’m surprised you ended up here, surrounded by guys like me. Thought you’d end up doing makeup or as a flight attendant or something.”

Really? Really ? “I’m done.” Jay spun around and headed for the door. “I need to go home and pack.”

“What?” Finch hurried after him, catching up with him outside on the office floor. The guys were huddled just outside King’s office, talking. They stopped to see what was happening, just like everyone else. Finch did love an audience.

“You’re not going.”

Jay turned, aware that he and his brother were the center of attention, but he didn’t care. He was so done with this macho bullshit. “Excuse me? I’m sorry. Were you under the impression you had any say in this?”

“Damn it, Jaybird.”

“I’m going,” Jay snapped.

“This is not a job for a glorified secretary.”

“The fuck did you just say? First of all, there’s nothing wrong with being a secretary. Second, you have no idea what I do, so fuck off.”

“This isn’t prom,” Finch spat out. “Where you show up in your bedazzled tux with an entourage of cheerleaders and bust out your flash mob routine. These guys are armed and dangerous, using real bullets.”

What . The . Fuck . “Excuse me?”

“All you’re going to do is put yourself and everyone else in danger,” Finch growled. “You’re not made for this.” He threw out a hand to grab Jay’s arm.

Jay didn’t hesitate. He jabbed Finch in the throat. His brother gasped, stumbling back and grabbing his throat. He made a wheezing, gargling sound before he fell back against the wall, his eyes glassy and face red as he stared at Jay, who stepped up to him, poking him in the chest.

“This isn’t high school, Finch. You try your bullshit on me, and I will dropkick your ass.

I’ve taken down bigger guys than you. If you want to stick around, fine, but stay out of my way.

” He leaned in, his voice low. “And stay the fuck away from my man.” Spinning, Jay went to his desk, grabbed his messenger bag, then headed for the elevator, Ryden on his heels.

“I’m going home to pack,” he shouted over his shoulder.

“You can catch me up on the plan later.”

Ryden leaned in. “Your man, huh?”

Jay threw up an index finger.

“Right. Too soon. Mhm. I guess I’ll just?—”

“You’re coming with me,” Jay said, hitting the button for the elevator.

“I am?”

“Yes. We’re going to my condo so I can pack, then we’re going to your house where you’re going to fuck me into the mattress, buy me dinner, and cuddle, not necessarily in that order, no wait.

Yes, in that order.” The elevator doors pinged open, and Jay stepped in.

He turned and held the doors open. Ryden stood blinking at him.

“You coming? I plan to, with or without you.”

Ryden jumped into the elevator. “We’ll take your car. It’s faster.”

“Saint,” King prompted, and Saint came running, stopping the door from closing. He gave them an apologetic smile.

“Sorry, guys, but I gotta.”

Jay stepped around Saint to address King. “I have a Marine!”

“And now you have a Navy SEAL,” King growled. “I will assign you a member of every military branch if I have to. Do not try me.”

“Wait, what’s going on?” Finch wheezed. “Why’s he got a protective detail?”

Jay didn’t wait around to hear more. He narrowed his eyes at Saint. “Fine. But Ryden and I are having sex at some point tonight, so do with that what you will.”

“Roger that.” Saint moved his gaze to Ryden and back, his expression not giving anything away, but Jay was sure the guy’s head was running on all cylinders. If he

hadn't been on the job, he probably would have been giving Ryden hell about how right he'd been.

The elevator doors closed, and Jay was so angry he could scream. Ugh, that asshole ! What were the chances? It wasn't bad enough that he had to call Finch for help on this case, but the jerk was living in the same town and now he was working with him?

"Do ya wanna talk about it?" Ryden asked.

"Nope."

When they got out into the parking lot, Ryden held out his hand. "Keys."

Jay glared at him, and Ryden arched an eyebrow at him.

"Yeah, okay." Jay tossed him his keys. Road rage was not a good look.

He got into his car on the passenger side and fastened his seatbelt.

He crossed his arms over his chest, still fuming.

Saint silently opened the door and slid into the backseat.

"Hey, darlin'?"

Jay turned his head, and Ryden took hold of his chin, leaned over, and kissed him. It was unexpected and sweet. Jay couldn't help but melt into it. He moaned and returned the kiss, feeling his shoulders relax and the anger drain from his body.

Ryden pulled back, brushing his lips over Jay's in the softest kiss that had Jay's heart skipping a beat.

It was a kiss that conveyed so much emotion without uttering a word, a kiss that told Jay they were both falling deeper into each other than they knew what to do with.

Ryden got them moving, and Jay sat back, his lips still tasting of the gorgeous and at times infuriating man next to him.

As Ryden drove, Jay studied him. How had he never noticed the man's perfectly tanned skin, the way his T-shirt stretched over the muscles of his strong arms and chest, or the sexy stubble? He had big hands, long fingers, and...was that a mala bracelet on his right wrist?

"How long have you had that?" Jay asked.

"Had what?"

"The bracelet."

"Oh, uh, Lucky gave it to me after I started at Four Kings. Let me see if I got this right. Hematite, tiger's eye, blue tiger's eye, and lava rock. He said it was for protection and groundin'. There's a lot more to it than that, but that's what stuck the most. Guess 'cause it's what I needed most."

"That was sweet of him," Jay said. "I can't believe I never noticed it before. Guess we were too busy driving each other batshit to pay that kind of attention to detail."

Ryden was uncharacteristically quiet as he bit down on his bottom lip. He glanced at the rearview mirror as if wondering whether he should say anything in front of Saint. What was this now? Jay eyed him.

"Spill."

“Darlin’, I can point out every outfit you’ve worn since I met you.”

Jay stared at him, his cheeks getting hot. “No way.”

“Try me.”

“Name one outfit, and nothing I wore in the last two weeks.”

“Button down white shirt with colorful butterflies, red pants, white socks, and red shoes.”

Jay’s jaw all but hit the floor. That had to be a fluke. “Something I wore last month.”

Ryden pursed his lips. “White button down, pink pants and matching jacket, pink socks and brown shoes.”

“I remember that outfit, and you’re off,” Jay said, feeling smug. “I wore a blue button-down with the pink suit, not white.”

“Ry’s right,” Saint offered from the back seat.

“The reason I remember is because you changed to the blue shirt after Ace stopped in front of your desk with his sandwich, and when he took a bite, a piece of tomato flew out, smacked you in the face, and then fell onto your very white shirt. If looks could kill? Yikes. You changed into the blue, and Ace practically fell over himself running to take your shirt to the dry cleaners.”

“Well, shit. I forgot about that.” Jay’s stomach flipped. He turned his attention back to Ryden. “You paid that much attention to me?”

“From the moment I met you.” His grip tightened and loosened on the steering wheel.

“Sweetheart, you stole my breath away. I thought you were the most beautiful human being I’d ever laid eyes on.”

All this time... “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Ryden stopped at a red light and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

He shrugged. “I wasn’t in a good place. When you smiled at me, all I thought about was how fucked up I was.

Then there was this.” He pointed to his eye.

“I didn’t know you, so I figured you were probably gonna be put off by it.

” He waved a hand. “Anyway, the point is, I thought you were too pretty to want a guy in as rough shape as I was. You deserved better. Besides, I had nothing to offer. Literally.” He wrinkled his nose.

Jay held out his hand, and when Ryden took it, Jay laced their fingers together. “I might not have noticed your bracelet or what you wore, but I do know you’ve come a long way from when we first met, and I’m so proud of you.”

Ryden’s eyes got glassy, and he smiled. “You don’t know how much that means to me.” He turned his face to look at Jay, and Jay leaned over the center console to kiss him.

“I can’t wait for you to make me yours,” Jay murmured before sitting back, Ryden’s fingers still laced with his.

“Why’s this damn light gotta last so damned long?”

Jay laughed. The more he thought about it, the more he agreed with Ryden. Stupid traffic lights. Didn't they know he had a sexy man to get into bed with?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Why weren’t we doing this years ago?” Ryden asked, breathless as he and Jay mauled each other’s mouths while simultaneously attempting to make their way to Ryden’s bedroom without injuring themselves. Good thing Ryden was a multitasker.

Thankfully, it hadn’t taken Jay long to pack back at his condo because he kept several bags ready since part of his job included traveling at a moment’s notice should the Kings need him.

The entire ride over, the heat and need growing between them had threatened to drive Ryden over the edge.

All he could think about was getting Jay naked.

“Because we were too busy avoiding our feelings,” Jay replied against Ryden’s mouth. “So all that pent-up sexual tension turned into frustration, and instead of having hot sex, we threw books at each other.”

“You threw books at me,” Ryden reminded him. “I just kept them.”

Jay hummed, his lips wet and swollen from Ryden’s kisses.

“We can discuss it later.” He tossed Ryden’s shirt off to one side and ran his hands down his chest with a low moan that went straight to Ryden’s dick.

“Do you know how often I tried not to stare at this body when you were downstairs

working out?”

“Is that so?” Ryden loved how desperate Jay was for him.

He was still trying to wrap his head around it.

But now was not the time. If Jay wanted to be fucked into the mattress, Ryden would happily oblige.

His best friend had settled into the guest bedroom with the door closed, where he wouldn't hear Ryden making a mess out of Jay.

He had no doubt Saint was going to burst into gloating mode at some point, but that was tomorrow's problem.

By the time they reached the bedroom, they were both naked and painfully hard. “Fuck, you're gorgeous.”

Before Jay could say another word, Ryden shut the bedroom door, spun Jay around, bent him over the end of the mattress, and dropped to his knees behind Jay.

“What are you?—?”

Ryden parted Jay's cheeks and speared his hole with his tongue, moaning when Jay jumped and let out a string of what sounded like curses.

Hard to tell since all his words came out jumbled together.

Ryden dug his fingers into the round globes of Jay's ass as he took his fill, loving the way Jay pleaded for Ryden to fuck him.

He slid his hands over all that soft, smooth skin, up his back, and with his chest pressed to Jay's back, he whispered in Jay's ear.

"Tell me what you want, darlin', and it's yours."

"That depends," Jay said, breathless.

"On what?"

"On whether I'm the only one you're going to have sex with."

Ryden swallowed hard and nodded, even though Jay couldn't see him do it. There was nothing he wanted more. "I'd like that."

"Then I want you, all of you, and only you."

Ryden was stupidly happy, and he couldn't stop smiling. "You got me, darlin'. I'm all yours."

"No condoms."

Jay's words surprised the hell out of him.

"You sure?"

"Is there a reason we shouldn't? We just had our quarterly tests. I'm negative. I've never...I've never done this with anyone. No condoms, I mean."

"Same on all accounts, sweetheart," Ryden replied. Even during his most challenging years, he'd been careful. He placed a kiss just under Jay's ear, loving the way he shivered. "Don't move."

“I thought I was the bossy one,” Jay teased as Ryden went to his nightstand and grabbed the lube.

“Baby, you can boss me around anytime, anywhere.” Ryden flicked open the cap to the lube. “Move up the bed and lie down on your back.”

Jay looked at him over his shoulder, his brows drawn together in confusion.

“I want to see your beautiful face when I wreck that sweet little hole of yours.”

With a whimper, Jay quickly moved up the bed and lay on his back, his knees bent and his hand stroking his gorgeous cock, precome glistening from the tip.

Damn, no one made Ryden as hard and desperate as Jay.

He got on the bed, spreading Jay’s knees to position himself between them.

Jay handed him a pillow and lifted his hips for Ryden to put it under his ass.

A part of him still couldn’t believe this was happening.

He poured lube onto his fingers, rubbed them together to warm it up, before he pressed a finger against Jay’s hole.

Jay moaned and threw his head back, eyes closed, as Ryden gently stretched him, using one finger at first, then two until Jay was writhing beneath him, ready to come apart.

“Please, Ry.”

“Please, what?” Ryden asked, his voice throaty and low from the intensity of his

arousal.

“Please put your big dick inside me. I need to feel you inside me.” Jay’s brow was beaded with sweat, his cheeks flushed, his pink lips wet from running his tongue over them.

“Whatever you want,” Ryden promised, placing the tip of his cock against Jay’s hole and slowly pushing.

“Fuck,” Jay gasped. He grabbed fistfuls of the blanket and nodded. “More.”

Ryden sank himself in at a torturously slow pace, but he wasn’t about to hurt Jay. As soon as his groin was up against Jay’s ass, he started moving.

“Oooh, f-f-fuck yes.” Jay arched his back, and Ryden lifted Jay’s legs, putting them over his shoulders so he could lean over Jay and hold him in place. He drove himself into Jay’s ass deep and hard, the noises Jay made urging him on.

“You feel so fuckin’ good,” Ryden growled, his body on fire as the room filled with the sounds of their bodies coming together, their curses, moans, and groans.

He slipped his fingers into Jay’s hair, grabbing fistfuls of it as he covered Jay’s lush mouth with his and kissed the ever-loving fuck out of him until they both gasped for air.

Jay reached between them to get himself off as Ryden lost any rhythm he’d had, his orgasm building inside him.

“Ry!” Jay dug his nails into Ryden’s shoulders, the sting and feel of hot come between their stomachs sent Ryden’s orgasm roaring through him, and he buried his face in Jay’s neck as he slammed his hips against Jay’s ass, coming into that tight

heat, claiming Jay as his own.

Fuck, Jay was his now. His body trembled, and he lay on Jay for a heartbeat, their bodies locked together in a tangle of legs, sweat, and come.

When he was in danger of falling asleep, he carefully pulled out of Jay. Jay was pouting.

“What’s wrong?”

“We’re both assholes,” Jay muttered. “We could have been doing this years ago. Years .”

