



Cruising Right Into Love: MM gay romance

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Category: LGBT+

Description: à new life brings hope. But will it also bring Victor pain – or the love he craves?

A chance meeting leads Victor Newton to the quiet town of Sweet Haven. Beaten and broken, he finds something totally unexpected. Friends who are more like family. A job he loves and a home of his own. But there's a fly in the ointment. He's crushing on someone who knows about Victor's past. Someone already spoken for.

Paramedic Denton Colby meets Victor his first day in town under awful circumstances that leave a lasting impression. Denton feels protective towards the gorgeous blond, but as time passes and he watches Victor flourish, so do the feelings he's kept hidden. Strong feelings he thinks would frighten Victor, who has no idea Denton is bisexual. Denton attempts to move on with his life, dating Nese.

But something isn't working.

When Denton hears Victor is going on a gay pride cruise as part of a wedding party, he decides it's time to take a chance, and joins the trip. Now all he needs is for Victor to open his eyes and see him as more than a friend.

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Victor

Our meal wasn't going well—though I'd expected nothing else—when Davey's strident tone announced to the whole restaurant his displeasure with me. "Do you really need to make such a show of me after I've gone to all this effort to treat you to an expensive meal?"

I couldn't see what I'd done. But then, nothing I did pleased him, so it didn't really matter. So tonight, I just didn't understand the point of taking me out for a fancy meal. Why would Davey insist on traveling so far out of his way to take me out for a valentine's date?

The place was beautiful. The food was delicious, but it was all fake. We had nothing to celebrate as far as I was concerned. If anything, it was more a commiseration prize, and that, unfortunately for him, was me.

The beatings and threats were getting to the point I didn't know if it was better to be homeless and penniless than suffer the constant anxiety of what would trigger Davey next. All my wages, which I earned working for Davey, were controlled by him and he just left me with pocket money. When I broached the subject of putting the money into my account, he'd laughed it off, saying I had him to look after me, so why would I need the money?

I should have listened to my gut and gone then, but I'd romanticized the idea that he wanted to take care of me. What I'd figured out too late was that it was all about control and had nothing to do with caring for me at all. No family to speak of, Davey's threats to hurt them if I left were empty, yet his controlling behavior left me

scared to leave with his constant promises of killing me if I tried. A part of me believed him, having taken the brunt of his rage. I had no friends to speak of either and no one to share what was happening to me.

My life really sucked, and I had no power to change it.

At Davey's loud reprimand, I felt every eye on me and sank further into the seat, desperate not to draw any more attention, which would only be my fault.

Something ugly flashed over Davey's face when he turned his gaze to an area surrounded by beautiful plants. Before I could figure out what had caught his attention, he was up and striding in that direction.

Wide eyed, I dithered, unsure what the heck I should do.

Were we leaving?

Only he wasn't heading to the door. As I realized this, Davey's angry voice carried over to me. "You ungrateful little shit. Thought you could throw me aside for something better, did you?"

When I rose, unable to sit a moment longer, I registered Davey's unhealthy color and the ugly sneer that never boded well. Only this time, it wasn't aimed at me. Instead, it was aimed at the occupants of a table I couldn't see.

If whoever he was speaking to answered, I didn't hear it over the buzzing going in my ears when a tall man built with wide shoulders and dressed in an impeccable suit, rose so fast his chair clattered to the floor. He grabbed hold of Davey's suit jacket and hauled him up into the air, leaving his feet dangling in mid-air. "Who are you and why do you think it's okay to manhandle my boyfriend?"

Boyfriend?

Oh gods, what was this?

“He was my boyfriend until he ran away in the middle of the night with all my money.”

The other man, who I assumed was Davey’s ex-boyfriend, said nothing to this accusation. One I’d heard from Davey a time or two when he got drunk and went on about a previous boyfriend. I’d weighed up how controlling Davey was and what he was capable of, and considered that he was lying about the reason their relationship ended and the stolen money.

Unable to watch Davey ruin their night, I walked over, feeling sick to my stomach. The little bit of food I’d eaten was churning inside me faster than a washing machine on spin. Before I could think of something to say that might help, the guy who Davey accused of stealing took hold of my arm and I found myself dragged to the entrance of the restaurant.

Blinking back tears of panic, I didn’t utter a word. The second we were outside, the guy dropped my arm and started speaking. “You need to get as far away from Davey as you can. If he hasn’t already laid into you, then it won’t be long before he does. Then he’ll start with the threats to your family. He’s the biggest bastard I know, and a leopard never changes its spots.”

At the truth of my reality, sobs tore from my throat. “He says if I leave, he’ll find me and—”

“Yeah, I know the drill. Listen, he’s violent, and it only gets worse. Do you have a phone?”

Pulse racing at the reason he was asking, I nodded, and the guy held out his hand to me. “Give it me. I’ll put my number in it. Call me when you know it’s safe and I’ll help you.”

He wants to help me.

Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, I did as he asked. Tears drenched my eyes as confusion, panic, and hope warred inside me at this man offering something I was desperate to accept. Despite that, a part of me was still concerned as to his reasoning, when he didn’t know me. “Why are you doing this? You don’t even know me.”

“I was you,” he muttered, his gaze never lifting from the screen he was clicking at, adding more than one number to my contacts list.

Quickly returning the phone to me, I noticed he monitored the restaurant door when I tucked the phone back into my pocket, feeling... panic, but also a lightness that I hadn’t felt in the last year. Could he help set me free?

“Wipe your face. You know he’ll get madder than a hornet’s nest if he sees you crying.”

A shudder ran through me at the truth and I scrubbed at my face, desperate to rid any evidence of my tears.

The guy offered me a friendly smile. “I’m Leeson by the way.”

For the first time since we’d met—and though my lips trembled—I offered him a small smile. “I’m Vic. Thank you for being nice to me. I don’t know many people—”

As the door opened, the wide-shouldered guy appeared with Davey hot on his heels. I

pressed my trembling lips together, fear closing up my throat at Davey's furious expression.

"I'm pressing charges. There are witnesses to the fact you manhandled me."

"Fuck off! You laid your hands on my boyfriend. Do it again and it won't be him that ends up with a broken arm," the guy growled menacingly, giving Davey a dose of his own medicine with a stare that could have boiled water.

Leeson looked to ignore Davey and smiled sweetly at his date. "Let's go."

"You owe me," Davey shouted as they retreated. His anger sent tremors down my spine and froze my innards.

Leeson swung around and I caught the sympathetic look he gave me before he mocked Davey. "Listen here, dickweed, what I owe you is a broken arm and more bruises than you can count. I never took a fucking dime from you. All that I took was control over my life back."

On that, Leeson strolled away, leaving Davey with a look that left me breathless with fright.

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Three weeks later

A sob tore from my throat as I ran, trying to evade the devil chasing me. My foot caught on the last stair as I scrambled to escape the next swing of Davey's fist. I landed on my knees, pain running through my side and working its way up through me to spike at my brain. It stole my breath as I attempted to regain my footing. My vision blurred from the tears flowing down my cheeks.

I staggered up and stupidly looked back. His hair wild and his clothes smeared with my blood, the man who I'd once thought loved me leapt down the last few stairs, crazed eyes filled with what I'd come to consider was a rage as black as his soul. This kind of fury made Davey blind to everything other than inflicting pain on me. My heart slammed into my throat and prevented me from taking another breath, leaving me at his mercy.

The fight had started in the bedroom when he'd found me packing my few, meager belongings. He'd come back having forgotten his wallet, which I'd not noticed on the side in my haste to escape. For three weeks, I'd carefully planned my route to escape but now it was ruined. The money I'd squirreled away, hidden in my underwear, was no defense against what was coming.

Davey curled his fingers into the collar of my T-shirt, twisting tightly. Glazed, hungry eyes watched as he choked me.

Alarm took hold and I scratched at Davey's clenched fist. My gaze wheeled around, looking for something, anything, to grab to stop him.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" Hot breath touched my ear as he growled threateningly. "I wasn't finished showing you who you belong to."

Pain exploded through my brain at the punch he landed on my temple, my head snapping at an awkward angle. It left my legs feeling like rubber and black spots swimming in my vision.

Don't pass out!

Don't pass out!

Please!

I frantically flailed my arms, sucking in greedy breaths when the tight grip on my T-shirt lessened enough for me to breathe. All the parts of me he'd kicked and punched sang in a painful harmony no one wanted to hear. The world spun in incomprehensible agony with me at the center of the tornado, and Davey there ripping apart my world.

Hammering sounds came from somewhere, but I couldn't say where with the pounding happening in my skull.

Dropped to the floor like a sack of shit, Davey disappeared toward the front of the house. Some part of me registered that I needed to move, that this would be my last chance if I wanted to live—to escape.

Biting my lip hard enough to taste blood, I staggered to my feet once more, swaying while trying to get my eyes to focus on where I had to go. Breathing hurt as I took a second to register which way to go. The side entrance of the house went into the garage. If I could reach it then I would have a chance to slip out into the back alley.

Taking a painful breath, I clamped my lips together to stop the whimpers and weaved away from the voices having a heated discussion. Holding my breath, I crept down the hallway, not caring that I was leaving everything behind except my phone and cash tucked into my underwear.

I rasped out a labored breath, sweat slicking my skin. I forced myself not to look back as I opened the door, fear of the unknown forming in a ball of dread. What if Leeson didn't answer my call.

Don't think like that, it's not helping!

Soundlessly, I closed the door and locked it with trembling fingers. Would it buy me time when Davey figured I wasn't in the house? God, I hoped so as I tossed the keys

away.

Despite every step bringing pain, the reality of what lay behind me pushed me on. Weak sunlight bathed my clammy skin as I wrapped my arms around my body, hoping to prevent things inside me from moving and to stop some of the pain from what felt like broken ribs.

I couldn't say how long it took me to reach the bus depot as I kept my head down, so as not to scare folks. The restroom at the depot was empty when I caught sight of my reflection. Fresh tears tracked down the bruised, swollen skin streaked with blood from my split cheek and lip.

Lifeless eyes stared at the marks around my neck. Davey's finger marks were clear above the bruised ligature marks from where he'd used my T-shirt as a garrote.

Unable to bear looking at myself any longer, I dug out my phone in slow, painful movements to text Leeson. I didn't send up a prayer as I wasn't religious, but I sent out a wish to the universe that this time, someone would be there to help me as I messaged.

Hi this is Vic. Did you mean what you said about helping me? I'm in pretty bad shape and really need somewhere safe to hide out. Please help. I've got no one else to turn to.

Long seconds ticked by after hitting send and I struggled not to lose the miniscule piece of hope I held.

"Shit," I cried out with a jerk when my phone rang. My teeth chattered together as I accepted the call. "Hello, Lee? Is that you?"

"Yes, it is. Where are you? Do you need me to come and get you?"

Hearing his offer, a shuddery intake of breath made me wince once more and tighten my grip on the phone as my eyes blurred.

“Where are you?” I asked instead, not wanting to hang around with Davey hunting for me. Because hunt, he would.

“I’m in Sweet Haven. Do you know where that is?”