Ryden chuckled. He moved Jay’s plastered hair away from his face. “The wait makes it all the sweeter.” Jay arched an eyebrow at him, as if he were full of shit, and Ryden laughed. “Okay, yeah. But we’re here now.” He brushed his lips over Jay’s. “And, baby, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Jay’s smile did what it always did: steal his breath. “Same.”

Ryden shook his head and popped a quick kiss on Jay’s lips. “Let’s go shower before I say somethin’ that has you runnin’ for the door.” He made to get up when Jay cupped his cheek. Ryden moved his gaze to meet Jay’s, and what he saw had him both hopeful and terrified.

“You mean something like, I think I’m falling in love with you?”

Had he just heard what he thought he heard? Ryden could pretend that wasn’t the case or deny it until the cows came home, but his heart was done with his bullshit.

Ryden’s breath hitched, and he nodded. “Yeah, somethin’ like that.

Fuck, Jay. I know we kinda did all this in the wrong order, but it's us, so no big surprise there.

Fuck it. I love you. At some point in the last six years, I fell in love with you and convinced myself it was somethin' else.

The reason I was such a dick that night at the tavern was because I was jealous. ”

Jay stared at him. “What?”

“I was jealous you were gonna go home with one of those guys, so I went all caveman, marchin’ over to you and makin’ an ass out of myself. I wanted to punch every one of those asshats.”

Jay’s expression softened. “We’re quite the pair, aren’t we?” He brushed his fingers through Ryden’s hair. “And in case you need to hear it. I love you, too.” He pulled Ryden down and kissed him until the air conditioner made him shiver. “Come on. Let’s take a warm shower.”

Ryden rolled off Jay and sat up, smiling when Jay wrapped his arms around Ryden’s neck from behind and kissed his cheek. “You realize we’re gonna walk into a whole lot of smug when we leave this room.”

“This room? Try the whole office. Trust me, I know,” Jay grumbled. “Joshua’s going to be singing ‘I told you so’ for years to come.”

Ryden chuckled and stood, allowing Jay to get up. He couldn’t help himself, and he drew Jay into his arms. “We might have a problem.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m strugglin’ real hard to keep my hands and mouth off you.”

Jay hummed, and he stood on his toes and brushed his lips over Ryden’s. “Doesn’t sound like a problem to me.”

“Come on, Trouble.” Ryden pulled Jay along with him into his bathroom. His heart had never been so whole. They took their time, kissing and caressing each other as they washed up.

When they were done, Ryden lent Jay some pajamas and ordered everyone food.

Saint thanked them for the food and the offer to stay in the living room with them, and then went to his room.

The twinkle in his eyes told Ryden that his best friend was giving them their space so they could be all ridiculously lovey-dovey without an audience, and Ryden appreciated that.

They curled up on the couch together while eating and watching TV.

Afterward, Jay sat with his bare feet up on the footrest and Ryden stretched out on the sofa, his head in Jay’s lap as Jay ran his fingers through Ryden’s hair.

He’d never been more at ease. So, of course, his past bubbled up looking for fuckery. He sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Jay asked softly as he continued to run his fingers through Ryden’s hair.

“The reason I have a prepper’s pantry isn’t ’cause we live in Florida.”

“Oh?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:30 am

“It’s ‘cause I spent several years livin’ on the streets, not knowin’ where my next meal was comin’ from, if at all, which developed into a scarcity mindset. Dr. Bradbury helped me work through it so I feel like I’m prepared enough to feel safe, but not enough where I obsess over it.”

Jay’s hand stilled, and he was so quiet that Ryden sat up to find Jay turned away from him.

“Sweetheart?”

Jay shook his head, and Ryden shifted closer, leaning forward. “Jay, please look at me,” he said gently, taking Jay’s hand in his. With a sniff, Jay faced forward, and Ryden was surprised by the tears. “Hey, now. What’s all this for?” He pulled Jay onto his lap and wiped Jay’s cheek with his thumb.

“I can’t believe...” Jay shook his head and let out a frustrated growl. “I can’t believe, after everything you gave, after losing your eyesight while serving, that you were on the streets going hungry. What the fuck, Ry? It makes me so angry. Fuck them.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Ryden said, wiping Jay’s other cheek. “You deserve to know everything. I don’t want there to be any secrets between us, and what I went through played a big part in makin’ me the man I am today.”

Jay nodded. “I understand, and I want to know, no matter how difficult it is to hear. Thank you for trusting me with this.”

“To be honest, I’ve been wantin’ to talk to you about it for a long time, but there was

never a good time.

It's not like I could just stroll on over to your desk one mornin' and be all, 'Oh, by the way, before I tried to kill Mason Cooper and then myself, I was livin' on the streets.

Nice bow tie.' It wasn't exactly casual conversation. ”

Jay's eyes were huge, tears welling again, and Ryden realized what he'd said. Shit . That was not the way he'd planned on telling Jay.

“You...you tried to... When was this?”

“The night I accidentally shot Mason. Well, you know. Accidentally but not accidentally.”

Jay stared at him, heartache and uncertainty in his big blue eyes, but Ryden had to push through. If Jay wanted him, all of him, then he had to know.

“A lot happened before I ended up in Florida. My mom passed, and I missed her funeral 'cause I was on a RECON mission.

Then there was the trainin' accident where I lost my vision.

Anyway, after recoverin' from that and bein' discharged, I couldn't find a job and eventually lost everything, including my apartment.

I was too ashamed and too proud to ask for help.

Most of all, I was angry, so angry, and one day, I found a target for that anger. ”

“Mason,” Jay murmured, cupping Ryden’s cheek. Ryden leaned into the touch, basking in the way it soothed his soul.

“I was drownin’ in darkness, sweetheart, with no way out in sight.

I’d lost all hope, and I blamed Mason for everything that had happened to me, but when I tried to shoot him, I realized I couldn’t do it.

” Ryden closed his eyes, the images of that night seared into his brain.

Jay knew some of what happened with Mason, but Ryden still had to get it all out.

“When Mason ended up shot, that was it. I’d hurt a good man, and...

I thought that was it. Seekin’ revenge kept me going, and that was gone now, too.

What was left? I went up on deck and walked to the front of the boat.

Lucky followed me. I told him I was sorry and put the gun to my head.

He tackled me just as it went off. I broke then.

” He shook his head. The shame and guilt were gone, thanks to years of therapy, but the pain of knowing he could have succeeded still hurt his heart.

“I used to have nightmares of where I would have ended up if Mason and the guys hadn’t taken me in. ”

Jay straddled his lap and hugged him. With a sigh that went down to his core, Ryden wrapped his arms around Jay and buried his face in Jay’s neck.

This was what his heart needed, what he needed.

Jay had never judged him, no matter how bad their little feud got or what words they flung at each other over the years; Jay had never seen Ryden as less than.

“Thank you,” Ryden murmured against Jay’s skin.

“For what?”

“For being you. For listenin’ and not judgin’.”

Jay pulled back and stroked Ryden’s cheek with his thumb. “What happened to you breaks my heart, and I wish you could have been spared all that hardship and pain. You haven’t... I mean, since then, you haven’t wanted to...hurt yourself, have you?”

Ryden covered Jay’s hand with his and turned his face to kiss Jay’s palm.

“No, darlin’. Things are very different now.

I have a great therapist who gave me the tools I needed to heal.

She showed me how to accept help when I needed it and how to ask for help.

I have a family now, people who love me, who would be there at the drop of a hat, ready to go to war for me. ”

“I would go to war for you,” Jay said softly.

Ryden’s smile couldn’t get any wider. “I love how fearless you are.” He knew Jay wouldn’t like what came next, but Ryden had to try. He ran his fingers through Jay’s hair. “Darlin’, are you sure you need to go to Tampa?”

Jay's brows drew together, his frown deep. He opened his mouth to reply when Ryden stopped him.

"Before you go gettin' your feathers ruffled, please understand that my worry comes from a place of love. We don't know what's gonna happen down there, and if you were to get hurt or worse... Baby, I would never forgive myself."

"Why? If something happens, I'm the one who made the decision. Not you. You have nothing to feel guilty about."

"I would because I'd tell myself I could've done more. I could've done somethin' to keep you here, safe."

Jay shook his head, his lips pressed together. "That's not fair, Ry."

"I know. Neither would it be fair to lose you after I just got you."

Jay got off Ryden's lap, and Ryden sighed. He had a feeling this was going to happen, but he gave Jay his space and let him say his part.

"And what about you?" Jay asked, crossing his arms over his chest. "What if something happens to you, and I'm over here and can't even see you?"

I know you're a Marine, but you work in Risk Assessment, Ry.

You're not out there being shot at all the time, and you sure as hell aren't fighting other Marines, and murderers at that. "

"True," Ryden replied, standing. He tried to pull Jay into his arms, but Jay wasn't having any of it, shaking his head and turning away. "Come on, love." He wrapped his arms around Jay and leaned in to rest his chin on Jay's shoulder. "Help me find a

compromise here.”

Jay sighed. He turned and slipped his arms around Ryden’s waist. “King’s going to have a base of operations set up somewhere. What if I promise to stay there?”

There was no hesitation. “Deal.” This was as good as it was going to get, and he’d take it.

If it meant Jay was away and safe from these guys, even if he were in the same city, he’d take that over Jay following their every move and risking his safety. Hopefully, they could keep Finch away from Jay. The last thing they needed to worry about was the brothers being at each other’s throats.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Port Tampa Bay wasn't the largest container port in Florida, but it was the largest in terms of area.

It was also a major cruise port. Thankfully, the cruise terminals were located on the north side, while the container terminal was situated to the south.

In between were various businesses, ranging from home renovations to construction, which meant parked vans and trucks everywhere, with people coming and going at all hours.

Setting up a base of operations in the middle of the night in one of the container yards would have been impossible, what with the guarded security gates, if it weren't for their resident hacker and cybersecurity expert.

Jack initiated a distraction by setting off a false but well-timed radiological detection alarm at the port authority, which prompted the night guards to take action.

They probably weren't too concerned with anyone getting in because there would be no one there to lower the retractable traffic barriers.

As soon as the guards stepped away, Jack lowered the barriers and initiated the looped surveillance footage, taking care of any cameras that might have caught sight of the enormous black surveillance van concealing a cyber command center and nine men dressed in black from head to toe.

They parked near a construction company, among several large vehicles and containers, blending in seamlessly.

“I don’t like this,” King muttered, his beefy arms crossed over his chest. “Tell me again why you’re not at the hotel?”

Jay wasn’t about to back down. “Because Ryden and I made a deal. I could come along if I promised to stay in the van.”

Ace, Lucky, Jack, Joker, King, and Finch glared at Ryden, as if it was his fault Jay was along for the ride. Ryden flipped them off.

“Oh, screw all y’all. Don’t act like any of y’all woulda been able to do better.”

None of them could argue with that, so they turned back to King.

Finch snorted. “I’m more surprised he didn’t show up in an outfit you could see from space.”

“No one asked for your opinion,” Jay spat, ignoring his brother’s amused chuckle. Just like the rest of the guys, Jay had dressed in a black Henley, tactical pants, and boots. Did his brother really believe Jay would show up for an op dressed in a fuchsia paisley suit? Ass.

“Moving on,” King grumbled.

After some recon and digital tracking, Jack confirmed the ex-Marines were going to make their move tonight.

As a precaution, everyone’s significant others agreed to stay with Colton until all this was over.

Mason, Red, and Chip provided indoor protection while several more security agents were posted on the property.

As much as King would have liked to notify the FBI or the Department of Homeland Security about what was going down tonight, he was familiar with their procedures and how long it would take to navigate the bureaucratic red tape necessary to set up an operation once they had sufficient evidence to warrant it.

The surveillance van was equipped with everything they might need, including monitors connected to drones, which Jack planned to use to locate their targets. On one side of the van wall was a large touchscreen displaying a map of the port.

“There are several cargo ships docked around the port, but I’m looking at this one here near the cement terminal.

” King drew a circle around one of the ships with his finger, highlighting it on the screen.

He tapped the small PDF icon in the corner, and it opened up to a cargo manifest. “This ship is carrying thirty thousand tons of cement. Each pallet carries sixty-four bags of cement weighing ninety-four pounds and is securely wrapped in both stretch-hood packaging and waterproof hoods. This ship is cleared to leave at 0500 hours.”

“Where’s it headed?” Ryden asked.

“Cartagena, Columbia.”

Joker sighed. “That’s our ship.”

“How do you know?” Jay asked.

King pointed at the map. “That’s a refrigerated ship taking food to Canada.” He moved his finger to another ship on the map. “That one is taking crude oil to India, and that one is taking lime to Japan. Also, the cement cargo ship is the only one scheduled to leave within their time frame.”

Jack held up a finger. “I also found some last-minute staff changes for that particular ship.”

“If they planned it right,” Ace pitched in, “and moved quickly, they could have replaced cement bags with weapons crates and rewrapped the pallets. All they had to do was maintain the same weight as the original manifest. They’ve probably paid off some of the staff and have guys waiting on the other side. ”

Which reminded Jay. “I still don’t get why they didn’t just use this port to begin with.”

“Whatever the reason,” King said, “their hand has been forced and they’re desperate, which makes them dangerous. Comms in.” Everyone secured their earpieces in place. “Radio check.”

“Loud and clear,” everyone replied.

King grabbed his tactical vest. “Gear up. Remember, disarm and detain. No casualties. Keep an eye out for civilians and port security, not to mention anyone these guys could have paid to help them.”

Lucky turned to Ace, his gaze narrowed. “Try not to fall off the ship and almost die this time, bro.”

Finch looked from Lucky to Ace and back. “You fellas end up on cargo ships a lot?”

“It’s a long story,” Ace grumbled.