“Yeah. I went through the town once with a friend. I’m about a hundred or so miles from there. I can get a bus. Will you be able to meet me when I arrive? I’m not sure I can walk far.” My voice broke on a sob while I rushed to talk, which my lungs hated me for.

“Are you all right to travel? I can come to you if you need me to.”

“I’m already at the bus depot as I’ve just got off the bus that left town.” The lie rolled off my tongue at not wanting to put him at risk when I recalled how Davey had acted after that meal. I was positive I remembered that there was a bus headed directly to Sweet Haven.

Whether that would be far enough away from Davey, I wasn’t about to guess, but Leeson had a boyfriend who’d protect him. Could he protect me, too?

“No, it’s best if I get the bus. I don’t want to hang around here any longer than I have to... you know, just in case he’s following me.” That was the truth.

“Ring me when you get close and I’ll make sure I’m where I need to be.”

Agreeing, I ended the call and stared at myself in the mirror for a few more seconds. A resolve I’d thought I’d lost until Leeson had answered the call and offered me help, resurfaced.

“You can do this. You can trust Leeson.” I had to start somewhere and for now, this was what I had. It had to be enough.

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Victor

Three Years Later

At the sound of the door opening behind me, I glanced back to ask Nese, the other shop assistant who worked with me, what had taken her so long. She'd been gone at least five minutes and the queue out of the shop had grown. Clearly the townsfolk were in a rush to buy what was left of Leeson's chocolate Easter bunnies before we closed for a long weekend off. In the States, the Easter holidays weren't a thing, but Garrett had lived in Europe for a while where they celebrated this holiday, so he traditionally gave us those days off. This meant Friday and the following Monday, the shop would be closed.

I stared at Leeson, frowning in confusion at his appearance. "Is Nese okay?"

Leeson's cheeky grin appeared as he sauntered over to me, clutching a large tray of bunnies. They were super cute in white, dark, milk and a blend of all three chocolates. I reminded myself to put one aside for myself as an Easter treat before they were all gone.

Leeson and his soon to be husband, Garrett, were chocolatiers. Garret was from Sweet Haven and from what Victor knew, he'd left to train in Paris, where he'd met his previous husband. After they'd split, Garrett had returned home and opened a chocolate shop in town and named it after the town. In need of a new assistant, Leeson had applied, and the rest was history—sort of.

"Denton's here," Leeson said by way of an explanation as he placed the tray down,

smiling at the customers, “and I needed a quick word before I lost my nerve.”

My already leaping pulse at the mere mention of Denton’s name skidded to a halt. “Lost your nerve?” I croaked out, trying to think if I’d missed something and I was in trouble. Jumping to conclusions was a habit I’d mostly broken, but sometimes...

“I can see by your expression you think it’s bad, it’s not,” he murmured close enough to my ear that the customers standing in front of us, who were showing interest in the conversation, couldn’t hear.

It was easier to focus on the woman, a regular, remembering she’d been waiting for Nese to return with the chocolate bunnies. What Leeson wanted... that could wait, even with his reassurance it wasn’t bad. “Which one would you like, Cassandra? Milk, white, dark chocolate or a mixed one?”

Cassandra giggled like a schoolchild. “I’ve no will power against your chocolate and though I’m here to buy for my grandchildren, I’ll need to buy one for me, too. Oh, and my daughter or she’ll never forgive me. So it’ll be two white, one milk for my daughter and I’ll have a mixed one.”

Leeson winked at her. “Who wants willpower?”

She laughed, digging in her purse. “My diet.”

As I filled her request, Leeson, who could charm honey from the bees, chatted away, serving the next customer.

Before I could stop myself, my gaze went to the door leading into the kitchen. There was no sign of Nese coming back. She’d mentioned earlier in the week that she felt something was off with Denton, but wasn’t sure if it was something to do with her or his work. Denton and Nese had a casual thing going on for the last few years, as far

as I could tell from listening to Nese. Denton never talked about his relationship with her to me, even though we were friends.

Why was that?

I shook off the odd feelings that came with the lack of an answer. They weren't living together and it could be weeks between dates, but I suspected she wanted more. I know I would, if he was dating me.

What Denton wanted, I couldn't say. Not that I'd given it much thought.

Liar. Liar, liar, pants on damn fire.

I'm not interested, I argued back at myself, hating that I was indeed interested, more than I should be when I classed Nese as a friend, too. There were also the circumstances under which I'd first met Denton, making sure that nothing could happen between us—if he were interested. I was gay and though he dated Nese, I'd heard on the gossip vine of Sweet Haven he was possibly bisexual. But as with all gossip, it was unfounded as I'd seen no sign that Denton was interested in men as much as I might want him to be.

The only time I let my thoughts veer longingly in his direction was usually when I was feeling lonely and could bypass the disastrous reasons behind how we met when I arrived in Sweet Haven. Years on, I still recoiled at what he'd witnessed. What he'd done to help when I was at the lowest point of my life. Broken both physically and mentally.

Since then, he was always super sweet to me and never mentioned the awfulness of what came after I'd collapsed or the court case that followed Davey's arrest and imprisonment for his abuse of me and other men, including Leeson.

“You okay?” Leeson questioned, his voice laced with concern, bringing my attention to the fact I was holding the bag I’d carefully packed for Cassandra, who was holding out her hand to me, wearing a look of alarm at my lack of response.

“Sorry, I was thinking I’m gonna need to save a bunny for me before they all disappear,” I stated with forced joviality, handing over the bag and hoping that no one else noticed my vacant episode. The gossips in town had enough to talk about when it came to me.

When laughter filled the shop from the queue still waiting, I breathed a little easier.

“Don’t customers come first?” someone shouted cheekily.

“Always,” Leeson replied, an impish look appearing on his pretty face. “But we have to keep our staff sweet, too.”

More raucous laughter followed and then a deep voice I recognized said, “Vic’s already full of sweetness, he doesn’t need your treats, Leeson.”

It was hard to resist looking over my shoulder at the attractive man who I knew was standing behind me by the scent of Denton’s familiar aftershave.

Leeson saved me from doing just that by making shooing noises and waving his hands in Denton’s direction. “Go on with you. You know you aren’t allowed behind my counter. You’ve already distracted my staff enough today.”

Denton moved in front of the counter, dark tousled hair framed a face that was striking and brought attention to the forest green of his eyes. A dimple appeared in his left cheek as he leaned against the corner of the counter where the cash register sat.

Right by where I needed to be.

His jacket strained enough to draw attention to his biceps as he waved a hand in the air. “I offered to carry the tray for you. Didn’t I?”

“Looking for a new job, Denny?” An elderly woman asked, her gray head coming from behind another customer. I wondered if it was her who’d made the earlier comment. I didn’t know her name, but I had served her once before.

I took the cash from Cassandra, but it was hard to pay attention with him so close to the cash register. I made a concerted effort—something that was getting harder to manage with my growing infatuation—to not stare at him.

“Garrett has too many exacting standards. I’d not last an hour if he started barking at me, Nana.” His chuckle was deep and sent tiny shivers down my spine.

Nana?

He appeared to be showing no signs of leaving, and I found my gaze moving to him, then down the queue to the woman he’d called ‘Nana’.

“Garrett’s exacting standards are because there are so many rules around making chocolate and sweets,” I said without heat, feeling I needed to defend my boss. One who’d paid all my bills in the beginning, until I’d gotten back on my feet and worked to pay it all back.

Denton’s eyes were full of mirth as they met mine, and he winked. “Admit it, you’ve got bigger balls than me.”

The laughter was deafening around us as Denton shrugged, despite the pink now gracing his cheeks as I spluttered, “I bet I don’t.”

He leaned over the counter, his lips brushing my ear, making the air in my lungs fire

out of me in an excited rush when he whispered, “I’ll need to be the judge of that for myself.”

What the heck did he mean by that?

I couldn’t say who I served over the next hour or what they ordered before the queue dwindled down enough for Leeson to tug me back into the kitchen, leaving a sullen-looking Nese to finish the last few minutes before closing. She’d had that same expression when she’d returned to the counter and Denton had left.

It took a moment to register Lesson’s nervousness. My brows arched up at how Leeson was chewing the heck out of his lower lip. My earlier worries as to what he wanted to talk about came out in strangled words, “Something’s up?”

“Haven’t you asked him yet?” Garrett questioned from where he stood at the counter, scowling down at the bowl in front of him. As he often wore a scowl, I learned not to stress about it being connected to something I’d done. Nine times out of ten, it related to whatever he was making or Leeson doing something that created a mess. To say that Leeson was clumsy at times could be a little of an understatement. He could force the kitchen into utter chaos with no effort. “Asked me what?”

“To be one of my groomsmen at our wedding?” Leeson’s smile was wide and pleading. “Please say yes!”

Lips flapping like a dog who’d poked its head out the car window when driving up the highway at sixty kilometers an hour, I stared speechless at Leeson.

“You know we are shutting the shop for the two weeks of the cruise, so it’s not like you’ll be working.” His grin wasn’t as bright as I continued to stare at him, remaining at a loss at how to respond to such a big gesture.

“You don’t need to stress about the cost, we’ve booked several staterooms on the ship, so there’s plenty of room for you, too.” Leeson came forward and took hold of my icy hands. “Please say yes. It would mean the world to have you there with us.”

I choked back a sob at the sincerity.

“To both of us.” Between Garrett’s expression and how grumpy he sounded, it was impossible to read if he was actually telling the truth.

“Really?” A feeling of warmth filled my chest at the generous offer. “Why would you want me gatecrashing your wedding plans?”

Leeson slung his arm around me, hugging me hard. Around the same height, it was easy to look him in the eye when he answered, “‘Cause you’re part of my family.”

That did it. An ugly sob crawled out of me and there was nothing I could do about it when Garrett cursed and came over to hug both me and Leeson. “Just say yes and make it easier for both of us, okay?” There was a catch in his throat, showing he was just as affected by Leeson’s confession as I was.

These men were my salvation—and family. It was the truth. They were so much more than my employers and there was nothing I wouldn’t do to make them happy after all they’d done for me. I sniffed, blinking away the tears and nodded. “I’d love to come, if you want me there.”

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Denton

For March, the weather was seasonally warm and the sky was bright as I exited the shop with Nana, having to take a moment for my eyes to adjust.

“Nana, were you spying on me?” I asked, keeping my voice low, not wanting anyone to overhear.

Gently, I hooked my arm through hers to guide her across the road and away from Sweet Haven. Away from Victor and the ever present temptation to flirt with him.

“Why do you think that?” Her smile gave her green eyes a sparkle that proved that she was indeed spying, probably for Mom, and hadn’t been after the chocolate she’d bought. Those same eyes stared at me in the bathroom mirror and mine could match hers for mischief.

“You heard me and Mom talking about Vic, didn’t you?” I didn’t sigh, my family were all up in each other’s business, I’d have wasted my energy. It was how they were. I loved them, but it could get a little frustrating when I was attempting to work out a way to untangle myself from Nese without hurting her feelings so I could go after Victor.