King, Ace, Lucky, Joker, Jack, Saint, Ryden, and Finch strapped into their tactical vests and geared up, including helmets with night vision. They looked like they were going to war. Then again, they were going up against a tight-knit team of ex-Marines, so maybe they were.

“Saint, you’re with me,” King said. “Lucky with Ace; Jack, you’re with Joker; Marines, you get to be battle buddies. Let’s get moving.” King opened the van’s back doors and jumped out, the rest lining up to do the same.

Ryden turned to Jay, his smile gorgeous, and a lump formed in Jay’s throat. Not caring who saw, Jay cupped Ryden’s face, stood on his toes, and kissed him. When he pulled back, he met Ryden’s gaze.

“If you get hurt, so help me, I will read every one of my romance novels out loud to you.”

Ryden chuckled. “Darlin’, I’ve already read them.”

Jay blinked at him. “What?”

“All the books you threw at me that I kept? I read them.”

“You did?” Jay’s heart did a little happy dance. “Why?”

Ryden shrugged. “It was something you enjoyed. Guess it was my way of feelin’ close to you, even if I never woulda admitted it to myself.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Finch grumbled. “Can’t you two be all disgustingly romantic some other time?”

Jay glared at his brother. “Don’t make me throat punch you again.”

Finch threw his gloved hands up in surrender and turned away.

“Gotta go,” Ryden said, kissing Jay’s cheek. “Stay in the van like you promised. You’re on intel. If anything looks suspicious, report it just as we discussed during recon, and if you’re about to be compromised in any way, drive like a bat outta hell. We’ll catch up when it’s safe. Be back soon.”

Jay nodded, then remembered something. “Oh wait!” He reached into one of the large pockets of his tactical pants and pulled out his fuzzy little green friend.

Ryden’s smile was huge. “I named him Pascal. He’s going to look after you.

” Jay tucked the pipe cleaner chameleon into one of Ryden’s pockets on his tactical vest.

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to bring him back to you.” Ryden jumped down to join the others, rolling his eyes when Ace, Lucky, Joker, Jack, and Saint quietly teased him.

Jay grabbed his brother’s sleeve. Finch turned, his gaze questioning. “Please keep him safe.”

Finch’s expression softened. “Sure thing, Jaybird.”

“And, um, you stay safe too, okay?”

“Careful there.” Finch winked at him. “Someone might get the impression you care about me.” He didn’t give Jay time to reply, just jumped down and closed the van doors.

“I do care about you,” Jay murmured. He and his brother might have a lot of unsettled issues to work through, but that didn’t mean Jay didn’t care what happened to him. With a heavy sigh, he dropped down into one of the chairs at the security console.

Well, this sucked.

Jay hated that the guys were all out there, risking their lives to catch these bastards, and all Jay could do was watch.

Supposedly, he was there to provide intel and offer support from the van, but Jack’s cybersecurity vans weren’t like any other surveillance vans.

The damned things were so high tech that they had minds of their own.

It was cool yet creepy. It also meant Jay didn’t have much to do because the van did it for him.

Several screens were laid out in front of him. One of the screens was divided into eight feeds, four on the top and four on the bottom. Each feed belonged to a camera that the guys wore on their vests, similar to those worn by police officers.

Another screen showed an aerial view with infrared imaging of the guys, thanks to one of Jack’s drones, which was controlled by the van.

It had also hijacked several of the port security feeds so that only they could see what was going on, giving Jay a good visual of the area surrounding the cargo ship and container yard.

The second drone was in stealth mode and scanning the cargo ship.

All of it connected to the small tablet Jack had in his hands.

“I swear, if you start talking, I’m outta here,” he muttered at the console, side-eyeing it. “I’ve watched enough movies to know it’s all going to lead to an uprising, and I’m too pretty for post-apocalyptic fashion.”

And he was talking to a computer. Thankfully, it didn’t respond.

The guys moved in pairs, rifles at the ready, using hand signals as they went. Jay had observed them during various training exercises over the years, so seeing them move like a unit wasn’t new. The Kings and Wild Cards were always perfectly in sync because they had been a unit.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:30 am

With so many security agents at Four Kings Security being former military personnel, the Kings ensured that agents could work together as one, regardless of the branch they'd served under.

That didn't mean that when agents of the same branch ended up working together, they didn't fall back into moving as a unit.

Despite Ryden and Finch never having served together, they moved together like they'd been doing it for years. Jay followed Ryden on the screen, tapping the keyboard to adjust the surveillance cameras for a better view.

"Jay," Jack said over their comms.

"Yes?" Jay sat up straight, ready to spring into action. "I'm here, what do you need?"

"For you to stop touching the cameras. I need to be able to see something other than your boyfriend."

Oops . "Sorry." Jay quickly tapped the keyboard, and all the cameras returned to their previous position.

"Does that mean you two are dating?" Finch asked. "Or?—"

"Yes, Finch," Jay hissed. "We're dating. He's my boyfriend."

"Aw," Lucky cooed. "Look at Ry's face. You just made him so happy, Jay."

“It’s about freaking time,” Joker muttered.

“Approaching the container yard,” King said, and everyone fell silent.

Jay stared at the monitors, heart pounding as the guys approached the container yard near the ship, moving like shadows in the darkness.

King silently motioned to each pairing, and they split up.

The infrared on the drone feed lit up the screen with their movement.

Wait. There were more than eight heat signatures.

Jay leaned closer. “Guys,” he murmured, “there’s a new heat signature. Three o’clock from Ryden and Finch.”

“I see it,” Jack replied in his ear. “Could be a port worker.”

The figure moved quickly between containers, crouching low and taking cover. “Yeah, I don’t think it’s a civilian.”

King spoke up. “Finch, Ryden, possible hostile approaching your location. Proceed with caution.”

“Roger that,” Finch and Ryden replied.

The camera on Finch’s vest shook as he took cover behind a stack of pallets. Ryden’s camera moved in unison, both of them readying for possible engagement.

Jay’s fingers hovered over the keyboard, ready to switch up the views should he need it. The figure he’d spotted moved again, then split into two. What the hell?

“Shit,” Jay breathed. “You’ve got two possible hostiles, not one.”

“Confirmed,” King said. “Joker, Jack, shift position. Saint, swing wide on the right. We’ve got company.”

Jay’s heart was in his throat, and he couldn’t stop his knee from bouncing.

This was excruciating. How did Jack do this?

Surveillance was clearly not for Jay. He was ready to start pacing.

Ryden and Finch stayed put, waiting as the figures approached, inching closer.

The tension was about to give Jay heart palpitations.

Then there was a burst of motion. Oh shit!

Gunfire crackled in Jay’s ears, loud even through the filtered mics. The feed on Ryden’s camera jolted as he dove behind a container, bullets sparking off the metal. Finch shouted something Jay didn’t catch, then fired his weapon.

Jay jumped to his feet. Relax . Ry’s okay .

This is what he does, remember? Jay took a deep breath, centered himself, and refocused.

He couldn’t freak out every time he thought Ryden was in danger.

The man had been working in private security for six years, and although most of his work involved risk assessment, he was occasionally assigned to large events that required a significant security presence.

Finch took down one of the shooters when Ryden darted out from the shadows and swept the leg of the second guy in one fluid motion, then slammed the butt of his rifle into the guy's face. They rendered the men unconscious.

"Targets down," Ryden's voice came over their comms, slightly winded as he zip-tied the guy's wrists and ankles, Finch doing the same. "We're good."

Jay fell back into his seat. "You scared the crap out of me," he muttered, though he knew Ryden couldn't hear him directly.

"It's not our guys," Finch confirmed. "Looks like they've hired some help."

Great. More movement drew Jay's attention. The drone picked up another cluster of heat signatures at the far end of the yard, opposite the guys. Jay tapped the screen.

"We've got movement," Jack said. "Four signatures. Looks like they're carrying something."

King made a low sound. "Roger that. It could be them. Let's move."

Jay switched feeds again, pulling up Saint's and King's cameras.

King crouched low, Saint beside him, both of them advancing toward the next row of containers.

The camera jittered slightly with each footstep, and Jay swallowed hard.

He hated this. Waiting, watching the people he loved step into danger while he sat in the damn van.

He also had to accept that Ryden was right.

Jay wasn't a Marine. Hell, he wasn't any kind of soldier.

He had no military experience. Working as an executive assistant to a team of Green Berets had taught him a hell of a lot over the years, but that didn't change the fact that he was five feet four inches and weighed one hundred thirty pounds.

These guys could bench press him with one hand tied behind their backs.

His family was out there risking their lives to stop dangerous men from hurting anyone else.

The last thing Jay wanted was to put anyone in danger, so no matter how difficult it was, he did as promised and stayed put.

The second drone continued to sweep the deck of the cargo ship and the containers.

The angle shifted, and Jay spotted an open cargo container.

Several of the cement pallets were outside and unwrapped.

Someone dressed in black combat attire from head to toe rounded the corner, driving a forklift carrying an empty pallet.

He set it down, then jumped out before quickly loading the cement bags onto the empty pallet.

In the container yard, four figures, dressed identically, carried a large crate.

Jay assumed it was their five ex-Marines, though with the balaclavas they wore, it was impossible to know for sure.

Jay tapped his comms. “You’ve got one target moving cement bags. The others are likely heading his way.” Jay zoomed in, spotting a crate near the pallet. “Weapons crates.” He scanned the length of the ship. The rest of the containers were closed. “I think they might be finishing up.”

“Let’s move,” King ordered. “Jay, can we make it up the gangway before the hostiles on the ground see us?”

“If you move fast. They’re using the containers to stay hidden, so it should give you the cover you need to get up there before they do. I’ll let you know when they head down one of the bays. Get ready.”

“Roger that,” King replied.

Jay’s eyes were glued to the screen and the heat signatures as they moved between the containers. Considering how they were moving in and out between the bays, they most likely believed they were evading security cameras. They exited one bay and turned down another. “Now!”

The guys moved fast and stealthily, running up the gangway of the cargo ship, their all-black uniforms helping them blend in against the ship. Ryden and Finch had taken up the rear and were still on the gangway when the figures carrying the crate were about to exit another bay.

“Move your asses, Marines,” Jay hissed at Ryden and Finch. They’d just made it onto the deck when the men carrying the crate appeared. Jay slumped back in his chair, his pulse racing. That had been way too close a call.

The guys moved in formation, heading to the farthest side of the container stack, as it was more likely the men carrying the weapons crate would take the right, which was the shortest route to their teammate.

Movement caught Jay's eye, and he turned his attention to the screen showing the second drone's feed.

It descended to a lower altitude, moving through two of the container bays.

It wasn't supposed to get so close, and it continued to get closer.

The thing dropped, then hovered. Something was wrong.

Before he could tell Jack, one of the men removed a gun from his holster and fired.

"Son of a bitch," Jack growled. "Drone two is down."

"What the hell happened?" King asked.

"I don't know. It started to lose control before one of them shot it. They have to have a jammer."

"Goddammit," Joker hissed. "They know their cover's blown."

The heat signatures scattered. The ex-Marines were on the move.

"They split into twos," Jay said.

"They won't make it far," King replied over their comms.

There had to be something Jay could do. He tapped at the keyboard, searching for a command prompt.

Self-defense wasn't the only skill he'd picked up at Four Kings Security in the twelve years he'd worked there.

He might not be a hacker or cybersecurity agent, but he'd trained enough with Jack to have a basic understanding of their cybersecurity intelligence system.

Jay's fingers flew over the keyboard, and he found all the devices their system had control over. He opened the prompt for the yard's floodlight system. With a final keystroke, the lights over the container yard blazed to life, spotlighting the ex-Marines who'd ducked between containers.

"Nice work, Jay," King said. "Let's go get 'em."

Gunfire erupted again, and Ryden's camera feed rocked with motion as he sprinted between two stacks of containers. Finch followed, covering him. Seconds later, Joker's camera showed one of the ex-Marines being tackled.

One by one, the guys took down the remaining team and restrained them. Jay kept his eyes on the feeds, shifting views, scanning heat signatures, keeping them all in sight. He didn't realize how tense he was until King called out, "All clear."

Jay sagged back in his chair. It was over.

Why wasn't he relieved? He should have been thrilled.

Instead, he had a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Something doesn't feel right," he murmured.

It was too easy. The ex-Marines had gone down with very little fight.

Jay opened his mouth to ask King if everything was alright when a crackle of static tore through the comms. "What the hell?"

“All teams, hold positions and check targets,” King said, his voice sharp and tense.

“Shit,” Ryden growled. “It’s not them.”

King grabbed the collar of one of their captives. “Where are the men who hired you?”

Nothing.

“Answer him,” Ryden replied through his teeth.

“I hope you kissed your boyfriend goodbye before you left.”

Jay’s heart stuttered, and he jumped to his feet. He tapped away at the keyboard, bringing up the external cameras. Three figures dressed in black and wearing balaclavas approached the van. Oh god. They were coming for him .

“Everyone else, let’s move,” King ordered. “Jay, we’re heading your way.”

Jay’s heart hammered as he hurried to the front of the van, intent on getting the hell out of there just like Ryden had instructed. But before he could make it, there was a loud bang on the roof, then a metal clang against the side. What the hell was that?

“Aw, did your boyfriend leave you all alone?” One of the men called out. Jay froze. He recognized that voice. It was the guy who’d caught him in the stairwell. Walton. “How about you let us keep you company? I promise we’ll treat you better.”

“Ry...” Jay’s voice cracked. He was trapped.

“I’m comin’ for ya, sweetheart, just hold on,” Ryden said tightly. “You do whatever you gotta do to keep them from gettin’ their hands on you. You hear me?”