Late at night, I could recall how his eyes had looked when I’d first seen him. The devastation of his appearance had tugged right at my heart. That day he’d captured a bit of me and hadn’t let go. He’d been so vulnerable and fragile, the attraction had taken a back seat to my need to help him. Then life had kind of moved along and I placed myself in the friendship column and into a rut which had formed into a deep

barrier I hadn't found a way out of.

Then recently, I'd noticed that Victor was showing an interest in dating again and it brought with it a stark reality. I wanted the opportunity to find out if Victor would be interested in me.

"That boy is a sweetheart."

Having zoned out for a moment, I cocked my head, taking a second to fathom out what she'd said, then feigned ignorance. "What boy?"

"The one you were making cow eyes at." Her short, bobbed gray hair swung around her lined cheeks as she gave me a look that said to stop messing and give in to her.

"I was doing no such thing!" I exclaimed. Was I?

Damn it all, I was.

I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach and regret quickly followed. I didn't want to hurt Nese; we had dated casually for a long time and I didn't want to upset her. The day I'd gone into the chocolate shop to ask her out on a date, three years ago, had changed my life. Problem was, it wasn't Nese who made my heart leap, it was a blond with the haunted eyes. But Nese was a nice girl and fun to be around, so I'd dated her. For me, it had never been serious. I'd purposely laid out that I wasn't looking for serious when we'd started out and made no promises.

The dates with her continued, but that initial reaction to Victor never lessened. Now I could see I'd been unfair to both of us. And this was where my dilemma came in because over the past few months I wanted to let Victor know I was interested, but I'd not discovered a way to tell Nese and somehow I'd taken a misstep, and she was making noises about us moving in together. That was when I'd gone to talk to Mom,

needing some insight.

We had a relationship where I could, and often did, talk through what was on my mind. Only Nana had arrived in the middle of the conversation and must have heard more than I'd realized. Her next words confirmed my suspicion. "Did you let that nice girl down gently? And I'm sorry, sweetheart, but you most definitely gave that boy cow eyes."

I sighed heavily, looking around us to see if anyone was close enough to hear the conversation. The street was busy, which was not unusual at this time of day. "I've arranged to meet Nese at my place tonight so we can talk, if you must know."

"Now don't go using that snippy tone with me. You aren't too big for a spanking."

I rolled my eyes, laughing at her empty threat. She used her disapproval better than any weapon to spank me. "Sorry. But you're being nosy, Nana."

"Interested. I'm interested, is what I am." She poked her nose in the air like I'd offended her, but I didn't miss the light in her eyes showing her delight.

"Let's go with that." I saw no point in arguing with her. I'd never win and it would only give folks a chance to listen into the conversation. "Do you need a ride home?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Day off?"

"Yep." I winked at her. "And I couldn't think of anyone better to spend it with."

"Sweet talker." She paused at the next corner to hit the button for the crossing. "I've got a hot date."

I jerked at the comment, my eyes widening at the statement. Widowed about ten years ago, as far as I knew, she'd never considered dating anyone else. "A date?" I questioned, sounding like a frog croaking out the words.

"Why, yes. That nice Mr. Halls from the supermarket is taking me for lunch at that new Italian place down on Fourth Street."

"He is?" I asked, flummoxed to have not heard about this situation from anyone else in the family.

She tapped my arm as she unthreaded hers from mine. "Don't sound so shocked. I've still got it." She tucked her purse under her arm, smiling widely. "Now I don't want to be late, so I'll let you be and find out later from your mom what happened with Nese."

The light changed and she was off down the sidewalk before I could get my tongue in working order.

Nana was going on a date.

Holy shit!

My concerns about what came later fled as I dug out my cell phone and rang Mom. "What's this about Nana going on a date?" I asked before she could even say hello.

Her laughter burst from the speaker, deafening me for a moment. "She told you."

"She did! How did this happen? In fact, I don't want to know... shit, Nana and a man. Yeah, forget I called." It was too scary a conversation to be having with Mom, with the possibilities of her answers. Yeah, I'd been foolish to ring.

Rumbles of laughter continued as I stopped rambling. “You finished having a freak out?”

“Yep. I’ll see you later.” I pressed ‘end call’ before she could slip in information I didn’t want and just missed crashing into a passerby when I turned the corner to head in the direction of where I’d parked. Nodding an apology, I strolled on, my thoughts rolling back around to what I was going to say to Nese.

Whatever it was going to be, I had a feeling it would not be easy, and that was all my fault!

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“I’m so sorry, I don’t want to hurt you. I hoped that when I said I didn’t want more than what we had, you got I was being serious. I know this isn’t what you wanted to hear,” I continued, feeling like I was making matters worse. I’d gotten flustered initially and lost track of what I was saying.

“Are you for real?” Nese stared at me like a creature from the Black Lagoon and I have to say I didn’t blame her. My attempt at softening the blow had come with a meal and a bottle of wine which, in hindsight, I could see had given the wrong impression.

Reaching for her hand across the table, she snatched it away and sat back in the seat. The lights danced over her pale complexion. “I am.” I wanted her to hear my sincerity. “I like you Nese, I really do. You’re fun to be with, but I’m not in love with you. I never have been.”

It was hard to remind myself that I’d been honest with her when, in fact, I’d given her hope by continuing to hook up with her.

A scowl formed on her brow, and her eyes narrowed, pinning me to the seat. “Have you been in love before? Do you even know what it feels like? I love you, Den.” Her eyes welled with fresh tears and my throat thickened with emotion.

I hated hurting her. That I had caused her pain. But honesty was the only way forward, and it’s what I should have given her months ago. “Yes, I know what it feels like to be in love. To have those all-consuming emotions for someone. Wanting to be with them every waking moment. To want to know what they’re doing and be excited to see them again.” As I spoke, all I could think about was Victor, right or wrong.

A tear rolled down her cheek, cutting me off at the knees. She swiped at it in an angry motion. “You’re in love with someone... now. The way you’re speaking, it feels like it’s in the present, not the past,” she accused.

It took a moment to get my heart, which had jammed itself into the back of my throat at how accurate she was, to behave and allow me to swallow. I had feelings for Victor, only I wasn’t sure love fitted, despite how deep my emotions went. “I don’t want to hurt you—”

She came forward, pushing her plate towards the center of the table. “It’s too late for that. You have. And you’re right, you never promised me anything. That’s all on me for being silly enough to think that you’d change your mind.” A disheartened sigh followed. “So who is it?”

There was no way to avoid answering when I wanted to date Victor. I inhaled, exhaled, and met her distressed stare. “I’m interested in Vic.”

Plates and glasses rattled on the table as she shot up, her hands waving about. “I knew it!”

I stilled, unsure how to take that comment when she actually looked pleased with

herself. “You did?”

She plonked herself back in the seat as if she were a balloon that had just popped. “A feeling I got when you stared at Vic.” She rubbed at her damp eyes. “I’m not totally blind, I know when someone is attracted to someone. I remember how you were with him in the beginning, but I set it aside when you asked me out, convinced myself I’d misread the situation, but I hadn’t.”

It was a statement, but I felt compelled to answer. “I was attracted to you. Only with Vic it’s... different.” It was. He was more than a passing fancy, I just wasn’t sure how much more.

A weak, trembling smile appeared as she reached for her glass of half-drunk wine. “There’s more than general attraction. Something deeper.”

I nodded. “I really am sorry.” This time I reached out to her, she took my hand. “I never meant to hurt you.”

She sighed. “I know.” Her fingers clasped mine. “Vic’s a great guy. You have good taste.”

It lacked enthusiasm, but I took it as a win and squeezed her fingers gently. “I picked you too,” I added, winking at her to attempt to lighten the mood.

Her giggle was wet, although I saw it as a win. “That you did.” She took a large gulp of her wine. “So, when are you going to ask him out?”

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:13 am

Victor

Five hours into the shift after the long weekend and Nese had been unusually quiet towards me. Had something happened between her and Denton? She was usually really chatty about what they'd been up to, especially as she'd had four days off.

There was definitely something off with her, she wasn't acting like her usual self around me, and I'd racked my brain to figure out why.

Stomach acting like I'd poured a whole jar of jumping beans down my throat, I coughed to draw her attention when we had a lull, deciding to take the initiative. "You okay, Nese?"

She picked up an empty tray and gave me an abrupt nod before disappearing through the door into the kitchen area.

Okay then, something was definitely up.

What had I done to piss her off?

It had to be me. I couldn't interpret it any other way when I heard her laughing in the kitchen with Leeson no more than thirty seconds later.

Unable to follow as Leeson and Garrett didn't like the shop left unattended, I took the time to replenish some trays, working on not letting my hurt feelings overwhelm me. Therapy and gaining back my independence had gone a long way to help me not take life's shit so personally after Davey's treatment. However, that didn't help with this

type of situation.

I chewed my lower lip between my teeth as I added more popular chocolates to the display that we kept under the counter. It had been a busy morning but as usual, getting towards the mid-afternoon, things had died down. We'd shut in an hour, then sort the email orders that needed to be boxed for shipping. Would Nese talk to me then?

Circling around the reasons for this change in Nese's behavior, it didn't register right away that someone had come into the shop until I glanced up, nearly dropping the box I held in my hands when I met a pair of attractive dark eyes that gleamed with humor. Today, he came in dressed in his EMT uniform of black combat trousers and navy and black short-sleeved cotton top. There was no sign of his jacket and I couldn't tell if he'd just finished his shift or was heading to work.

"Hey. If you're looking for Nese, she's out the back," I mumbled, blushing as I placed the box down. My fingers trembled at the lazy smile that hit me in ways that kept the oxygen in the place from moving where it needed to be.

Denton leaned on the counter next to the cash register looking windswept and so damn attractive it actually hurt to look and restrain the urge to reach out and touch the way I wanted to.

He belongs to Nese.

He belongs to Nese.

Listen and behave.

It was hard to pretend there wasn't a desperate edge to my inner voice. Why did I have to fall for the guy who was already seeing someone, and a female, to boot? I'd

asked myself this countless times, ever since I'd taken an interest in the possibility of dipping my toe back in the dating pool again. Three years and so much had changed. I had changed and maybe the dating app Ollie, Lesson's original flatmate and now mine, had encouraged me to sign me up for would help. I was getting desperate enough to try anything.

"Nope. How was your weekend off?"

His words stopped any other thoughts, and I blinked at him in confusion. Nope? Did that mean he'd come in for another reason? Brain playing catch up with how I was jumping to all sorts of conclusions to the reply when married with Nese's behavior, I repeated like a fool, "How was my weekend?"

If it was possible, the grin he wore got bigger, drawing attention to his full, dark pink lips and white teeth. "Yeah, your weekend. Did you do something fun?"

It got asked so casually, only it didn't quite match the look of expectation he wore. It was almost as if he was... concerned about my reply when the crinkles at the sides of his eyes deepened. Although besides that, I couldn't say why I considered he was concerned about my reply. It wasn't like I could report I'd got hot and sweaty doing naked gymnastics or anything. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd done anything exciting.

Why am I thinking about naked gymnastics in front of Denton?