Something slid across the top of the van. Metal on metal. Now what? A familiar hiss followed, and Jay's eyes went huge. Smoke began to pour in through the ventilation system.

"Gas!" Jay coughed and scrambled to the equipment locker.

He put his hand to the security panel, and it unlocked.

Coughing, he reached for one of the emergency masks and a Glock.

Fuck. He could barely see, his eyes stinging and watery.

Breathing became a chore, and his body grew heavy.

He was so dizzy, but he managed to get the mask on over his face.

Sucking in a deep breath, Jay took the safety off the gun.

He struggled to raise the Glock, but he managed to push through.

The sound of an engine roared, and Jay turned, intent on stumbling for the back doors when a blinding light engulfed the van, followed by an earth-shattering boom that rocked the van sideways, throwing Jay against the console.

"Jay!" Ryden's voice was panicked, but he sounded so far away.

Jay's ears rang as he hit the floor, the lights around him flickering, or maybe it was his vision.

It was as if he were swimming in murky waters, unable to tell which end was up.

With a groan, he forced himself to roll over onto his side.

He had to get up. Jay threw out a hand, searching for the gun, but he was grabbed and flung over someone's shoulder before he could find it.

“Ry?”

“Don't worry. You'll see your man soon enough. Too bad it won't be for very long.”

Darkness came and swallowed him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

How the hell had this happened?

Jay's voice echoed in Ryden's head, the way he'd called for Ryden, the fear. This wasn't supposed to happen. Fire and smoke exploded into the night sky, and Ryden's heart stopped. What the hell? Was that...? Fuck . His blood turned to ice, and a lump formed in his throat. They blew up the van.

Jay .

Ryden didn't wait for the others. He flung the strap of his rifle across his chest and bolted, not caring about breaking formation, being out in the open, or being shot at.

It went against every instinct, every bit of training he'd had, but his heart was in the driver's seat.

He jumped off the bottom of the gangway and took off again, sprinting across the container yard.

His thoughts raced, all kinds of horrific images invading his brain, but he shoved them out, refusing to accept any of them to be true. He had to get to the van, to Jay.

“Ryden, wait!”

Finch wasn't far behind, but Ryden couldn't stop.

His ears rang, and the voices in his comms sounded muffled, as if underwater, which was fitting since Ryden felt like he was drowning.

All he could focus on was getting to the man he'd lost his heart to, a man who could make him laugh, sing, and growl in frustration at the same time. He couldn't lose Jay.

When Ryden agreed to let Jay come along, he refused to go down the path of what-if scenarios.

Even knowing the likelihood the assholes had hired help, there had been no evidence to suggest they wouldn't be busy with their product considering their desperation and last-minute scramble.

Besides, it's not like they would have known Jay would be there. Even if they had, why go after him?

The container yard blurred around him, and shouts from King and the others echoed in his ears. Ryden's lungs burned, but nothing mattered except reaching that van. He had to believe Jay was alive.

Please, darlin'. Be alive.

When the smoke cleared enough to reveal the scorched shell of the surveillance van, Ryden skidded to a halt.

The doors were blown halfway off, and the side was crushed in, like something had tried to plow through it.

Glass littered the ground, and the smell of scorched plastic and electronics threatened to choke him.

“Jay?” Ryden’s voice was a whisper, and the back of his eyes stung. Please, don’t let him be in there. “Sweetheart?”

No answer. Not that there would be.

Ryden forced his body into action, rushing to the back of what remained of the van and wrenched open the remaining door. Inside, the red emergency lights pulsed, and a couple of the screens flickered. One of the chairs had been torn from its base, but the scorched console was mostly intact.

The equipment locker was open, and a gas mask lay on the floor along with a Glock. Ryden climbed in and crouched down to pick up the mask. He couldn’t help his shaky smile. Jay had intended to go down fighting.

Instead, he’d been taken.

“Those sons of bitches.” Ryden wiped at his eyes as he stood. He was going to hunt them down, and once he had Jay safely back in his arms, he would make them pay.

“Ryden!” Finch’s voice crackled through the comms. “Where the hell are—Damn.” He stood outside the doors, the color draining from his face. “Tell me he’s not...”

“He ain’t here,” Ryden murmured, standing. “Jay’s gone.” He shook his head and tried to get a hold of himself. “ Fuck !” He slammed the mask onto the floor. “I should have made him stay home, tied him to a fucking chair or something.”

“Come on, man,” Finch said quietly, climbing in after him. “You know my stubborn baby brother. He would have found a way to be here. This isn’t on you.”

The rest of the team arrived, their expressions a mixture of concern and fury. Ryden and Finch jumped out of the van to join them.

“They took him,” Ryden said. “Those assholes had to have been watching us, planning for this.” He turned to Jack. “How the fuck did this happen?”

Jack shook his head. “I don’t know. Doesn’t matter how good these guys are. There’s no way they got into our system. Leo and I built it together. The damn NSA couldn’t get into it.”

“These guys don’t need to get into your system,” Finch said. “Are you telling me you Snake Eaters wouldn’t have been able to do this op without your fancy equipment if push came to shove?”

“Of course we fucking could,” Joker growled. “Doesn’t explain how they got the drop on us.”

King rubbed his hands over his face. “Damn it. We’re the visitors and they’re the home team.

They’ve operated out of this port for years without getting caught.

Probably knew we were here the second we rolled through the gates.

They didn’t need our system when they have the whole damn port.

Fuck !” He removed his helmet and chucked it against the van.

It smacked the side with a loud thud before bouncing off and skidding across the dirt.

The outburst made everyone jump, and they all stared at King. The only time Ryden had seen King lose his shit was when Leo was shot. The man was grumpy as all hell, but he was a mountain, always in control. But Jay was family, and someone had messed with King’s family.

“We’re going to get him back,” Ace said, his frown deep.

King rounded on Ace. “How did we fuck this up so badly?”

Ace grabbed King by the neck of his tactical vest and pulled him close, meeting his gaze. “Stop. We are going to get him back.”

King clenched his jaw so hard that Ryden was afraid the guy was going to break something. Instead, he took a deep breath in through his nose and let it out through his mouth. “Okay.” He nodded. “Let’s get to work.”

Ryden turned his attention back to Jack. “There’s gotta be a way you can track Jay. He’s somewhere in this port. I can feel it.”

Lucky nodded. “Plus, there’s no way these assholes are going to leave their product behind. They have to be planning something.”

“I’ve still got access to the port security system,” Jack said, tapping away at his tablet screen. “Let me see what I can find. This might take a minute.”

They might not have a minute. Ryden did everything in his power not to think of those bastards and what they might want with Jay. Walton and his men had come this far. They weren’t going to walk away.

Joker removed his phone from his pocket. “We need to find Jay before the police swarm this place. No way someone didn’t hear that explosion.”

Port security was probably on their way, which meant they had to move fast. Good thing the port was so damned big. Their priority was getting Jay back. Their second goal would be to get out of here without being seen, which would be interesting considering the van was out of commission.

“What do they want with Jay?” Saint asked. “If they took him alive, it’s for a reason.”

Ryden ran a hand through his hair. “His connection to me, his security clearance at work, or maybe they’re just sadistic assholes. Take your pick.”

“Jay’s cellphone is offline,” Jack grumbled. “No surprise there.”

“Wait.” Ryden turned to Jack. “His smartwatch. I used to tease him ’bout how ridiculous he was for usin’ that thing to do everything, even pay for his coffee. He’s gotta have his location on.”

“Let’s hope they haven’t figured it out yet,” Jack muttered, tapping away at his tablet again.

“I’ve got something.” Jack zoomed in on a large structure.

“There’s a warehouse that belongs to a remodeling company.

It’s where they store their building supplies.

I can’t get a heat signature unless I’m outside the building, but this is where Jay’s watch is pinging. ”

Finch pressed his lips together in a thin line. “I don’t like this. You think they wouldn’t have checked him over and found the watch? It would have been the first thing I did. Take his phone and his smartwatch.”

“Doesn’t matter,” King said, scanning the area around them and motioning to several parked vehicles. “We need to borrow some SUVs. Jack?”

“I’m on it.”

They took off toward the parking lot while Jack got to doing what he did best. When they reached the parked cars, he pointed to two black SUVs. “Those. I can hack into their computer systems.”

“Split up,” King ordered.

King climbed into the driver’s side of one SUV with Ace, Lucky, and Jack joining him, while Finch drove the second SUV carrying Ryden, Saint, and Joker.

They headed out of the lot, making sure not to speed and attract any unwanted attention.

The only good thing about the van exploding was that any security or police that showed up would be occupied with that, giving them time to get to Jay.

They didn’t have long, but then something told Ryden that the bastards weren’t hanging around for the fun of it.

“Hey.” Saint squeezed Ryden’s knee, getting his attention. “We’re going to get him back.”

Ryden nodded, his frown deep as he pulled his fuzzy green friend from his pocket.

He stared down at Pascal, unable to believe Jay had brought the silly little thing with him.

It squeezed at his heart in a way nothing ever had, probably because Jay made him feel a lightness he hadn’t thought he’d ever feel again.

Relationships of any kind had always been challenging for Ryden, and in the beginning, things with Jay had been complicated as hell, or at least it had felt that

way.

But now? Being with Jay was easy. It was comfortable and fun.

They were only in the beginning stages, and he was sure they'd still drive each other up the wall, but what they had was something special.

As brave as Jay was, he had to be terrified.

No amount of self-defense or reading incident reports could come close to the danger he was in.

Jay might have kicked his almost-kidnapper's ass, but he was on his own against five armed ex-Marines.

When Ryden lifted his head, he caught Finch's gaze in the rearview mirror.

"You love him, don't you?"

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Ryden swallowed hard. “Yeah, I do.”

At one point in his life, he’d believed he didn’t deserve a guy like Jay.

Hell, he’d thought he didn’t deserve to be loved by anyone, but now, he was at peace with himself and in a place where he could love Jay the way he deserved to be loved and accept Jay’s love in return.

That night in his living room, when he lay on the couch with his head in Jay’s lap as Jay stroked his hair, it was the closest to being absolutely at peace as he’d ever come, like his soul was settled.

If he could have purred like a cat, he would have.

“We’ve got your back, bro,” Joker said, making a lump form in Ryden’s throat, because for the first time in his life, he had everything to lose. His hands threatened to shake, so he took a deep breath and then released it, sending calm through him. Jay needed him to be calm and focused.

Ryden carefully returned Pascal to his tactical vest pocket just as Finch pulled the SUV up beside King’s.

Everyone got out of the vehicles, being careful to remain quiet.

They’d pulled in across the street from the warehouse behind another building that was part of a cluster of larger structures, possibly more warehouses, surrounded by trees and shrubbery, all of which would help provide cover.

They waited as Jack rounded the corner of the building, using the shadows and trees to disappear.

One moment he was there, the next he'd completely vanished.

Ryden had to give it to his Snake Eater buddies.

They were damn good at staying out of sight.

It was why Ace always got the drop on everyone. Annoyed the fuck out of Ryden.

It felt like a lifetime, though it was just a few minutes, and then there he was, strolling back to them like he'd never left. They huddled around Jack, watching him zoom in on the warehouse.

"We've got multiple security cameras on each side of the building, but I can take care of those.

" Jack pointed to the tablet. "There's a door and loading bay entrance on the south side, a loading bay entrance on the east side, and the north side has two doors on the second floor accessible via these stairs here, and on the ground level, four loading bay entrances, two here and two here. "

"Hostiles?" King asked.

Jack tapped his tablet. "I counted six heat signatures in total, two on the north side, one on the south side, and one on the east. These two move around, obviously patrolling. This signature isn't moving." He lifted his gaze to Ryden. "It's most likely Jay."

Ryden clenched his jaw but didn't respond. He couldn't let himself think the worst.

They took Jay and had him in that warehouse, which meant they needed him for something. They were going to go in there and bring Jay back alive.

Finch held a hand up. “Anyone else here thinking maybe this is a trap?”

They all held a hand up.

“Just checking.”

Jack handed the tablet to King, and he studied the building. A heartbeat later, King nodded. “Jack, you got something that can get us in through those doors?”

“Of course.” Jack reached into one of his pockets and pulled out four pucklike gadgets.

“Okay. Ace, you and Lucky take the door on the south. Saint and I will take the loading bay entrance. Jack and Joker, take the loading bay entrance on the east. Finch and Ry, second floor. Ry, your primary objective is getting Jay out of there. The rest of us will take care of those bastards.”

“Roger that,” they replied.

“Watch your six,” King grumbled. “We’ll reconvene back here once we get word from Ryden that he has Jay and they’re safe.”

Finch held his fist out to Ryden, who bumped it with his. “Let’s do this.”

Jack handed one person from each group a puck-shaped device, then they split off into their designated groups of two.

Thankfully, the warehouse had few windows, and they were all on the second floor,

none of them giving a very good view of the grounds outside the warehouse.

Ryden took the lead, heading east across the street so they could use the trees for cover.

Since most of the businesses were closed, there was little lighting around.

It wasn't as if this was a residential neighborhood that required numerous streetlights.

The dock might have workers here at all hours, but none were anywhere near them.

A cool, salty breeze came in from the surrounding ocean, and there were few clouds in the sky.

Ryden controlled his breathing, his pulse.

Finch fell in beside him, rifle up, silent and focused.

They moved through the shadows, ducking between buildings and shrubbery, hurrying to the warehouse.

The shadows cast by the building helped conceal them.

Ryden silently hurried toward the end of the building, keeping close to the wall, Finch behind him.

Listening out for any possible movement or sign they'd been spotted, Ryden motioned for Finch to follow.

They hurried up the stairs, years of training and practice ensuring their boots made no sound as they advanced.