Nervously, I scratched my head, then noticed I was wearing the plastic gloves we used to touch the chocolate with. I groaned, blushed, and peeled them off to throw them into the bin.

I shrugged and walked to the bin for something to do, and to hide my embarrassment while I confessed, "I went over to the Gallery to help Ollie set up for the exhibition of

the new artist that they're previewing from tomorrow."

Movement out of the corner of my eye drew my attention back to the gorgeous guy who came a little forward, his forearms bulging as he rested on them on the counter, showing more than a casual interest in me. Or that's how it came across.

Desperate.

Totally and utterly desperate.

I hated that the inner voice was right and glanced back to the door, worried Nese would come back any second and see... what?

"I've seen the flyers for the opening for tomorrow... are you going?"

Again, his appearance was all casual... but it wasn't, and the pause was very noticeable. I'd gotten to know him. Study him—in a totally non-stalkerish way. Was I reading too much into this after Nese's odd behavior?

"Yeah, Ollie got me a ticket. You know, for helping him out. Should be cool. The artist has never done a public show before, but he's really popular online selling his stuff. Ollie says he's been a recluse for over a decade."

Denton frowned as he rested more fully onto his arms, getting close enough I could scent his cologne. "I'd not heard that. I wonder what changed?"

"Not sure. But his artwork is stunning. He doesn't just work in one medium. He paints, sculpts, and does glass work. There is this small blue-green glass bottle. So small, I'm not sure what you'd use it for, but it's absolutely captivating when the light hits it. Every time I look at it, I could see different, unique patterns." A blush heated my cheeks when Denton tipped his head to the side, giving me a thoughtful

look.

“Are you going to buy it?” he asked after a long moment.

I shook my head. “It’s an entire month’s pay, and I got to save up extra cash now I’m going on the wedding cruise.”

“You got an invitation to the cruise wedding of the year? How cool. Should be fun.”

The door creaked behind me and I glanced over my shoulder, offering an over bright smile to Nese as she appeared.

Her gaze traveled between me and Denton and something that looked akin to pain flashed in her eyes before it was gone.

“Hi,” she murmured, not moving from her position in the doorway, letting all the heavenly scents waft into the shop, along with the sounds of Leeson and Garrett chatting.

“How are you?” Denton asked, standing straight, no longer appearing comfortable as he tugged at the hem of his cotton top as if to straighten it.

Was that a weird question to ask his girlfriend?

“I’m okay, you?” Nese’s gaze moved once more between us and lingered a little longer on me before it returned to Denton.

“Was a busy one which no one in my business can say is good. But no one died, so there’s that.” His deep voice changed, and the timbre reflected the somber response.

“At least there’s that,” Nese responded, looking awkward as she remained in the

doorway.

It became my turn to look between them, assessing what I was missing. Because evidently I was missing something by the way they were behaving towards each other. Almost like... strangers.

“I suppose I better head off,” said Denton, glancing at me with a look in his eyes I couldn’t fathom.

“Oh...” I looked at the counter and the sweets. “Did you want something?”

He shook his head. “It can wait.” He waved at us and a second later, disappeared out the door.

An uncomfortable silence followed as I reached for more plastic gloves, hoping someone would come into the shop and help shift the strange atmosphere.

As I moved to continue what I’d been doing before Denton’s arrival, I gave Nese a sideways glance. “Are you... alright?”

My timid question got an arched brow in response, then Nese’s shoulders slumped and she wore a defeated look. Her eyes gleamed with tears as she spoke, “We broke up.”

Oh shit!

“I’m so sorry,” I said, going to slip an arm around her shoulder in a move I’d done a hundred times before. Only this time, she moved away and went in the opposite direction. I dropped my arm and felt my lips tremble at the obvious rejection.

“Yeah, well...” She picked up another tray and headed back towards the kitchen. “It

happens. There's not much to say, is there! He doesn't love me and he made no promises."

She dashed through the door, making it swing closed as I stared open-mouthed.

Oh...

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:13 am

Denton

For four days, I waited for Victor to be out of the shop so I could pop in and see Leeson unobserved. I didn't want to ask over the phone and give him the chance to say no to what I wanted. I knew folks found it hard to refuse me when I turned on the charm.

As I entered the shop, I smiled at Nese, and wasn't completely surprised to get a tight-lipped one in return. I couldn't blame her. Things were still a little weird between us since I'd confessed my attraction for Victor.

I indicated to the kitchen door as she was finishing serving a customer. "Is it okay to pop back into the kitchen?"

"Lesson's alone as Garrett had to go to the wholesalers." Her tone was friendly, and I breathed a little easier.

"Great, that's who I wanted to talk to."

I got a nod in response, but she continued ringing up the purchase, making the woman, who was called... Mary, look in my direction. I'd treated the mother of four, I recalled, for a collapse several months earlier when she'd fainted when her youngest cut his hand. She gave me a curious look, glancing at me and Nese. In a small town, everyone knows everyone's business. The town was too small to have secrets. Or it always appeared that way to me.

I offered a polite smile and ignored the curiosity, moving towards the kitchen door at

the end of the counter. Dating Nese gave me some privileges over the years. That, and my help with Victor, allowed me to step into the holy grail of kitchens. Garrett was a stickler for protocol with what happened in his kitchen. Thankfully, his gratefulness to me meant his annoyance was at a lower level than with most others—mostly.

One glance at the back of my scarred hand and I remembered the day I'd gotten the burn. I stupidly went to dip a finger into a pan of chocolate Garrett was standing next to. Touch nothing when a chef has a spoon covered in boiling sugar. It was a daft ass move on my part and it taught me a lesson I only had to learn once.

Inside the kitchen, my stomach rumbled at the delightful smell of melted chocolate, and what I thought was possibly some fruity concoction. Leeson, who was standing in front of the large double fronted stove, glanced at me before returning his attention to the pot he was stirring, giving me a fleeting smile.

“What can I do for you, Denny? If you are here wanting to whisk Nese away early, then the answer's gonna be a no. We are shorthanded as Garret had to go get some supplies we needed as I had a little...” he blushed as he flicked a quick glance in my direction, “mishap.”

I fought the laughter when my gaze swept the room and landed on the kitchen sink. There were several large, stained clothes soaking. “What did you do this time?”

A scowl formed on his pretty face. His mishaps in the kitchen were legendary around town. “Garrett distracted me...” A rosy blush followed his statement.

“Distracted you how?” I settled my ass against the steel counter, making sure it was free of anything first.

“He bent down in front of me and I tripped over.” His tone was all accusation,

making it harder to contain my amusement.

“You were looking at his ass, weren’t you?”

He blew out a breath and his bangs lifted, then fell in his eyes. He shook his head, a scowl forming. “It’s not a crime!”

“His ass is a thing of beauty, so I don’t blame you.”

A chocolate-covered spoon got pointed in my direction and dripped onto the floor, which Leeson didn’t seem to notice as he gave me a fierce stare. “Why were you looking at my fiancé’s ass? And aren’t you and Nese an item?”

“I’m not blind or dead and you know I’m bisexual.” I gave him a flirty wink. “It’s easy to see Garrett has a great combo of hot chef and grumpy cuteness going on.” I waited a beat because Leeson was adorable when he got all possessive of his boyfriend.

He plopped the spoon into the pot, splashing its contents onto the stove, then reached to turn off the heat, swinging back to me a second later. Only then did I add, “Nese and I aren’t together any longer.”

I figured that would be what he’d pay attention to. I wasn’t wrong and a moment later, his jaw dropped open.

“What! Why am I only just hearing about this?” As he asked, his small fists went to his hips. “When did it happen? She never said a word.”

The loud, quick fired questions got me glancing at the door I’d come through. I was aware that it didn’t block all the sound from the kitchen. Seeing the door was closed, I breathed a little easier and returned my attention to Leeson. “Keep your voice down.

And just before Easter. It's why I'm here."

His brows rose and disappeared under his bangs. "It is? Have you changed your mind and want her back?"

"No..." I ran my hands through my hair working on how to say what I wanted without it coming across like I was a dick. "What we had was more casual. I explained from the beginning I wasn't looking for a long-term commitment—"

"Like she was going to pay attention to that. You dated for three years. She had you both dancing down the aisle along with me and Garrett after he proposed to me."

I groaned, slumping back against the counter's edge. "That may be so." I gave him a pleading look. "I swear I made no promises to her."

"I'm sure you never." He shrugged. "I've got to know you over the last three years and I could see you weren't as into her as she was into you."

"Really, you could tell that?" A frown appeared as I stared at Leeson as he nodded. "Why did you think that?" I asked, holding my breath at the mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Vic."

His name whistled through the air towards me like a missile. "You knew!" I exclaimed, not bothering to deny it, given it was the reason I was here in the first place.

"Listen, I might be clumsy, but I have two very good working eyes. Being in a relationship with Davey made me hyper vigilant and though it's calmed down some over the years, I still pay extra attention to what's going on around me. And Vic is

my friend.”

At what he was saying, my stomach took a nosedive, and I felt quite queasy. “Do you think Vic knows... that I’m interested in him in that way? And you have to know I would never hurt him.”

Leeson giggled, his head shaking. “Can I just say that shade of green does not suit you. In answer to your question, nah. Vic isn’t aware. He would never go after someone who is dating someone else. And just to be clear, I never thought you’d be the kind to hurt anyone.”

My pulse settled a little at how emphatic he was. “Do you think he’s interested in me?” I blurted out, before I could stop myself.

“What are we, back in high school?” His laughter grew louder as he rocked on the balls of his feet.

“Stop, okay. I came to see if I could get an invitation to the wedding. I’ve been and sorted out the vacation time.” I gave him a beseeching smile.

“Presumptuous much?” The haughty tone fell short when he sniggered.

“I could just book a cruise and pretend it was a coincidence.”

Leeson came to me, wrapped his arms around my waist and gave me a hug, sighing. “We gave Nese a joint invite for you and her before we realized the cruise we booked is all male. But before I could tell her, she’d already said no. Said something about another commitment that she couldn’t break and that you were busy with work.”

I tugged away. “You did? When? She never said a word.”

All thoughts that she was okay with how we'd left things and my confession about Vic blew up in my face when Leeson replied. "Day or two before Easter, about the time I asked Vic to be my groomsman."

The sinking feeling I'd need to talk to her again came and went as I considered the timing of Leeson's offer to her. "Can I accept the offer? If you still want me to come."

Leeson's smile returned. "You'll have to share a suite... with someone else. Is that gonna be okay?"

An itch developed between my shoulder blades as Leeson moved towards the stove and the pan he'd been at when we'd started talking. Unable to see his expression, I couldn't assess why I got a feeling something was off.

"Yeah, I'll share. It'll reduce the cost, so that's a win." My mind wandered to the gallery and the piece of glassware I'd asked Ollie to set aside. A cruise and paying for the glassware would have made things really tight for a couple of months. Now it seemed I'd be okay and wouldn't have to worry about eating beans and rice for a month or two.

"—great. Then all you need is a passport, a leather jock strap, and sun cream."

My brain re-engaged, and I spluttered, "A leather what?" trying to figure out what else I'd missed.

Leeson chuckled as his attention returned to me. "You said yes, so you can't back out now!" he exclaimed, looking highly amused. "I'll send you the link for what's booked so you can pack accordingly."

Fuck! Why the hell was he grinning at me like that? What had I just signed up for?

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Victor

The sound of a door opening shifted my attention from the cell phone I was holding to Ollie, who appeared out of his bedroom scratching at his neck and cracking a jaw breaking yawn. He'd gotten back late last night and dressed as casually as he was in sweatpants and an old sweater that hid his shape, said he'd the day off.

He stretched his arms up and yawned again, then automatically tugged at the hem of the sweater that had ridden up to pull it back into place. Ollie had body image issues and he hated to talk about them, as I'd found out. It was hard not to say anything when he was super cute and one of the nicest guys that I'd met, except for Leeson.

Sometimes I wished there was some attraction between us, but we were too much alike in what we wanted from a relationship.

I sighed and side eyed Ollie when he came and slumped next to me on the couch where I'd come to sit after breakfast and had started mindlessly scrolling through Instagram. The debate I'd been having with myself over whether I should get a tattoo continued. In the meantime, I'd started following artists looking for inspiration. It was easy to admire the artwork when I didn't have to think about the pain folks went through getting them.

Ollie peered down at my hand and moaned. "Why are you looking at tattoos when you could be searching the dating app I downloaded for you for a guy to go on a date with?

"Dating? Don't you mean hook-up with? Swiping left and right makes me feel... like

more of a loser when it comes to dating.”

Warm pressure from Ollie’s shoulder came with the scent of flowers from the washing detergent he liked to use. “You have to start somewhere. Weren’t you the one who said they were ready to try?” he asked, looking worried. Ollie wasn’t one to push and was being supportive, I got that.

“I did...” I rolled my eyes at myself. “I do want to try. And you didn’t push.” I twisted, digging a hand into the couch, hitting a spring as I moved to face him. I kept my complaint to myself because buying another wasn’t on the cards with how much the cost of living was and how I was going to be digging into my savings for the cruise. I might not be paying for it, but I’d still need cash to spend for trips off the ship. “It’s just that it feels a little harsh if you get a like, reach out and they come back wanting just a hook-up. I like sex, don’t get me wrong, but I want more than just that.”

“Sex with no ties could be a good way to get yourself back into dating? I mean, it can’t hurt, can it?” He groaned, his face bleaching of color as he reached out to take my hand. “Shit sorry, I didn’t—”

His hand was clammy against mine, and I rushed to reassure him. “Hush, it’s fine. We can’t avoid the fact I got myself into a harmful situation. Or that I managed to get myself back out of it which my therapist, Betsy, pointed out. Davey was a lesson learned. He was an evil fucker who was all about control. And though I cringe at my behavior of wanting someone to look after me, Betsy worked with me to see there is nothing wrong with that. And maybe she’s right, it’s just hard to let go and trust my judgment on guys. I downloaded the app because I need to test the waters. I just haven’t found the courage... yet.” An image of Denton flashed into my head.

You’d find the courage for Denny, a small voice at the back of my mind pointed out.

The fingers clutching mine squeezed tightly. “I really am sorry. Davey was an asswipe and I should have pushed Leeson a little harder to go to the sheriff.”

“We can’t live on ‘what ifs’.” Betsy had drummed those words into my brain. They were true, and I meant them as I spoke them. “It happened, and we stopped him from hurting anyone else.”

I took solace from that even when the image of Denton got replaced with one of Davey. It was the day they’d led him from the courtroom. Dressed in a suit, looking respectable and law abiding, he’d worn a smug grin when he’d looked directly at me. He’d lost it eventually after a harrowing retelling of everything he’d done to me. The pictures they took at the hospital of my injuries, and my medical records supported my case. With the added testimony of Leeson, it sealed Davey’s fate and he wouldn’t see the outside of a prison for years. I was more than aware there would be parole hearings and I would need to go to prevent an early release, but that wasn’t for worrying about now. I was safe right now and that counted.

“So, does this mean you might be ready to use the app?” he asked hesitantly, bringing me back to the conversation.

I grimaced and tilted my head, meeting his gaze. “I gotta say I’m not sure that the dating app is the way to go...” I paused and considered what I’d been thinking about since Leeson had asked me to go on the cruise. A cruise full of gay men. “But the cruise—”

He squealed, letting go of my hand to bounce off the couch and wiggle his ass. “Yes! Have you seen the brochure?”

I watched his back disappear into his bedroom before I could reply. Then, a second later, he was back carrying a glossy magazine with a large cruise ship on the front. He waved it at me, missing my nose by a hair’s breadth. “The ship, dear gods, it looks

amazing. It's got ten pools!" He blushed deeply. "Not that I'll be using them."

I rolled towards him as he plonked himself down hard enough to make the couch groan. He didn't notice as he flicked open the magazine.

"Why won't you use the pools?" I didn't really need to ask when he gave me a skeptical glance before his eyes dipped down towards his belly. "No. Don't you dare say anything about your body. You're gorgeous. And if you're encouraging me to date, then I'm gonna do the same to you."

Briefly, Ollie had shown an interest in his boss, the owner of the gallery, but that had quickly fizzled out. I wasn't completely sure why and as I was going through the trial, I'd not paid proper attention. By the time the trial was done with, so was Ollie's attraction to his boss.

He grinned, though I noted it didn't quite touch his eyes. "Deal," he muttered, then looked back at the brochure. "Says there's capacity for three thousand people!"

"That sounds like a lot of people all in one place," I said, gawping at Ollie as I got a feeling in the pit of my stomach that wasn't all that pleasant.

He rolled his eyes at me. "It's a huge floating gay palace."

I laughed at his returning enthusiasm and quipped, "Maybe we'll both meet our prince charming amongst all that gayness."

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:13 am

Denton

“Shit!” I exclaimed, cursing my stupidity as I scrolled through the availability to fly to Florida for the cruise. Leaving booking my flight to the last minute had not been a smart move. Leeson had contacted me a week ago, right at the beginning of a block of three nights. They turned out to be grueling shifts that left me collapsing straight into bed at the end of them and I forgot to check the messages he’d subsequently sent with the details I’d need on the trip. After the nights, my brain was mush as it usually was, so I’d not followed up on the messages.

A big mistake!

The first shock had been that Leeson and Garrett had paid for the cruise in full and that all I needed to pay for was the flight to Florida and any excursions I wanted to do. The second shock I then got was seeing how difficult it was going to be to get a flight with everyone else.

A mushy brain equaled a forgetful me. I had remembered in the morning, but this was the first time I’d had a chance to search for flights. Clearly, I’d left it too long and now the flight everyone else was on had no available seats. That meant my plans to surprise Victor at the airport, the way I wanted, had gone up in smoke. I had hoped to sit next to him on the flight and drop casually into the conversation that I was interested in dating him. The universe, it seemed, wasn’t up for that option!

“Is that ‘shit, the situation we’re headed to is a crap shoot’ or is that ‘shit, I’m all out of luck with the hottie I hooked up with last night’?”

The blaring siren alerting folks to get the fuck out of our way didn't block out the comment. I didn't lift my gaze from my screen as I flipped my middle finger at Alex. He had partnered with me on our wagon eight years ago, when Leith, my original paramedic partner, had left to work for a private company selling medical supplies. Alex was a solid guy who I trusted to have my back when we sometimes went into situations that could be dangerous.

“Neither, dickwad. I can't find a seat on the damn flight everyone else is going on for the cruise.” I glanced sideways at him as he shifted gears to slow for the next turning. “And you were the one with the hottie last night, remember? Or is too much fucking giving you memory problems?”

He and I didn't see eye to eye on monogamy. For him, it was a dirty word, and this resulted in him constantly trying to hook me up with friends of friends. No matter how many times I explained I wasn't interested, he never gave up. It was his only annoying quality, but I didn't take offense as he saw it as 'doing me a solid'.

There was a flash of teeth in his tanned, attractive face as he tapped the side of his head. “There ain't nothing wrong with my memory. I can keep them all straight, no issue.”

I shook my head and returned my attention to the screen, swiping up to scroll through the list of flights with seats available that would get me to the ship before it sailed.

“Did you ask Lee if he had room for me, too? Paid cruise, I could do with some of that action.”

I chuckled, grinning. When I'd asked for the invite, and Leeson had mentioned sharing, I hadn't expected them to pay for my cruise. It was a shocker and generous as fuck and I, for one, wasn't about to turn it down. I'd checked out their wedding list and got a gift I hoped made up a little towards their generosity. Leeson, in his own

words, was a 'kitchen appliance whore' so the thing I'd ordered to be delivered was for their home kitchen. I had no clue what it was capable of, but Leeson apparently did. To me, it looked more like a control panel for a spaceship on Star Trek.

When I'd mentioned their generosity to Alex, he had moaned like a fucker about not having friends like mine. Then jokingly, he'd gone on about getting an invitation. "I told you, it's a gay cruise, man. It won't float your boat."

"For a free, all-inclusive, fancy pants cruise, I'm sure I could get my boat to float."

A bark of laughter was my only response as I clicked on the screen, distracted by the time of the flight I'd found. My eyes narrowed while I worked out the time my shift finished and the departure time.

"Get in," I muttered, going through the process of filling in my details. I'd have to head straight to the airport after my shift, by my calculation. But if I had everything in the car, then I'd have plenty of time to catch the flight and get there before anyone else.

Would I be able to access the boat early? I didn't want to be a sweaty mess when I saw Victor. Hell no, I wanted to make a good impression!

I finished booking the flight and once I had confirmation, I switched over to my messages to send a text to Leeson.

Do you think I'll be able to get on the ship earlier than you guys? Couldn't get on the same flight, so I'll get there earlier than you. Oh, and who am I sharing with?

I stared at the phone for a moment, then realized how pointless waiting for a reply was when I noted the time. Leeson and Garrett would be busy for the next three hours, at least. Leeson, I'd learned, didn't bring his cell phone into the kitchen after

once dropping it into a pot of sugar mix and getting chewed out by Garrett.

Some heavy braking from Alex got me shoving the phone into my pocket, my brain switching to what we might face. The call from the guy's wife said he'd got chest pain. There'd been some discussion about the onset but apparently the woman had gone cagey and vague.

I checked the address as we stopped outside a nice-looking house. A traditional family home, two storeys with a wooden, white painted porch. The house and garden were in good repair in a 'friendly' neighborhood, judging by the folks twitching at their curtains. The door was open, with no sign of anyone. My instincts weren't going bat shit crazy, which was always good, but we were always careful. Folks could act oddly over the weirdest shit.

"I'll grab my pack," Alex said, already moving to get out of the wagon.

I jumped out and headed for the open door, my boots thudding on wood loud enough to alert anyone inside to my presence. After taking a steadying breath, I called out, "Hello, it's the paramedics. You called for assistance. Is anyone there?"

"Oh thank god, we're through here," a female voice shouted from somewhere inside.