At the top of the stairs, they ducked and ran to the side of the door, both straightening with their backs against the wall.

The small glass window on the door was grimy as hell.

With a nod, Ryden motioned for Finch to keep a lookout while he took a peek in the window.

There was enough lighting for him to see down the hallway.

He indicated to Finch the number of entryways he could see.

It looked like the doors were closed, but that didn't mean they could breach without caution.

Not seeing a hostile did not negate their presence.

Shifting back, Ryden nodded at Finch and removed Jack's gadget from his pocket. Pressing the button, he stuck it on the door next to the dirty keypad. Three blue lights appeared, and when all three turned green, he heard a click .

He had no idea what they were walking into or what these guys had planned, and if it were anyone else, they would have gone for a shock and awe approach, but they weren't dealing with anyone else.

They were dealing with a group of lethal, desperate traitors who would do anything to complete their mission.

Well, Ryden had a mission too, and if any of those assholes got in his way, they were going to regret ever having laid eyes on him. He hated that he was going up against men who should have been his brothers-in-arms, but what Walton and his men had

done went against everything a Marine stood for.

It was time for them to be reminded.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Oh, God, everything hurt. What the hell?

Jay's head throbbed, and his body protested every movement.

Had he been hit by a truck? Oh, no, wait, not him.

The van he'd been in had been hit by a truck.

It all came back. The attack on the van, the gas choking him, and that son of a bitch slinging him over his shoulder like he wasn't a damned human being.

Cautiously, Jay opened his eyes, jaw clenching at the pain in his wrists from the zip ties biting into his skin.

His arms ached from having them bound behind his back and the awkward position he was in, on his side, his cheek pressed against the cold concrete floor.

They hadn't gagged him or tied his feet.

Then again, they probably figured there was no point since he wasn't going anywhere.

Jay blinked, his eyes adjusting to the dim lighting.

Where was he? Somewhere industrial, judging by the super high ceilings covered in

pipes with hanging steel lamps.

Scanning the area, he spotted unusual scaffolding propping up doors, some of which were partially boxed and wrapped, while others were not.

There were also numerous wooden pallets with what appeared to be windows in various styles.

The place was cavernous in size, with packing material everywhere.

Checking his surroundings, Jay realized he was in between two rows of steel shelving, like the kind used in home improvement stores or those big-box warehouse stores where you could get a sixty-pound tub of honey and a funeral casket under the same roof.

The shelves were stacked with a wide variety of materials, and the place smelled of wood dust and chemicals, maybe paint or glue?

There were also forklifts and stacks of wooden pallets everywhere.

He remembered there was a home renovation company in the port.

Relief washed over him. They were still in the port.

Jay closed his eyes and breathed, remembering what he'd learned over the years from his calming app and his training with the Kings.

Steady your breathing and thoughts. Keep calm.

The guys were somewhere out there, and they were coming for him.

He believed that with every fiber of his being. Ryden was coming for him.

A shadow moved somewhere to his left, and he froze.

The lack of sound was terrifying, and Jay's heart hammered, but he forced himself to remain calm.

Two men, dressed in tactical gear and carrying rifles, stepped into the circle of light.

Jay recalled the screen in the conference room that had displayed images of the five ex-Marines.

In his mind, he could see his brother pointing them out and saying their names.

Jay had an exceptional memory, particularly when it came to names, faces, and voices.

The first guy, Jones, muttered something Jay couldn't quite catch.

He strained to hear them. The second guy was Fleming.

When they started to argue quietly, Jay was able to listen in.

"This is fucked," Jones growled. "We should never have taken him."

"How else are we going to get those Snake Eaters off our asses?" Fleming shot back.

"This op has been a goddamn disaster from day one because of that dumb fuck. If he hadn't screwed things up with Gibson, we wouldn't be in this mess.

And then he made it worse by getting Foster's attention and hiring some street thugs

to kidnap his boyfriend, knowing who these guys work for?

Are you fucking kidding me? Walton made the right call in getting rid of him. Fucking liability.”

Was Walton the one leading them? Someone had to be giving the orders, and something told Jay it wasn't Jones or Fleming.

Jones started pacing. “I knew we shouldn't have gotten into bed with the goddamn cartel. If we don't get that shipment out, Munoz and his men are going to hunt us down and string us up by our balls!”

Fleming threw an arm out in Jay's direction. “Why do you think we have him for, asshole? And keep your fucking voice down. If Walton finds out you're losing it now, he might start thinking you're a liability too.”

“Fuck Walton. He's the one who got us into this shit. I'm so fucking tired of his?—”

“His what?” Walton asked smoothly, emerging from the shadows and stepping up to Jones, toe to toe. He was a large man who looked like he had no problem putting a bullet in someone, or blowing them up, in Martin's case. “Finish that sentence, Jones.”

Jones shook his head.

“You sure?” Walton grabbed Jones by the throat, practically lifting him off his feet. “If you so much as fucking think of bailing on us, the Snake Eaters are gonna have themselves a plus one. You got me?”

Jones made a choking sound and nodded before Walton dropped him. He coughed and rubbed at his throat, his glare intense.

“Go make yourself useful and help Dennis,” Walton hissed. “He should have been done by now.”

Jones turned and marched off without a word.

They were setting a trap.

Jay’s mind raced. They were waiting for King and the others.

Jay had no idea how long he’d been out for, but the guys had to be close by.

Somewhere in the row behind him, he heard faint voices and the sound of movement.

It had to be Jones and Dennis. He craned his neck to peer through a stack of PVC pipes.

He could only see their legs, but he was more concerned about the wooden crate on the floor and the brick of C4 one of them pulled out.

Oh hell . Jay’s breath caught. Don’t panic .

They had explosives and were planning on blowing this place up with Jay and the guys in it.

He had to do something. Not because the guys were unknowingly walking into a trap, but because they knew it was a trap and were coming anyway.

The back of Jay’s eyes stung. He was not going to lie here while those assholes killed his family.

“Where’s Rivera?” Walton asked.

“Upstairs, like you ordered.”

“Good. Keep an eye on Jones and the kid.” Walton walked off, and Jay closed his eyes in case they looked his way. After a few seconds, he snuck a peek. Walton was gone.

The zip ties around his wrists weren’t a problem.

Getting out of them was the first thing King had taught him.

You couldn’t work security without knowing how to use zip ties to restrain someone and escape them should you find yourself restrained.

No, the problem was what to do once he was out of them.

The warehouse was big enough for him to find himself a hiding spot long enough to get a message to Ryden.

Memories of him and his brother playing hide and seek when they were kids popped into his mind. Jay had been an expert at hiding. The fact that he’d been so much smaller than his brother probably had something to do with it. Now, he could use his size and agility to his advantage.

Walton had left Fleming to stand watch, except Fleming didn’t think much of Jay because he was paying more attention to Jones.

Scanning his surroundings, the only thing close enough to Jay was the PVC pipes stacked on the shelf behind him.

Wait, there was something on the other side.

About five or six PVC pipes had been propped against the stack. If he could time it right....

Keeping his eyes on Fleming, Jay gingerly shifted his body and rolled onto his back, then pulled his knees up and kicked out as hard as he could.

His boots struck a cluster of PVC pipes on the shelf, and they shot forward, hitting the propped-up pipes on the other side.

They fell over, hitting the floor with an echoing clatter, bouncing and rolling everywhere.

“What the hell?” Jones shouted, which had Fleming hurrying over.

Now was his chance. Jay tucked his knees up against his chest and pulled his arms down.

It was awkward and uncomfortable, but he quickly pulled his arms under his ass to his knees then sat up to pull his legs out so his hands were in front of him.

Getting to his feet, he remained in a crouch.

While Fleming and Jones argued over what happened, Jay silently hurried to the other side of the next row away from them.

He stayed in a low crouch and darted across and behind the next row of shelving.

Time to get out of these zip ties .

When he was sure he wasn't followed, he used his teeth to make sure the lock of the zip ties was in the center, then pulled the extra plastic hanging out as tight as it would

go. He brought his elbows down and back as hard and fast as he could and snap .

Thank you, adrenaline .

Jay made his way through the warehouse when the shouting started.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Walton bellowed. “Do I have to fucking do everything around here? How did you lose him? I swear to Christ, Fleming, if you’ve fucked us, you’re a dead man. Find him !”

Shit. Jay had to hide and fast. He looked around him, then up.

There was a lot of shelving stacked high.

He grabbed the steel bar of the shelving unit to his right and used the cement bags piled on the bottom shelf to climb up to the second shelf.

Then, onto the third, where he was able to slide in on his stomach onto the bags beneath the final shelf, which provided enough shadow for him to hide.

That didn’t mean they wouldn’t be able to see him. Now what?

You can do this .

Jay had not spent the last six years losing romance novels to a man he had no idea he’d been falling in love with to die now.

Walton had no intention of letting Jay and the others walk out of here alive, or he would have taken Jay’s watch or jammed the signal.

The guy was too careful for anything else.

Tapping his watch, he brought up his messaging app and sent a text to Ryden.

Trap. C4. Got free. Hiding.

Jay waited. When Ryden's response came through, Jay was so happy he could cry.

Stay put. Upstairs. Luv u.

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Upstairs? Jay instinctively turned his head to the stairs that led to the second floor. That's where Rivera was.

Jay quickly texted.

Armed hostile upstairs. Luv u 2.

No response.

Ryden had to know the moment he opened that door, Rivera would be there. No way the guys didn't know where everyone was inside. Jay was sure they had something planned. Still, Jay couldn't stay here.

"Find him," Walton shouted from close by.

Jay pulled himself forward and army-crawled along the cement bags, stilling and lowering his head when someone approached the end of the aisle.

Jones came around the corner, rifle in hand.

He paused before he started walking Jay's way, ducking his head to check the shelves on both sides of him.

The others were somewhere else, so Jay readied himself.

As soon as Jones approached, Jay gritted his teeth, grabbed the corner of a cement bag, and dragged it. He turned it slightly and readied himself. Just because he didn't

hear the others didn't mean they weren't nearby, so he'd have to move fast.

Jones stepped in front of Jay's shelving unit, and with all his strength, Jay shoved the bag. Roughly a hundred pounds of packed cement landed on Jones, knocking him to the floor. Jay cringed. The guy hit his head and was out.

Not wasting another second, Jay slid out and carefully but swiftly climbed down, jumping down when he was close enough to the floor.

He crouched and scanned the area. No sign of anyone.

Silently, he darted over to the rifle. When he reached for it, a shot rang out, making him jump, and the rifle went skidding across the floor.

Jay's heart was in his throat, and he slowly straightened, turning to find Walton there, barrel aimed at Jay. Damn it .

"Don't think I won't put a bullet in you," Walton growled.

Slowly, Jay put his hands up. "Then why haven't you?"

Walton's grin was evil.

Wait...

Jay felt sick to his stomach. He swallowed hard. "You're not going to kill me, are you?" With every step Walton took toward him, Jay took one back. "You have plans for me."

"Oh, I'm going to kill you," Walton assured him.

“But not until I get what I need. The only good thing that came out of that idiot Martin trying to kidnap you was putting you on our radar. Martin planned to use you to get to Foster, not realizing you were the one with all the power. You have access to the entire Four Kings Security network.”

Jay shook his head. “I don’t have that kind of access. I’m a secretary.”

Walton snorted. “Come on. Do you think we didn’t do our homework on you?

On your boyfriend and his friends? The moment we discovered the kind of security clearance you had, we started putting together a plan, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

I knew your boyfriend wasn’t going to let you out of his sight, just like I knew your friends weren’t going to let us go.

So here we are. Two birds, one stone. With access to Four Kings Security, it’ll be a whole new game, with me calling the shots.

Hell, with the Kings gone, leaving poor little de Loughrey all alone, I can have his general daddy in my pocket. ”

“Not going to happen,” Jay spat out, enraged at the thought of this asshole hurting Leo.

“We’ll see about that. And just because I’m not going to kill you yet, doesn’t mean I won’t put a bullet in your leg. You don’t need your legs to access a computer.”

Jay edged closer to the shelves when an explosion rocked the warehouse, distracting Walton enough for Jay to grab one of the smaller PVC pipes off the shelf.

He swung it with all his strength toward Walton's head.

The impact was brutal, sending Walton crashing into the shelves and stunning him long enough for Jay to take off toward the end of the row.

Gunfire erupted in the warehouse, and something that sounded like a flashbang went off upstairs.

Rounding the aisle, Jay almost slammed into Fleming.

Without hesitating, Jay ducked and swiped Fleming's leg from under him.

He knew Fleming wasn't about to let go of his rifle, so Jay swiped the Glock from his holster and bolted.

Upstairs, more guns went off, and Jay's heart leaped in his throat.

Ryden.

Shouting and the thundering sound of gunfire echoed through the air.

The Kings and the others had found their moment and breached the warehouse.

Jay had to get to one of them, though he had no idea where in the warehouse they might be.

He'd just rounded the next aisle when the second-floor door slammed open.

Finch and Ryden hurried through, and Jay had never been so happy to see them. They hurried down the stairs when Rivera stumbled into the doorway, gun in his bloodied hand. He propped himself against the doorframe and aimed.

No .

Jay detested guns, but that didn't mean he didn't know how to use them.

He'd spent plenty of time training with Ace and Lucky.

Jay aimed and took a deep breath, then fired, hitting Rivera and forcing his shot to go wide as he stumbled back.

Finch spun and fired. Rivera was down. The look of pride on Ryden's face had Jay's heart skipping a beat.

And Finch? Well, his brother looked surprised as hell.

How about we all get out of the warehouse rigged to blow ?