The giggles that came after gave me pause, but I knew some folks laughed when in shock. I went toward the sound, checking around as I walked through a pretty room full of frilly things, and on into the kitchen.

The large, sunny space didn't get more than a fleeting glance. It was the naked man, who looked to be in his forties, sitting at the square kitchen table, that held my attention. He was clutching his hairy chest with one hand and the other was holding the side of his jaw. One look at the unusual angle of his jaw and I could tell it was dislocated.

Years of going into unknown situations kept my expression neutral when I then noticed the woman next to him wearing a skimpy satin gown. My best guess was their sexy time had gone awry.

“Arg... I’s... a... fuc...” the guy slobbered, making the woman’s giggles morph into full on belly laughter.

The guy’s glare missed its mark as the woman shook with laughter, her hand going to her mouth like that would help stop her. It didn’t.

The sound of heavy boots thumping through the house announced Alex’s arrival. He came to a stop next to me. “Is everything okay?” he asked, his gaze shifting to the couple, then to me, his brows rising.

His dark eyes held some amusement but other than that, his expression revealed none of what he was thinking. I bit the inside of my cheek at all the possibilities of what had gone on while the guy slobbered more gobbledygook, making the woman laugh harder.

“Please, could you help us out and explain what has gone on?” Alex said to the woman, dropping his pack on the ground next to the man and crouching down to grab what we’d need.

“It was supposed to be some morning fun while the kids were at school and we both had a day off together,” she said around the next bout of giggles. “He was,”—she blushed, not quite meeting Alex’s gaze—“pleasuring me, and he opened his mouth a little too wide and his jaw got stuck.”

The snort the guy made said it all.

There was more laughter before she got herself together. “And when we couldn’t get

it to go back into place, my husband got a little worked up and his chest started to hurt, so I thought it wise to call for help. You know, in case it was a heart attack.”

It was hard not to feel sorry for the guy when his wife couldn’t contain how hilarious she was finding this situation, despite her obvious worry for her husband.

“I see,” I said, keeping my voice devoid of any humor, my mind going through what we’d need to do as Alex placed our cardiac monitor on the tabletop. “Let’s see what’s going on with your heart and give you something for the pain. Then we can assess what we do next.”

Whatever their plans were, they were now going to involve a trip to the emergency room to at least fix the jaw, as I suspected the chest pain was only stress related. Because dislocating a jaw while going down on your wife? Yeah, that had to be stress inducing, for sure!

~/~/~/~

Hours later, I sank down onto my couch and eyed the pizza box I’d dropped on the table in front of me, feeling way too exhausted to consider cooking for myself. The scent of cheese and pepperoni came from the box and, although appetizing, I couldn’t muster the energy to do more than inhale.

I had been right about the jaw dislocation, the chest pain was nothing more than a stress response. After that, the day had gotten crazy with no time to stop even to take a piss.

My pocket vibrated and thoughts of motivating myself to eat disappeared when I realized I’d not checked to see if Leeson had responded to me.

Leaning on my left hip to retrieve my cell from my pocket, I saw I’d received several

messages. The last one was from Mom, which I ignored for now when the opening line mentioned 'day off' and began with the ones I could see were from Leeson.

If I tell you who you're sharing with, would you keep it a secret?

I frowned as I opened the next message that was time stamped for an hour later.

Is that a no?

The next one read.

Are you ignoring me?

I chuckled at the following one that was all emojis mimicking someone losing their shit. The last one got the laughter dying and my eyes widening.

Nese says if you're working today, and busy, you'll not likely see this until tonight. So I'm not going to be upset you didn't answer me for eight hours. You're sharing with Vic. He doesn't know, so it's up to you if you want to say anything to him beforehand. Boarding starts at 10am, so you should be fine. I've emailed the company to advise you'll get there before the rest of us and to let you know if there's an issue.

I re-read the message four times and it was the tugging on my cheeks that clued me in to how wide my grin got as I stared at the words 'you're sharing with Vic'.

I'll keep it a secret, I think. I hit send, then thought about what he was doing for me and followed it up with another message. And thank you for trusting me with him.

All thoughts of eating gone, right along with the tiredness, I rose and headed off to my bedroom, my head filled with what I was going to pack. Hot damn, this was

turning into a great fucking cruise and it hadn't even started yet!

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:13 am

Victor

Exiting the car that had collected us from the airport, I popped on my sunnies to hide my wide-eyed awe as I looked around. Although, the sun was an enormous ball of blinding yellow hotness in a clear blue sky. It promised us a great start to the holiday, not discounting the men that filled the dockside.

Behind me, I could hear Ollie, Leeson, and Garrett talking, but the wide array of men held my attention as my head went into swivel mode, absorbing everything around me. Thousands of men—or so it seemed—were boarding the ship, chatting with others, or already on board and watching from the decks above us. As I strained my neck to look up at the gigantic ship—floating hotel—the brochure hadn't done justice to, I could see it would easily cope with so many people.

Sun gleamed off the brilliant white of the ship and all the glass it carried, blinding me despite my glasses and making me dizzy with its sheer height. I counted at least ten decks before giving up. Some of the balconies facing me already had occupants watching the chaos on shore.

I got a range of fluttery sensations when a dark-haired guy strolled past me, attempting to catch my eye. When our gazes clashed, he gave me a flirty grin. My nerves kicked in but there, in the background, was excitement, too. Although, I felt sick to my stomach at the idea of flirting with a guy after being out of practice for over four years.

This was also my first ever holiday and the idea of spending two weeks on this luxury Royal Caribbean cruise ship, floating around the Caribbean islands with like-minded

people was a dream come true. Only one thing would have made it utterly perfect—Denton.

He might be single but that doesn't make him gay, so get over yourself!

My shoulders slumped at the truth and at how I'd not found the courage to speak to him about his breakup with Nese. I'd made no attempt to dig a little deeper into his reasons and whether he was interested in someone else or just wanting to be single for a while. I was a scaredy cat. I really didn't want to know he'd found someone else. Someone that wasn't me.

Over the last few weeks, interpretation of Nese's behavior could be associated with too many things regarding the break-up. She wasn't saying anything about it, especially to me, despite how close we'd gotten whilst working together. Nese continued to be stiff with me and not her usual self since her breakup. It was almost like I'd caused their problems.

Maybe it was my guilt worming its way to the surface for finding her boyfriend attractive. Whatever it was, I'd broken down and confessed to Leeson something was up, and Leeson, being Leeson, assured me it wasn't my issue but hers. Despite that, I was getting a vibe I'd done something horribly wrong, and it was niggling at me constantly. I'd never made a move on Denton, so I had nothing to feel guilty about—did I?

Twice I'd gone out for coffee with Denton since he'd split up with Nese, and he'd been his usual self. The second time I'd mentioned the cruise, and he'd seemed genuinely happy about me going with Garrett and Leeson. During the conversation, I'd gotten the feeling he was encouraging me to let loose and enjoy myself. Afterwards, I'd gone home and moped about for hours before giving myself a talking to. It wasn't the first time Denton had talked about me dating and although it was nice that he was looking out for me, it still sucked on every other level that he wasn't the

one asking me out.

I bit my lip to stop the maudlin thoughts taking hold when this was supposed to be an amazing adventure. An adventure that I'd decided could—would—help me dip my toe back into the dating pool, so to speak. If I couldn't have Denton, then there had to be someone on a ship this size who wanted to have some fun with me—that didn't involve sweaty sex?

“Look at that guy!” Leeson murmured out the side of his mouth and fanned his face dramatically. The Hawaiian style shirt Leeson wore with a pair of shorts was like my own because he'd picked them out. Ollie and Garrett had dressed similarly, but Garrett had drawn the line at wearing one of the bright green shirts with orange flowers. He'd gone with a dark blue with a light blue flower pattern. It was fun wedding party outfits, or so Leeson had said when he'd insisted we bulk buy outfits that matched for the wedding parties planned. Who was going to argue with him? Not me or Ollie, that was for sure, as his two groomsmen.

I followed Leeson's gaze to the dark-haired dude who'd passed earlier and smiled at me. “I'm sure he gave me a flirty grin when he walked past,” I answered quietly for risk of being overheard, although with the overall excited chatter, there was probably little risk of that.

“Go you,” said Leeson, nudging his shoulder against mine whilst a slender arm snaked around my waist. I caught a whiff of chocolate that somehow always lingered around Leeson. “But I wouldn't choose someone yet. There's plenty of time to scope out the guys. My research says this is like one big gay-friendly party.”

Garrett, who had gone to grab the bags with Ollie, appeared with two of the bigger suitcases and gave his future husband a glare. “The only one you'll be partying with is me,” he barked, then spoiled it by kissing the end of Leeson's wrinkled nose. “Got it.”

“Got it... but I’m just gonna say there’s a—”

“There’s nothing,” Garrett pointed out sternly, but the glint in his eye suggested he wasn’t as annoyed as he was making out. “Now shall we get on the ship I’ve sold a kidney to get tickets for?”

My nerves were back, forming into a ball of anxiety as I tensed next to Leeson.

“He’s joking,” Leeson said, hugging me a little tighter before I could suggest paying, not that I had that kind of money to pay outright, but I’d pay them back like I’d done before.

Garrett eyed me, the tension around his eyes and lips evident in the deep lines that appeared as his lips thinned. “I’m messing around, Vic. This is the wedding Leeson wants.” A cheeky grin transformed him into the captivating man who had once graced culinary magazine covers. “And, my love, this is a lot cheaper than my first one!”

It was turn about as Leeson let go of me to face Garrett with a glare. It didn’t have much impact as he was just too cute. “Let’s not talk about that dick and spoil my wedding!” Leeson took hold of my hand and dragged me with him towards the gangway leading onto the ship. “And you don’t know that for sure as you haven’t seen the final bill.”

There was cursing behind us, but it got lost in Leeson’s laughter and mine because his playful grin was too hard to resist.

“Hey, you pair, wait for me, and what about helping with the bags’ lazybones?” Ollie called, making me pause and Leeson nearly trip because it appeared he wasn’t for stopping.

He barely looked over his shoulder as he shouted back, “We’ll get a purser or a steward. We get our own one, isn’t that cool?” Then Leeson was off, dragging me with him onto the ship past crowds of men.

I craned my neck to make sure Ollie was following; it was the best I could do. Leeson might have been small, but the guy was strong. Resistance was futile when Leeson was on a mission.

By the time we’d made it to the luxury staterooms that Leeson had bragged all had balconies and a hot tub, I had spent most of my time blushing and apologizing for knocking into people. Leeson had nearly taken out two men in his over exuberance to follow our steward, who had organized with the ship’s purser to deliver our bags and stop Ollie complaining.

The cute steward, Miller, rattled off all the amenities on the ship as he opened the stateroom door and stepped aside for me to walk in first. I’d not imagined my stateroom would be as luxurious as Garrett and Leeson’s, who were four doors down from me.

Wordlessly, I walked into the spacious, beautifully appointed room. The queen sized bed with cream and blue bed linen, with huge sumptuous looking pillows, sat close to the door. This left a large seating area with a huge couch next to the glass doors leading out onto the balcony. The view of the sea, which sparkled like a blanket of diamonds as the sun hit it, left me with a ball of emotion lodged in my throat. The sheer opulence was breathtaking and I felt the impact of the gift my friends had given me.

Assuming I was sharing with Ollie, I turned and grinned eagerly at him. “Come see. We have a queen sized bed to share, but with how big it is, we likely won’t find each other for the two weeks we’re here.”

Giggling, I glanced around the room once more, only then registering a noise coming from behind the closed door to my right. I opened my mouth to ask about it but it came out as a strangled, choked cough at the semi-naked man who appeared through the door wearing nothing except a towel around his hips. Golden skin glistened with droplets of water that ran down the planes of... Denton's hairy chest.

"What... you... here... what... wet?" Heat coursed through me and sweat gathered on my top lip as I stopped stuttering and attempted to make myself look less foolish. Then my gaze lingered on all the naked skin and it became impossible to get my mouth to form a coherent thought.

I dipped my eyes, hoping that not looking at all the wet skin would stop me from imaging drying it with my body, only my gaze caught on the towel and the impressive bulge pressed against the front of the white fluffiness.

It's soft.

Fuck, he's soft!

Dear gods, who knew it came in that size?

Denton's chuckle was warm and matched the twinkle in the eye I found when I returned my attention to safer places. It was then I noticed the towel he held in his hand when he brought it up and hung it around his neck, catching the drips from his hair. The white really stood out against his dark hair and tanned skin.

"I see you are all settled in, Mr. Newton," Miller stated, not at all surprised at Denton's appearance.

Miller was fully into the room, directing the purser who had appeared—when, who knew—to where another suitcase sat tucked under a walnut shelving unit.

No...

Was I sharing with Denton?

I glanced at the bed once more, seeing it with fresh eyes.

Oh my!

“Your flight was fully booked, so I had to take an earlier one, which meant I didn’t have time to shower after leaving work,” he explained, like that would make perfect sense to me.

I scratched my forehead and stared at him, working on keeping my eyes on his face and not on the silky-looking hair on his chest, or lower.

“I’m sharing with you?” I asked, while resisting the temptation to pinch myself to make sure I was awake.

“This stateroom is booked for Mr. Newton and Mr. Colby. You are Mr. Newton?” Miller asked me, sounding a little uncertain as he shifted his gaze between me and Denton.

“I am... I just thought...” I glanced back to the open door where Ollie remained wearing an expression I considered was like my own—stunned. “It was me and Ollie sharing,” I said, feeling way more flustered and pleased at Ollie’s shrugging shoulders.

“I’m sharing with Garrett’s best friend, Beckett. I thought I mentioned it? I haven’t met him yet, but Garrett assures me he’s nice.” Ollie shrugged his shoulders once more, a skeptical look on his face.

Denton stepped closer and I felt the heat from his semi-naked body. He smelled like a summer beach, leaving my brain taking its own vacation. As the steward walked back to the open door, I realized I was too distracted to even remember his name.

He's leaving us alone!

I'm going to be alone in a room with Denton.

A naked Denton...

"If there is nothing else, I'll leave you to prepare for departure. Drinks are being served on the top deck. You'll find the directions in your personal pack, and on the app we recommend you download to keep updated on all the activities on the ship. If you require anything at any time, just press this call button and someone will attend to you." He gave us a bright smile and then shut the door quietly, leaving me alone with Denton and clueless about what to say or do.

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Denton

I used the towel on my shoulders to rub absently at my wet hair, searching for something to say now we were alone. There were so many thoughts running through Victor's head, I could see them in the changing expressions I couldn't keep up with. Was he okay with sharing with me? Had I seen desire? Longing? Was that wishful thinking when his gaze had dipped and he'd looked at my body?

I didn't have a gym honed body, but my job kept me physically fit and when I could be bothered, I liked to run. It cleared my head and right now, I could do with that when I couldn't decide how to act around Victor.

Not once when I'd thought about sharing with him and revealing my attraction had I considered how awkward I'd feel. It didn't help that I'd never seen him dressed as he was. Have I ever seen him in a pair of shorts?

Looking at him dressed in them, they revealed smooth, lean legs, and I imagined them hooked around my hips while he rode...

I shut down my thoughts when I considered my state of undress. I didn't need to scare Victor and have him running to find Leeson to ask to swap with someone else.

I'd had a moment when I'd entered the stateroom and was glad no one else had witnessed my freakout at seeing the enormous bed I'd get to share with Victor. A grown man of thirty-six surely shouldn't feel like the seventeen-year-old who was about to lose his virginity. I'd told myself that throughout my shower, when my brain painted images of me in bed with Victor and not the twin beds I'd envisioned would

be in the room.

I blew out a breath, counted to ten, and gave Victor a bright smile. “You okay with sharing the bed?” I glanced at the couch that looked big enough to accommodate my long frame... just. “I could bunk on the couch... if you want?”

Please say no.

Yes, I’d agreed to share, but sharing a bed with a guy I’d been having hot and sweaty dreams about was asking a lot when that man was Victor. I wanted to take it slow and show Victor I was interested in more than just sex. I just needed other parts of me to get on board with that idea, too!

Victor rubbed at his jaw, a sure sign he was uncertain. “The bed’s big,” he murmured, hardly loud enough for me to catch, almost as if he was talking to himself.

“It is. I’m sure you could fit four people in it,” I pointed out, because it really was that big. Still, I’d be having a conversation with Leeson. The damn minx had to have known the rooms held only one bed.

Victor hopped from one sneakered foot to the other, his gaze remaining on the bed as the pink in his cheeks darkened. “I think us two is more than enough for me.”

The way he said it gave me pause. Had he been picturing himself on the bed with me? Or was he thinking about other men? The ship was full of them. I’d seen a few very attractive men when I’d boarded. Men who I was sure would take one look at Victor’s blond good looks and eyes that held a vulnerability that punched at the gut and would want to get to know him better.

Why hadn’t I thought about that before?

A neanderthal was never a good look on any man.

When he looked at me, my heart bounced hard against my ribcage at what I could see there in his eyes. “Will you be okay sharing with me?”

I frowned, not liking the implication I’d have a problem being next to him. “I’m not sure what you mean, Vic?” I asked, not wanting to second guess him.

The blush deepened so much, he looked like he had a severe case of sunburn. “I’m gay.”

“Yep... I know that, what’s your point?” Instead of replying, he chewed nervously on his lower lip and it struck he might not have figured out I was bisexual. “You know I’m bisexual, right, Vic? I have no problem sharing a bed with a guy. None.”

The room must have excellent sound-proofing because there was no other noise coming from outside or the staterooms on either side of us, making the silence more noticeable. The lip he was chewing on popped out, all plump and biteable. But the silence remained unbroken between us at my last comment.

Visible tension rolled off him as his mouth closed, opened, closed, and opened once more, yet he said nothing. Whatever he was thinking, I couldn’t get a read on whether this news was good or bad.

My own nerves were playing havoc with me, so I broke eye contact by bringing the towel up to rub at my hair. “I should get dressed, then we can go find the bar and the others.” I kept my tone light, going to the closet where I’d placed my clothes when I’d first arrived.

I dug out a pair of board shorts and a slim fitting T-shirt in black and continued to prattle on, leaving intermittent breaks for Victor to answer. When he didn’t answer, I

started to sweat, rendering my shower pointless. I kept my gaze away from him, hoping that by keeping acting like this was a normal situation, neither of us would freak the fuck out. I was close to him when I dropped my towel to the floor, going for a locker room vibe.

The indrawn breath was loud enough to give my heart another, smaller jolt. I decided to forgo underwear in case I wanted to take a dip in the pool as it was hot outside already and was only going to get hotter. The little bit of exhibitionist in me couldn't resist giving a brief show, so I flexed my ass before stepping into my shorts. I'd been told more than once my bubble butt was hot as fuck. Working on that, I took my time to pull up my shorts, feeling Victor's gaze on me before I turned and smiled at him. I didn't miss where he was staring, or the definite desire that gave his eyes a beautiful glow.

That has to be a good start, right?

I directed my gaze to his clothes. "You gonna go as you are, or change?"

"Leeson wants us all to match."

I cringed inwardly at thoughts of wearing a Hawaiian print shirt. The orange flowers on Victor's were... hideous. "Does he have shirts for all of us?" I enquired, keeping my thoughts to myself about that.

For the first time, Victor grinned widely, clearly hearing the trepidation I'd failed to hide behind my words. The transformation to his features made me stare and acknowledge the warmth that always followed when he looked at me in this way. "Yep. He has different ones for the activities he's got planned for the bachelor parties."

I groaned and picked up my T-shirt, tugging the towel I'd dangling around my neck

and dropping it on top of the other one. “Is this the price we’re paying for the cruise?” Head through the hole, I slipped on the T-shirt.

“Isn’t it worth it?” Victor turned in a circle, his sunny smile remaining. “This is rad! I’d never have been able to afford the luxury of this kind of trip.” He chuckled. “If I’d had to pay, I’d be stuck somewhere with no window and probably next to an engine rattling my bones all night.”

I fake shuddered, matching his grin with one of my own. “Hawaiian shirts it is.” I picked up the damp towels and headed into the bathroom to hang them up.

Back in the main room a few seconds later, with my travel clothes tucked under my arm, I found Victor had opened the glass doors and was standing outside. The smell of warm, salty sea air was welcome. Seagull cries and laughter weren’t what gave me the cheerful buzz growing inside me. It was the man who leaned casually against the rail, looking more relaxed than I’d seen him in the three years of friendship I’d cultivated with him.

I blew out a breath and went to stack my clothes into the bags they supplied for laundry, then rolled my shoulders back to release my inner tension from his reaction at finding me as his bed partner for two weeks. He wasn’t freaking out, I was.

Far easier to focus on doing something, I quickly applied sun cream to my exposed skin. I took a deep inhale and slowly exhaled, before I called out, “Ready to go have fun?”

Victor

The top deck was split into two levels. Each had two pools but only the top level had a bar on the edge of the pool that catered to those in the water. Barely three hours had passed since the ship had set sail and I thought everyone on the ship had wandered up here to check out the scenery. I'd never seen a field full of differing flowers, yet as I stared around at the bodies swarming like bees seeking nectar—the thousands of men—it was the only way I could describe it. Those who wore clothing came in bright colors. Those revealing more skin than I'd seen in a long time were carefree and unconcerned about body shape and size. It felt liberating and it gave me a bit of a confidence boost.

I tapped my foot in time to the music playing out of the huge speakers placed around the deck. The sound battled with the noise of hundreds of men who had all come to the meet and greet party. And it was a party. It was way livelier than I'd expected and thankfully Garrett had found a free table under a sunshade. A little overwhelmed, I sucked on the straw of the very strong cocktail that Denton had gone to get me. I was still reeling from the reality we were sharing. That he had actually been there, in my stateroom... naked.

Jeez, his ass was a thing of beauty.

So not where I wanted my thoughts to wander when I was in public, in shorts!