Ryden and Finch reached the bottom of the stairs and rushed over to him. Despite the circumstances, Jay couldn't help but throw his arms around Ryden, hugging him tight.

"Thank goodness you're okay," Ryden murmured, kissing the top of Jay's head.

"I'm so glad you're here," Jay replied.

Ryden ran a hand over Jay's head. "You are okay, yes?"

Jay nodded. He might not be so okay when this was all over and he had to process everything, but that was a tomorrow problem.

"I'm glad you're safe now, Jaybird," Finch said, smiling at him. He looked like he wanted to say more, but it wasn't the time. Jay was relieved his brother was okay,

too.

“Stay behind me.” Ryden moved Jay behind him, and Jay didn’t argue.

“They’ve set explosives,” Jay told them. “I have no idea how much time we have.”

Ryden tapped his earpiece. “Fellas, this place is rigged to blow. Rivera is down.”

“Roger that,” King replied. “Get Jay out of here. South exit. We’ll meet you outside.”

It sounded like the team had split up and breached various entrances because the gunfire was spread out.

Everyone had most likely taken cover. Jay’s heart skipped as they moved forward, Ryden and Finch with weapons raised as they scanned for threats.

Jay had seen the various military maneuvers the Kings used to take down threats, and one of them was to surround the hostiles and move in, forming a tight circle and giving the hostiles no choice but to surrender.

A burst of gunfire erupted close by, and bullets zipped past them, pinging off the forklift where they’d taken cover.

Ryden and Finch returned fire, moving tactically through the maze of building supplies.

They kept Jay between them, tucking him out of sight when they had to take cover.

Ahead of them, Jay spotted Ace, who gave the signal.

“Close your eyes and cover your ears,” Ryden ordered.

Jay quickly did as he was told, waiting for the flashbang Ace had lobbed to go off before opening his eyes and moving his hands away from his ears.

The explosion of light and sound disoriented Fleming, Dennis, and Jones, allowing the Kings and Wild Cards to surge forward, shouting for them to raise their arms above their heads and get down on their knees.

The ex- Marines were outnumbered, and they knew it.

Walton was still in the warehouse somewhere.

With Fleming, Dennis, and Jones in restraints and in their custody, the team covered their retreat, each member watching their six as they backtracked toward the exit.

The tension was thick, and Jay couldn't help but frantically look around him.

Where was Walton? As they neared the door, an explosion on the other end shook the building.

Dust and debris rained down, and Ryden grabbed Jay's wrist.

"Go!" King motioned for everyone to run just as another explosion went off. With all the chemicals in this place, it was on the verge of becoming an inferno. They all sped out of the building, not stopping as they headed as far from the warehouse as possible.

Jay glanced back. The warehouse was alight with smoke and fire.

A shadow moved from somewhere in the smoke, and Jay thought his eyes might be playing tricks on him.

Before he could see what it was, Ryden had his arms around him and turned just as a shot rang out.

Jay cried out as he hit the ground, Ryden on top of him. What the hell just happened?

Gunfire followed, then another explosion. The sound of sirens filled the air, and Jay looked up, his eyes meeting Ryden's.

"Ry?" His voice was hoarse.

"I've got you, darlin'. I've got you."

Was it finally over? Tears welled in Jay's eyes. "I was so scared I'd never see you again."

"They don't know how stubborn you are." Ryden pressed a kiss to Jay's forehead and brushed his hair away from his brow. "Or how fierce."

Wait. Something was wrong.

"Ry?"

Ryden winced and fell over onto his side. Oh no. No, no, no. Jay scrambled up.

"Ry!" Jay frantically checked him over, aware of King kneeling beside him, helping him search.

When Jay slid a hand under Ryden's vest at his shoulder, a couple of inches above his heart, he sucked in a sharp breath at the feel of something wet.

Pulling his hand out, it was covered in blood.

“King.” Jay’s voice was a whisper. “Oh God.”

Ryden lolled his head to the side and glanced down. “I guess that bullet did hit me. I’m fine.” Jay gaped at him, and Ryden chuckled. “Okay, maybe not entirely fine.”

Jay gripped Ryden’s vest, his heart in his throat, and terror threatening to consume him. “If you bleed out on me, so help me, I will murder you.”

“Not sure how that works, but okay. I love you, too.”

King slid his hand under Ryden, and Ryden cried out, then cursed. “It went through, Marine. Come on, we need to get you to the paramedics. They should be arriving any moment. Finch, give me a hand.”

Jay kissed Ryden. “Don’t you dare die on me.”

“Marines don’t die,” Finch said, helping King lift Ryden to his feet, each one putting an arm around him. “They just go to hell and regroup.”

“Oorah,” Ryden replied, his grin wide.

Jay shook his head. Those two. He wasn’t about to admit it, but it was nice that Ryden had a fellow Marine around. It was a shame Finch wouldn’t be staying. Speaking of Finch, his brother was awfully quiet, which was very unlike him. Focusing on Ryden, Jay stayed close.

“You said you read all the books of mine you kept.”

“Yep,” Ryden murmured.

“Then you know, the heroes always get their happy ever after.”

Ryden's soft smile lit Jay up from the inside out.

“Then let's make sure we get one.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jay had never seen so many flashing lights in his entire life.

Every type of first responder, in addition to Port Security and the Department of Homeland Security, swarmed the port. It would have been terrifying if King hadn't already called in a favor or two by the time he and the rest of their team reached the paramedics.

Thanks to King's connections, they weren't arrested on sight.

While King spoke with his contact at the DHS, the other agents took Dennis, Fleming, and Jones away in handcuffs.

The DHS had already picked up the men hired by Walton to load the ship, and the weapons crates were being seized.

There was no sign of Walton, but the fire crew was still working on extinguishing the blaze.

They helped Ryden into the back of the ambulance, removing his helmet and tactical vest to make it easier for the paramedic to attend to him, though not before Ryden insisted Jay remove Pascal from his vest's pocket.

Once inside the ambulance, the young woman quickly got to work to stop the bleeding, then administered an IV and secured an oxygen mask around his nose and mouth.

Jay rode in the ambulance with Ryden, holding his hand while the paramedic went to work. Meanwhile, the rest of the guys were arranging transportation to meet them at the hospital, what with their van having been blown up.

“I forgot how much getting shot hurts,” Ryden grumbled, his voice somewhat muffled from the oxygen mask. His pout was adorable.

“Maybe don’t jump in front of bullets next time,” Jay teased. His smile fell away, and he swallowed past the lump in his throat. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“He woulda killed you,” Ryden said, squeezing his hand. “My chances of surviving were greater than yours.” He paused before squeezing Jay’s hand again. “Woulda done it anyway. Even if I wasn’t geared up.”

“Don’t say that.” Jay couldn’t allow himself to think about what might have happened if Ryden hadn’t been wearing his tactical gear.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Jay replied, not caring that the paramedic heard every word.

However, the little smile on her face when she turned away reassured him that he didn’t have to worry.

He laced his fingers with Ryden’s. “That doesn’t mean I want you dying for me.

” Tears pooled in his eyes, and Ryden shook his head.

“No one’s dyin’,” Ryden said, pulling Jay close so he could wipe his cheek. “’Cept maybe Walton.”

“You think he got caught in the explosion?” Jay asked. He hated not knowing what happened to Walton. “I don’t understand how the guy could be so cold-blooded. He’d intended on killing men who’d served, just like him.”

Ryden slowly shook his head. “Walton crossed the line a long time ago. He lost his ability to see people as human beings. We were obstacles in his way. Nothin’ more.”

“It just seems a little easy, you know?”

Ryden arched an eyebrow at him, making him chuckle.

“You know what I mean. After everything he’s done, to get killed by his own trap? Walton’s too smart for that.” Jay shook his head.

“Even if he survived, the guy’s done,” Ryden pointed out. “His brothers are gone, and I’m bettin’ whoever was expectin’ those weapons is gonna want answers. If Walton’s smart, he’ll disappear to a country with no extradition laws.” He squeezed Jay’s hand again. “It’s over, sweetheart.”

A sense of relief washed through Jay, and he ran his hand over Ryden’s head, smiling when Ryden closed his eyes and let out a contented sigh.

When they reached the hospital, the paramedic who had sat up front so Jay could ride in the back opened the rear doors and hurried to help his partner get Ryden and the ambulance stretcher out.

Jay followed them inside, his heart in his throat when he had to let Ryden go.

Jay had no idea how long he had stood in the hospital lobby, his arms wrapped around himself, when a hand on his shoulder startled him.

Turning, he found his brother standing there, concern in his amber eyes despite his small smile.

Jay couldn't stop his lip from quivering, and he didn't care.

He threw his arms around his brother and hugged him close.

"It's going to be okay, Jaybird," Finch promised, running a hand over Jay's hair. "Your man is one tough Marine. He'll be just fine, and you'll get to play nurse for him while he recovers."

Jay nodded and sniffed. He realized that he wasn't bothered by Finch's words. Yesterday, he would have gotten defensive, taking Finch's words as something else. When he pulled back, he wiped at his eyes.

"I'm sorry I throat punched you."

Finch chuckled. "Gotta admit, surprised the hell out of me. I deserved it, though."

Before Jay could respond, King arrived. The others waited outside, most likely so it didn't look like an army was invading. King walked up to Jay and opened his arms. Jay didn't hesitate. He hugged King.

"I'm so relieved you're safe," King said. "I'm sorry I didn't?—"

"Nope." Jay stepped back and shook his head. "I don't want any of you blaming yourselves for what happened. We couldn't have known what they had planned. You all knowingly walked into a trap to save me."

King frowned. "Of course we did. You're family."

“I love you guys, too. That’s why I don’t want you feeling guilty. Understood?”

King sighed. “Understood.” He moved his gaze to Finch. “Could you give us a moment?”

“Sure.” Finch headed outside to join the others, and Jay couldn’t help but notice how well he fit in. The guys talked to him like they’d known him for years.

“It’s like he’s always been there, huh?”

Jay turned at King’s words. “It’s weird.”

“Listen, I know the timing isn’t great, and maybe it’s not my place, but... How are things between you two?”

“We haven’t had much time to talk. It does feel different than before.” Jay shrugged. “He’s different.”

“How would you feel about him being around more?”

Jay eyed King. “As in...?”

“As in making him a part of Four Kings Security.”

“Did he ask you for a job?” Jay asked, managing to remain calm. He’d hoped he’d been wrong, that it wasn’t the reason Finch had shown up.

“No.” King shook his head. “We were talking back at the office before all this, and I was the one doing the asking. He might not want a job, and I won’t offer if you don’t want me to, but...I got the feeling he might need us.”

King's words surprised Jay. His brother?

When did his brother need anyone or anything?

Then again, no one read people like King, so if he believed Finch needed them, then so did Jay.

His brother had always been good at putting up a tough front, as if he were impervious to frivolous emotions that might make him look weak.

Considering their history, did Jay want his brother around? There was so much baggage. He studied Finch out there with the guys, and he looked...happy. It was only then that Jay realized the difference.

"You see it now," King said softly.

Jay nodded. He turned to King. "Okay." He had no idea what he'd just agreed to, but his heart had opinions, and this time, Jay would listen.

Whatever issues they needed to resolve, Jay couldn't deny his brother the chance to be happy.

Being part of King's family was something special.

Did his brother deserve it? Guess they'd find out soon enough.

King squeezed Jay's shoulder, then joined the others outside. He said something quietly to Finch, who turned to stare at King. He looked so stunned that Jay couldn't help but laugh. Finch seemed to snap himself out of it, then took King's hand and shook it, his smile wide.

A heartbeat later, Finch came inside. "Can we talk? In private?"

"Um, okay." Jay followed his brother outside and to the far end of the ER doors, so they were out of earshot of anyone who might overhear, mainly Ace.

"Listen, I, um, just wanted to thank you," Finch said, his face looking a little flushed.

"For what?"

"Come on, Jaybird. You think King would have offered me a job without talking to you first?"

"King doesn't need my permission."

"No, he doesn't. But you mean a lot to him, and he wasn't about to hire me without your okay."

Jay wasn't about to tell Finch what he and King had talked about regarding Finch needing them. "He said you guys talked back at HQ before all this."

"I promise you, I didn't come when you called because I wanted a job."

"I believe you." And he did. "But I need you to understand that it's not going to be like high school. This isn't just a job for me. They're my family, and I don't want any of our past drama getting in the way of that."

Finch's brows drew together. "Well, that depends. Are you going to treat me like you did in high school?"

"What?" Jay blinked at his brother. Had he heard right? He narrowed his gaze. "I'm sorry. The way I treated you?"

Finch studied him before his brows shot up. “Holy shit. You really have no clue.”

“I think I have a pretty good idea,” Jay replied, rolling his eyes.

“No. You don’t. Do you know what it was like to live in your shadow?”

Jay frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Jaybird, from the moment you were born, you shone brighter than anyone and everyone. You had mom and dad wrapped around your little finger. Everyone thought you were adorable, funny, and smart. You could do no wrong. And me? I had to be the responsible one. Dad’s perfect little soldier.

The big brother who looked after you and kept you safe.

And I got it, I did. Hell, I was proud to do it.

But everything fell on my shoulders. Everything .

When you made a mistake, it was just you growing and learning.

If I made a mistake, I was told I should have known better.

Dad gave me hell for it because what kind of example was I setting for my baby brother? ”

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“I...I didn’t know.” Jay recalled his brother and dad arguing all the time, but he figured it was grown-up stuff.

His brother wasn’t that much older than Jay, but it always felt like he was.

He’d been so serious all the time and so angry.

Jay never imagined it was because of the pressure their dad put on him.

Finch shook his head. “My senior year was supposed to be my year. At home, I had to be perfect. I had to be what Dad wanted me to be. But at school, it was different, I was different. Then you came in and you turned the school upside down. You were everywhere, your light eclipsing everything and everyone. Anyone who didn’t love you or, at the very least, tolerate you had to leave you alone because of your entourage.”

Jay sighed. “Again with the entourage. I didn’t have an entourage.”

“Jaybird, you had half the school following you around like your personal cheerleaders. Hell, some of them were cheerleaders. You were captain of the cheer squad, spirit club, drama club, and who the hell remembers what else?”

“So you’re pissed because I stole your spotlight? What did you want me to do? Pretend to be someone I wasn’t? Hide in the closet to make you feel better?”

Finch’s shoulders slumped. “At the time, maybe that’s what I wanted.

I was seventeen, confused, angry, and still trying to figure out who I was.

A part of me was jealous you could be you, and I couldn't even admit to myself that maybe I wasn't as straight as I thought I was.

If I had the chance to do it over, I would have done things differently.

What I would have liked was for you to be my brother and have my back.

Jaybird, you were shitty to me all year. ”

What? What ? “You and your friends took every opportunity to give me hell about being gay. You yelled at me in front of the whole school! Do you have any idea how humiliating that was?”

“You’re right, it was a dick move. I should have stood up for you.

Doing nothing was as bad as taking part.

But any time I tried to talk to you, you were an asshole.

So as a seventeen-year-old boy who was pissed at the world, I decided to be a bigger asshole.

You were so busy being your authentic self that you were oblivious to everyone around you who couldn't be. Jaybird, you were a Mean Girl.”

Jay shook his head with a laugh. “Oh my God, I was not a Mean—” Memories of his encounters with his brother flooded back, and his smile dropped from his face. “No. I would never be so... I...”

“You might not have had a Burn Book, but you and your little girlfriends were Mean Girls. Making fun of our clothes, calling us dumb jocks, and playing pranks on us?”

Jay’s face grew hot, and he swallowed hard. Had he been so awful? He remembered high school as being so much fun. Reflecting on the past, he recalled incidents that he hadn’t thought about in years. His heart dropped to his stomach at the things he’d said and then forgotten.

“I had this idea in my head of how things had been, and after what happened in the gym, I’d convinced myself that it was all your fault, that you were a bully.

” Jay closed his eyes, his heart heavy. “I’m so ashamed of myself.

” When he opened his eyes, he met his brother’s gaze.

“I’m sorry I was so terrible to you. No wonder I drove you away. ”

“I didn’t join the military because my baby brother had been a jerk to me.

It was more complicated than that. I shouldn’t have said what I did that day in the gym or when I left.

I was angry, and it was easy to blame you.

” Finch shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged.

“We were a couple of teenage boys with raging hormones, dealing with things the way we thought was best, thinking we knew it all. We’ve both changed a lot since then, Jaybird. ”

Jay opened his mouth, but Finch stopped him.

“You have. I’ve not been around you very long, but in the short time I have been, believe me, I see it.

Back then, you acted out of fear and insecurity, just as I did.

It had to have been terrifying, being out in high school then, and instead of having your big brother to back you up, you had to fend for yourself.

Past Jay was kind of a dick, and Current Jay is still sassy, but in a different way.

He’s sweet, confident, and kind. I’ve seen the way he fusses over his family and cares about them.

Current Jay also kicks ass.” Finch smiled softly, and it reached his eyes, forming creases at the corners. “I like this Jay.”

Jay smiled and sniffed, blinking the tears from his eyes. He laughed when his brother pulled him into one of his big bear hugs.

“How about we leave the past in the past and start again?”

Jay nodded, his arms wrapped around Finch. “I’d like that.” It was only now that he realized how much he’d missed his big brother. “I’m sorry I ignored your calls. That was wrong of me.”

“It’s okay. The way we’d left things, I don’t blame you.

We’re here now.” He threw a hand over Jay’s shoulder, turning him and leading him back inside to the waiting room.

They sat down, and Finch leaned back, smiling at him.

“You got yourself one hell of a man, Jaybird. You always did have good taste.”

Jay side-eyed him, making Finch laugh. “So you were hitting on him.”

“Yeah, but only to get a rise out of you because I knew something was going on between you two.”

“You did?”

Finch arched an eyebrow at him. “Jaybird, it couldn’t be more obvious you two had been fooling around in there. Might as well have been holding up a sign that said, ‘Just gave my man a blowjob.’”

Jay gasped, his face on fire. “Oh my God,” he hissed. “We’re in a hospital.”

Finch chuckled, then his smile faded. “He’s going to be okay.”

“He was shot saving me.”

“Like I said, one hell of a man.”

They sat in silence, and it was...nice. Comfortable. It was good to have his brother back, and he was glad Finch was staying. Jay didn’t know how long he’d sat there, lost in thought, when a doctor came out.

“Ward Kingston?”

King had been standing to one side of the doors, murmuring to Saint. He lifted a hand and walked to the doctor, motioning Jay to join him. Jay hurried over. The doctor looked from King to Jay and back.

“Mr. Ward. I have you listed as Mr. Foster’s emergency contact.”

“That’s correct.” King waited, giving Jay time to speak up if he felt comfortable enough to do so. He never assumed, which Jay appreciated.

“I’m Ryden’s boyfriend,” Jay told the doctor.

The doctor nodded. “The surgery went very well. Thankfully, there was no nerve damage, so Mr. Foster should make a full recovery. After some physical therapy, I expect he’ll regain full range of motion in his arm.

He’s been moved to the post-anesthesia care unit, and once he wakes up, he’ll be taken to his room.

” The doctor turned to Jay. “The nurse will let you know when you can see him.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Jay replied. King went to share the good news with the rest of the guys, and a little over two hours later, Jay was shown to Ryden’s room.

He thanked the nurse as she closed the door before sitting in the chair next to Ryden’s bed.

His eyes were closed, and Jay figured he was asleep.

“Hey, sweet pea,” Ryden murmured. He tapped his lips, and Jay smiled, his heart squeezing in his chest. Standing, he leaned in and kissed Ryden, loving the way he hummed in response. “Sweeter than stolen honey.”

Jay held back a smile. “You’re high right now, aren’t you?”

“High as a Georgia pine,” Ryden said, nodding. He held his right hand out, and Jay

took it, lacing their fingers together. “Doesn’t change the fact that I think you’re beautiful and I love you.”

“How come I never knew how adorable you were?”

“Couldn’t see past the books you were throwin’ at me,” Ryden replied, chuckling.

Jay dropped his gaze and frowned. The tears pooled in his eyes, and he cursed under his breath. He was just a little emotional now that the adrenaline had worn off, that’s all. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, what’s goin’ on, darlin’? Did someone say somethin’ to you? Because I’ll set ’em straight.” He snickered. “Well, unless they work with us. Ain’t no one straight there.”

Jay shook his head, amused. He wiped his eyes and told Ryden all about his conversation with Finch, even though there was a very good chance Ryden wouldn’t remember any of this, but he wanted Ryden to know. Or was he looking for reassurance that he wasn’t a horrible person and had changed?

Ryden was so quiet, Jay had to check he hadn’t fallen asleep with his eyes open or something.

“Ry?”

“Yeah, uh, what’s a Mean Girl?”

“It’s from a movie. You haven’t seen Mean Girls ? It’s a cult classic. I was in high school when it came out.”

Ryden peered at him. “Darlin’, I was in the military while you were in high school.”

He rolled his head back to look up at the ceiling. “Ugh, now I feel old.”

“You’re not old.”

“Oh yeah? Name a band you consider vintage.”

Jay pursed his lips. “NSYNC?”

“Ouch.” Ryden gently laid a hand over his heart, groaning. “Ooh, that hurt my heart. Right in the AARP.”

Jay barked out a laugh. “What were you listening to at the time?”

“Garth Brooks and Nirvana. You were what? A year old when “Smells Like Teen Spirit” came out? Jeez Louise. Anyway, tell me about this mean girl.”

“Mean Girls ,” Jay corrected. He told Ryden the premise of the movie and how his brother said that’s what he’d been like in high school.

“I can still punch him,” Ryden said. “Don’t need my left arm for a right hook. Just sayin’. I like him, but I’ll still punch him.”

“No punching necessary. We talked it out. He was right, though. I was such a shit, and I had created this image in my mind of what I thought things had been like, what we were like. Maybe I did it because I didn’t want to believe I was the bad guy in this story.”

“Now you listen to me,” Ryden said, all humor gone from his voice.

“You’re not the bad guy. We’ve all done things in our past that we’re not proud of, but that doesn’t define us.

So you were an asshole in high school. Who wasn't?

No one had it all figured out at fifteen, no matter how much they thought they did.

The important part is that you both grew out of it.

Not everyone does. You talked it through and can be brothers again. ”

“But what if I haven't changed?”

“Darlin', if you hadn't, you wouldn't be feeling so shitty about it, would you?”

“I guess,” Jay muttered. “But I threw books at you.”

“They were paperbacks. Besides, I was intentionally provokin' you.” Ryden squeezed Jay's hand. “Do you think I woulda fallen in love with you if I thought you were a terrible person?”

Jay eyed him. “I don't know. Your choices are questionable at times.”

Ryden laughed softly. “Okay. Would King have made you a part of his family if you were a terrible person? The answer is no. You have the right to a full range of emotions. It's what makes you human.

Sure, you can be pissy and snide, but you're also kind, compassionate, sweet, funny, confident, and feisty.

I've seen you be fearless and stand up for others. You're a good person, sweetheart.”

Jay bit his bottom lip in an effort to keep his emotions in check. It had been a very long night. Then, of course, there was the fact he'd been kidnapped. Minor details.

“Thank you.” The room went quiet, and a heartbeat later, Ryden spoke up.

“So, you’re my boyfriend now, huh?” Ryden waggled his eyebrows, and Jay laughed.

“We gotta lot of boyfriending to do when I get outta here.”

“I’m looking forward to all the boyfriending,” Jay replied with a happy sigh.

“Take a nap with me.”

“A nap sounds good.”

“Don’t eat my dessert,” Ryden grumbled. “If you give me a kiss later, I might share it with you.”

“Yum, hospital dessert. How can I say no?”

Ryden chuckled, his breathing soon evening out. With a contented sigh, Jay leaned back in the chair, their fingers still laced together. For years, Jay had tried to flirt, sass, and charm his way around feeling too much, refusing to see what was right in front of him. Ryden had called Jay’s bluff.

And Jay happily folded.

several months later

It was times like these when Ryden thanked the universe for his good fortune. A great deal had happened in the last few years, and his life had taken a drastic turn for the better. It had been challenging, but he'd been determined to make the most of his second chance.

Ryden took a sip of his soda, his heart full as he watched Jay, Leo, and Joshua running around the beach playing with Chip, Cocoa, Duchess, and Cookie, who was off duty. It always amazed Ryden how Gio's Golden Retriever switched from service dog to playful pup with just one word.

Chip was a maniac, like always, and Ryden expected nothing less from Joker's Belgian Malinois bestie.

Cocoa had gotten so big, so fast, but as a German Shepherd, that had been a possibility.

There was a good chance he might end up bigger than Chip.

For now, despite his size, he was still in his puppy phase, all legs and no coordination.

Duchess, the standard poodle, had the most graceful little trots.

Mostly, Ryden loved to hear Jay laughing, pure joy radiating from him.

Even at the beach, Jay looked gorgeous. His hair was windswept, his cheeks pink from the Caribbean sun, and he wore designer pink tropical swim trunks with a matching top.

Jay had even gotten them matching outfits, which made everyone say, “Aw,” when they saw them, and Ryden didn’t even care.

He and his boyfriend looked damned good.

“Hey.” Saint sat down on the stool next to Ryden and leaned against the bar.

“Um, hey.” Ryden peered at his best friend. “Is there a reason you’re grinning at me like the Cheshire Cat?”

“Yes, there is. I just wanted to say, I told you so. Also, I knew it. And, oh yeah, I was right. Plus, oh my God, I told you so.”

“Really?” Ryden shook his head at his best friend. This was his twelfth “I told you so” of the night.

“Yep. It’s not every day I get to rub such an epic fail in your face.” Saint ordered a drink from the bartender before turning back to Ryden, his smile still huge. “Did I mention I told you so?”

“Wow. I might trade you in for a different model. Where’s Finch?”

Saint laughed. “Ass. But seriously. I’m happy for you both.”

“Thanks.” Ryden was happy for them, too.

“What’s it like going from driving each other batshit to being all kissy and

romantic?”

“Is that what you are with Val? Kissy and romantic.”

Saint wagged his eyebrows, making Ryden laugh. “He would call it something else, but yeah.” His gaze went to his beefy boyfriend sitting on the large half-circle outdoor couch beneath the shade as he talked and laughed with Red, Frank, Nash, and Bibi.

Finch headed their way, beer bottle in hand. He stopped in front of them. “So this is how the other half lives, huh? Just hop on your private jet to your private island?”

“This is how Ace lives because he’s married to a billionaire,” Ryden said with a chuckle.

“Never knew anyone who owned an entire island,” Finch murmured, looking around. “It’s wild.”

Saint nodded in agreement. “Ace said Colton got the idea after the last barbecue at their house when the dogs knocked him into the pool while they played. Said our family had outgrown their mansion and they needed something bigger.”

Finch stared at Saint. “Bigger than a mansion?” He turned, taking in the twenty-two people in attendance, along with the four dogs.

And that was without Bibi and Nash’s girls, who were visiting the Cuban Mom Mafia while their parents were on a much-needed mini-getaway.

“Then again, you could populate a small town.”

Ryden snorted. “Don’t give Ace any ideas.”

“Not gonna lie,” Finch said with a chuckle. “I had to take notes on my phone. I need a diagram to remember who everyone is and how they’re connected.”

“Really? It’s easy,” Saint said, waving a hand in dismissal.

“Ace met Colton on the job. Colton is best friends with Gio, who won Joker at a bachelor’s auction at one of our charity events.

Laz is Gio’s brother, and he met Red at a party at Colton’s.

Fitz is Laz’s best friend, so that’s how he met Jack.

Joshua was in Frank’s club when he met Colton and Frank.

Bibi is King’s sister and Nash is her husband, Leo is King’s husband.

He and Leo met in a government black site.

Lucky knew Mason through Ace, who had dated Mason before Colton.

Colton and Mason are now good friends. Ry met Jay when he started working for the Kings, and I met Val at Frank’s.

And Kazi works for Val at the tavern. See? Easy.”

Finch blinked at Saint. “That’s...I don’t even know what to do with that.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Ryden laughed. Finch had been invited to the family barbecue because of Jay, but Ryden had a feeling King was sizing up whether Finch would end up part of the Kings’ family.

“Hi.”

They all turned their attention to Leo, who stood next to Finch. It was cute, their size difference. Leo had to look up at him while Finch looked down.

“Oh. Hi.”

“Goldfish Cracker?” Leo held out his bag of favorite snacks.

“Hell yeah. I love these,” Finch said, extending his palm to Leo.

“Really?” Leo asked, his smile wide.

“Are you kidding? Cheesy, crunchy goodness with the bonus of being shaped like a smiling fish? What’s not to love?”

Funny thing was, Ryden believed Finch was serious. Especially since this was the first time the two were meeting face to face. Saint looked as surprised as Ryden felt.

Leo narrowed his eyes at Finch. “How do you feel about the pretzel ones?”

Finch wrinkled his nose. “Nah. I mean, if I wanted pretzels, I’d have pretzels.”

Leo beamed at him. “Right! That’s what I said!” He turned, calling out to King as he ran to him. “He hates the pretzel fish too!”

“What just happened?” Finch asked, confused.

“You just became Leo’s friend,” Ryden replied with a chuckle.

Finch might not yet grasp the significance of that, but he would soon enough.

It was sweet the way King's features softened with Leo.

He chuckled at Leo rambling excitedly at him, then lifted his gaze to Finch and, with a smile, gave him a nod.

"Holy shit," Saint murmured. "You got a smile and a nod?"

"Damn," Ryden shook his head in disbelief.

"You know how long it took me to get the nod? I still haven't gotten a smile.

Maybe. I don't think I have. I thought maybe he smiled at me like two months ago, but it turned out to be a grimace from something he'd just eaten.

Six years, man. And you get both in like a month. "

Finch looked from Ryden to Saint and back. "I don't know what any of that means, but I'm assuming it's good."

"It's really good," Saint reassured him.

Jay headed their way, and Ryden put in an order for his boyfriend's favorite cocktail from the bar. He handed it to Jay when he got there.

"Aw, thank you," Jay purred, kissing Ryden. "I think I'll keep you." He took the cocktail and sipped. "Mmm, tropical goodness."

"Your brother got a smile and a nod from King," Ryden said, motioning to Finch.

Jay gaped at him. "No way. Both? On the same day?"

“Okay, you all are freaking me out,” Finch grumbled. He fixed Jay’s shirt collar, which had flipped up on one side, then strolled off. The guy had no idea all the little things he did that showed he cared.

“Is it weird?” Saint asked Jay. “Having your brother around after all this time?”

“A little,” Jay admitted. “It’s like we’re getting to know each other again.” He smiled warmly. “If he’s made friends with Leo, he’s doing something right.”

The sound of glass shattering and a loud curse grabbed everyone’s attention. Something had happened to Finch’s beer bottle, and his hand was bleeding.

“Shit. I’ll be right back.” Jay placed his cocktail on the bar and hurried over, but Kazi was already there with the first aid kit.

Ryden sometimes forgot that Val’s tavern manager had been a paramedic before joining Val’s team.

None of them knew why Kazi had left that life and ended up at the Red Ax Tavern, but that was Kazi’s story to tell.

Kazi got to work quickly and efficiently, cleaning Finch’s wound. He shook his head, so Ryden assumed Finch wouldn’t need stitches. Ryden couldn’t hear what Kazi was saying to Finch, but it was clear Finch was a little smitten. He said something that made Kazi laugh.

“Do you see what I see?”

“Holy shit!” Ryden threw a hand over his heart, Saint jumped as well. “Where the hell did you come from?”

Ace grinned. “That’s not important. What’s important is that you see what I do.”

Ryden followed Ace’s gaze to Finch and Kazi, who were very obviously flirting with each other. “Oh no.”

“Nope. I know where this is going.” Saint jumped down from his stool. “I’m out of here. Plausible deniability.”

“New model,” Ryden called out, smirking when Saint flipped him off. He groaned when Ace rubbed his hands together with glee.

“Leave it to me, I’m an expert at this.”

“At meddlin’?” Ryden nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, you are.”

“No. At matchmaking. It worked for you, didn’t it?”

Ryden stared at him. No way. “What’re you talkin’ about? You had nothin’ to do with me and Jay gettin’ together.”

“Didn’t I?”

“No.” Ryden eyed him. His friend was full of it.

“If you say so. If you’ll excuse me, I have to go fan the flames of a budding romance.”

“You disturb me,” Ryden muttered, shaking his head as Ace walked off.

The best part of Ace meddling was the fact that Colton had developed some killer instincts when it came to his husband’s shenanigans, and before Ace could reach Kazi

and Finch, Colton swooped in.

Ryden had to hand it to the guy; he was smooth.

The way he distracted Ace with a kiss and a few whispered words in his ear? Ryden needed to take lessons.

“I have something for you,” Jay said, approaching him with a small pink box. He placed it on the counter next to Ryden. “Well, it’s not for you , but it’s for you.”

“I’m very confused.”

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Jay gave him a pointed look. “Just guard this with your life and don’t open it.” He walked off, and Ryden sat staring at the box. “Okay.” What was happening right now? “Meh.” Ryden shrugged. He knew better than to question Jay. A heartbeat later, Lucky walked up to him.

“Hey, bro. Jay said you had something for me.”

Ryden blinked at him. He moved his gaze to the box and then back to Lucky. He carefully slid the box over to Lucky. “This is for you.”

Lucky peered at him. “It’s not going to like explode glitter into my face or something, is it? Because Mason is not going to be happy if we end up with glitter in bed again.”

Ryden opened his mouth and closed it. “I don’t want to know.” He sure hoped there was no glitter. He shook his head. Lucky didn’t look convinced. “Just take the box and be careful.”

Lucky reluctantly took the box, though he was clearly questioning Ryden’s life choices. Opening the box, his eyes went huge. “?Ay, madrecita mía!”

Was that a good exclamation about his mother, or should Ryden be running for his life? It was sometimes hard to tell with Lucky. Just in case, Ryden slipped off the barstool.

“How?” Lucky stared at Ryden.

“Um.”

“I can’t believe it.” Lucky’s bottom lip wobbled.

He gently placed the box on the counter and threw his arms around Ryden, hugging him.

“I love you, bro! You’re the best.” He pulled back.

“How did you do this? You know what? It doesn’t matter.

I won’t forget this. If Ace asks you where I went, you saw nothing.

” He asked the bartender for a spoon, then vanished with the box.

Jay returned and leaned against the counter, a very self-satisfied smile on his face.

“I’m guessing it went well?”

With a chuckle, Ryden pulled Jay into his arms. “That was his coconut flan, wasn’t it?”

Jay’s smile stole Ryden’s breath away. “I figured it wouldn’t hurt for you to be back in his good graces again.”

“How’d you do it?”

Jay shrugged. “Graciela’s grandmother loves me.”

“And why wouldn’t she?” Ryden leaned in to nuzzle Jay’s neck, loving the shiver it sent through Jay. “What I wouldn’t give to have you naked right now.”

Jay pulled back. He bit down on his bottom lip and grabbed Ryden’s hand. “Come with me.” He hurried around the bar to one of the sandy trails lined with palm trees and shrubbery.

“Where are we going?” Ryden knew for a fact that the house was in the other direction.

He let Jay lead him down the path, which wound around several turns.

The sun was starting to set, and the salty ocean breeze was heavenly.

Before he could ask again, they exited to a small clearing and a cabana with what resembled a double bed with gauzy white curtains.

Jay turned to Ryden, his smile sinful. “The island has a bunch of these cabanas.” He reached into his pocket and waved a packet of lube at him.

“Well damn.” Ryden didn’t waste another second. He swept Jay off his feet, loving the sound of his laughter. Climbing onto the bed, he lay Jay down and started undressing him. He unbuttoned Jay’s shirt and slid a finger down his chest to the waistband of his shorts. “You’re so beautiful.”

“Please,” Jay groaned, arching his back and taking Ryden’s hand to move it down to his cock straining against his shorts.

“Fuck.” Ryden quickly stripped as Jay finished pulling off his clothes, tossing them to the side of the bed to join Ryden’s, then he turned over onto his stomach.

Ryden covered Jay’s more petite frame with his own, lacing their fingers together and moving Jay’s arms up onto the pillows.

He leisurely slid down Jay’s body, leaving a trail of wet kisses from Jay’s neck, down his spine to his ass.

He parted Jay’s cheeks and used his tongue to have Jay writhing and panting beneath him.

“Oh fuck. Ry,” Jay pleaded.

Ryden slicked his fingers up and carefully slipped them inside Jay one at a time, stretching him until he was ready for Ryden’s cock. He lay on his side and spooned Jay so his chest was flush against Jay’s back.

“Darlin’, you are everything I never knew I needed.”

“I love you,” Jay murmured, slipping one hand around to the back of Ryden’s neck. He moved the other to lace their fingers together on his stomach and sucked in a sharp breath as Ryden kissed his bare shoulder.

“I love you, too, sweet pea.” Ryden reached down and palmed Jay’s hard cock, running his thumb over Jay’s slit, smiling as Jay bucked his hips. Ryden rubbed his hard length between Jay’s plump ass cheeks. “Do you want this inside you?”

Jay moaned. “Please.”

“Whatever you want, darlin’.” Ryden shifted back a little and Jay pushed his ass back. Carefully, Ryden pushed the head of his cock against Jay’s hole, closing his eyes and groaning at the tight heat as he slowly sank himself inside Jay. Fuck, this was never not going to amaze him.

“I want you,” Jay said, breathless.

Ryden buried himself until his groin was against Jay’s ass, then he started moving, pulling out just a little and pushing back in, small thrusts.

Heat and need, unlike anything he’d ever felt, spread through him, and sweat beaded his brow.

He kissed Jay’s shoulder and pulled out almost completely, then thrust back in.

Jay cried out, and Ryden shifted his angle to hit that sweet spot inside Jay.

“Oh fuck,” Jay moaned loudly. “Yes. Fuck yes.”

Ryden slid his arm under Jay’s left thigh and lifted him, propping him on Ryden’s leg and adjusting Jay’s position so he could hold Jay close and really drive himself inside him, the sound of their bodies coming together again and again filled the air as the sun began its descent.

“Jay,” Ryden warned as his muscles grew tense.

Jay cried out as he came, his body tightening around Ryden and pushing him over the edge.

He came hard, and he punched his hips forward until he gently pulled out.

Placing Jay back on the bed, Ryden collapsed onto his back, his breath coming out in pants. “Oh, man.”

Jay rolled over and placed his hand on Ryden’s chest. With a smile, Ryden covered Jay’s hand with his, squeezing it before rolling over to face Jay. “You’re gorgeous.”

“I must look a mess,” Jay said, laughing softly. His hair was partly plastered to his face, the rest tousled. His face was pink, his lips swollen and wet.

“Darlin’, you’ll always look gorgeous to me.”

Jay smiled at that. “Whether I was frustrated or furious with you, or I was doing my best not to think about how damned sexy you were, you were always on my mind. When you weren’t in the office, I missed you.”

“You did?”

Jay nodded. "Of course, I was in total denial. I'd tell myself, 'Oh good, he's not here to annoy me, or make fun of my bow tie,' and then keep wondering when you'd be back."

"I made fun of your bow ties because I couldn't stand how fuckin' adorable you looked in 'em."

Jay shook his head. "Saint was right. Guess I have found my match."

"He said the same thing to me. Ace seems to think he had a hand in us gettin' together."

Jay opened his mouth, then closed it. He stared at Ryden, then shook his head, seeming to dismiss the thought. "No."

"That's what I said. But you were thinkin' about somethin' just then."

"Well, I remember when you first started at Four Kings Security, your desk wasn't the desk you had for six years."

Ryden blinked at him. "What?"

"Originally, you sat on the left. My side, left. You were across the room. I couldn't see you because of the filing cabinet that used to be there."

Two days later, Ace moved you. He said the lighting was better or something.

I don't even remember. But he moved you to the desk across the floor. Directly in my line of sight."

Ryden frowned. "Yeah, but there are three other desks directly in front of mine."

“Yes,” Jay replied, his smile bright. “And they belong to executive protection agents who are barely in the office, as opposed to you, who’s there a lot more. For six years, when you sat at your desk, I couldn’t avoid seeing you.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Ryden gaped at Jay, then shook his head. “He can never know that we know. If he finds out, he’ll get it etched into my office door or somethin’.”

Jay laughed, his eyes sparkling with love. “All those years, and it was always you.”

Beneath the setting sun, wrapped in love and the knowledge that he was no longer just surviving but living, Ryden kissed Jay, slow and deep.

“Always will be, darlin’. Always.”