I gulped down a large mouthful of fruitiness and scoped out the crowd. There were obvious couples, like Garrett and Leeson, and I spotted a few throuple's amongst the throng. But there were decidedly more single men from the way many were

behaving. Some had clearly dressed—or not dressed—to impress. I tugged at the hem of my shirt nervously, considering if I should take it off. I was pale skinned and blond, so I avoided the sun. Way too many men looked like they'd used tanning booths just to get sun ready. Golden skin glistened everywhere in the sunlight.

My attention got snagged on Denton—for what felt like the tenth time—when a golden skinned beauty swayed up to him. Pretty eyes batted long, dark lashes at Denton, whose grin was charming as he leaned in when the guy rose on his bare toes to speak directly into his ear.

He's into guys.

He likes guys.

Snickerfuckinfdoodle!

Sweating at that reality, my hand squeezed the stem of my glass as I watched the two men. Did the guy have polish on his toes? From head to toe he looked preened, plucked, and buffed, nothing like me. I sighed and sucked on the straw, waiting for the liquor to hit as the shine of the day got rubbed away when the dude stroked a hand over Denton's forearm.

"Stop staring, and go show Denny you're into him, rather than pretending indifference over here," Leeson hissed next to my ear.

I jerked, my drink splashing the back of my hand as I turned to Leeson, getting a whiff of the strawberry daiquiri he'd opted for earlier.

"I knew it!" I accused, understanding why Leeson had evaded me earlier and had done his best not to meet my gaze when I'd tried to pin him down. "You set me up. Does Denny know what you did?" I blamed the fiery ball of yellow in the sky for

how hot I got at the thought of Denton figuring out he'd gotten set up with me.

Leeson shook his head, but I didn't miss the cagey look that flashed in his eyes. "No! What I did was give you the opportunity to get to know Denny away from work. From Nese." He nudged my shoulder with his, giving me a smile that was all innocence. "You're wasting it, sitting here pretending not to watch him. If you aren't careful, one of the other slick looking dudes showing an interest will skip right in and steal the opportunity. He's bisexual," he stated.

"Have you always known that?" I found myself asking, unsure if I was the only dumb one who hadn't listened to the gossips. But then Denton had never dated anyone other than a woman so how was I supposed to know it was true?

"Who are we watching, my love?" Garrett questioned as he appeared behind the sun lounger, his hands resting on Leeson's shoulders.

"I've only got eyes for you," Leeson replied, glancing up and fluttering his eyelashes, giving Garrett a coy look that got him laughing.

"Good answer, but I suspect you're up to no good." Garrett looked over their heads toward the group of men Denton was with. Garrett's friend Beckett stood on the periphery. Tall and commandeering, there was something about him that suggested approaching him would be a bad thing. Garrett's brow furrowed and there was a flicker of worry before he returned his attention to Leeson.

Back were the fluttering eyelashes when Leeson twisted to reach up and stroke the side of Garrett's face. "Who, me? I just want everyone to have a good time, is all."

Garrett leaned into the touch, his eyes softening in a way that revealed how much he loved Leeson. "I can see that with the pairing of our friends!"

The rumble of Garrett's voice got drowned out by someone who tapped at a microphone before a guy spoke. "Welcome to your Caribbean cruise..."

I half listened to what the guy was saying when I couldn't resist looking back at where Denton was standing. He'd turned to listen, and I got treated once more to his back view. The shorts he'd slipped on over naked skin weren't tight enough to display the firm, golden globes beneath, but the image had become firmly etched into my memory. His ass really was spectacular.

I shut my eyes and there it was in all its tight glory. The palms of my hands tingled with thoughts of how it would feel to get a grip. To sink my teeth in and taste that golden flesh.

A wave of desire overheated my skin and I quashed the image, eyes opening only to connect with Denton's stare. I recognized the quizzical look and had to resist fanning myself when more heat coursed through me.

My mouth dried and I worked to direct my thoughts and gaze away from the man who was filling my thoughts. Only all I could focus on was that Denton must sunbath naked at the lack of tan line.

I'd been to his home on more than a few occasions and he had an enclosed yard. Did he frequently lie out there nude?

I blew out a breath as my shorts got a little snugger at how I envisioned he'd look stretched out naked. My eyes betrayed me and darted back to Denton, who remained staring at me.

Behave! How is this better than thinking about biting his ass, I reprimanded myself and attempted to hold Denton's gaze this time. His head tilted to the side and a smile spread over his face, his eyes lighting in what seemed to be an open invitation to join

him.

The polished dude who remained close gave me a narrowed eyed stare of warning.

I was into him way before you, matey, I projected right back. Up off my seat before I could register my intention, I cursed for not being sexy as he watched my approach. I waved my nearly empty glass at him, to use as an excuse when I reached him.

“Need another drink? I’m going to the bar,” I asked with as much cheerfulness as I could muster, pretending I wasn’t getting daggers from Mr. Polished next to him.

Denton slung a casual arm around my shoulders, coming in close enough I could smell sun cream along with his body wash. “Love one. I’ll come with you.”

He gave Mr Polished a grin that wasn’t as bright as the one he’d given me—or that was how it seemed to me—then guided me through the crowd towards the bar that was furthest from the man and microphone.

“What’s it gonna be?” Denton asked when he wedged us into a space a man had vacated a second earlier. It wasn’t big enough for two, but I definitely wasn’t complaining. He had to stand at a slight angle to fit in the space, which meant I got the chance to feel the side of his body pressed against my back and thigh. I had to fight hard to resist the urge to lean into him.

It took way longer than it should have to answer him when I noticed his quirked up brow and the glint of humor. With the liquor buzz I had going on and how it wouldn’t take much for my willpower to slip from my grasp, I considered what the safest option was. “Maybe I’d be better off having a soft drink this time.”

Denton didn’t question my choice in any way, or push me, which I was glad of. Fighting the attraction was hard enough as it was. Add in the courage that liquor

could give and I would never be able to resist the temptation to ask for what I wanted; a kiss. Denton's mouth on mine.

"Can we have two virgin cocktails," Denton asked the bartender when he came to serve us. The guy, like the other staff, wore a white T-shirt with the ship logo embroidered on to it, and black cargo shorts. Smart, yet casual. It gave a more relaxed vibe, which I was sure was the intended purpose. He was all flirty smiles, but Denton, if he noticed, didn't acknowledge it.

"Having fun?" I asked, for want of anything better to say and break what felt like an uncomfortable silence between us. Although that could have just been me resisting the urge to lean into him.

His lips brushed the rim of my ear as a hot breath sent shivers down my spine. "I am now. I was hoping you'd come rescue me."

Startled by the comment, my eyes widened as I shifted a few inches to look at him. "You wanted me to rescue you from Mr. Polished?"

He barked out a laugh, his body shaking against mine pleasingly. It stole my breath. His eyes gleamed with amusement. "Mr. Polished, is it? Suits him."

Blushing a hot pink that would definitely not suit my complexion, I groaned under my breath at how my thoughts had tumbled right out of my mouth at his proximity and the strength of the drink I'd had. "Sorry, that was rude," I murmured self-consciously.

"Don't be, I'm sure he'd be happy for someone to notice the effort he'd gone to, to look like that. He's probably a great guy, just not the kind I go for."

"He isn't," I gasped. The guy was beautiful and clearly looked after himself. He was

nothing like me, unfortunately.

Denton's expression warmed in a way that made his eyes seem like dark pools that invited me in for a swim. Captivated, they held my attention. His finger grazed my cheekbone and although the touch was light, it resonated through my body. Through my heart, which beat a hard tattoo against my ribs, which, with our closeness, he had to feel.

Then he spoke and set off my heart at a thunderous gallop. "No. I much prefer blonds with pale, delicate skin that feels as soft as a petal."

I was gasping again—a new look for me—when his meaning sank in, his gaze never wavering from mine.

Was I wrong or did he mean... me?

As if he'd plucked the thought from my head, he nodded. "I'm interested in you..."

"Here we go. Two virgin cocktails, enjoy," the bartender said, sliding them towards us with a flourish.

When Denton glanced away, I felt, more than witnessed, his frustration. Where he'd been relaxed a moment ago, tension stiffened his body.

I parted my lips to say something, only for another person to push into me from behind. I glanced over my shoulder ready to snap, but found a tipsy-looking Ollie. His glazed expression revealed how he'd spent the last few hours.

I looked at Ollie with concern. He wasn't a drinker, or he'd never been in the time we'd lived together.

Ollie gave me a not-so-subtle nudge with his foot, pushing me toward Denton. “Careful,” I murmured. “Maybe we should take you back to your room.”

“With all that hotness in there, I don’t think so,” he said in a tone that suggested he thought he was whispering, but in reality was shouting.

Denton shifted so he was standing at Ollie’s side, eyeing him with as much concern as me as he pushed the virgin cocktail into Ollie’s hand. “Drink this,” he encouraged, while I worked on figuring out what my friend meant.

Hotness?

Was the room too hot?

Ollie gave him a buzzed looking smile and two seconds later, offered back the now empty glass.

“More,” he slurred, clearly two sheets to the wind and unable to notice it was alcohol free.

I lifted my glass and handed it to him, knowing it could help sober him up. “Have mine.”

“Thanks, such a good friend.” He swallowed my drink as fast as the other and gave me a slight cross eyed stare when he offered me the empty glass. “You’re... my friend.”

I nodded, unsure where this was going as he sounded drunker by the second.

“Swap with me... I’ll share... with Denny,” he hiccuped. “You haven’t told him... how much you... wanna date him... yet?” he continued, making me wish we weren’t

having this conversation in front of Denton.

I broke eye contact with Ollie for a split second to look in Denton's direction. "He's... drunk," I stuttered, hating the fact Ollie had called me out right after the paused conversation. Problem was, Denton was grinning back at me in such a way it competed with the heat of the Florida sun.

"No, I's not," Ollie slurred once more.

For a brief second, I considered trying to reason with Ollie, then realized it would be pointless. "Let's go back to the room." I was careful not to point out which room, still unsure what his issue was with his room.

Ollie laughed and shook his head, then his expression morphed into a sullen look, his head lolling toward where everyone else attending the wedding part was. "He's watchin' me."

"Who?" I asked and tried to see who Ollie was looking at when he failed to respond.

Ollie slumped against me seconds later, moaning, "I'm gonna puke."

Damn it all to hell!

Denton

The spray from the cold water hitting my skin as I stepped into the shower stole my breath and eradicated my brain-fog at a violent rate. My lungs seized as I shivered at the eruption of goosebumps when icy rivers of water ran down my body. Curses flew out as I forced myself to stay under the pelting iciness for another twenty seconds before switching it over to hot.

When I got my breath back, I reached for the shower gel, my thoughts sharp enough for the conversation from the previous day to start a replay. I'd taken my courage with both hands and gotten royally shafted first by the bartender's interruption and, if that wasn't bad enough, by Ollie gate crashing my conversation with Victor.

My thoughts got hooked on the drunken comments Ollie had made. Had Victor wanted to date me all this time? Was Ollie telling the truth in his drunken state? Wasn't it true that drunk people often spoke the truth?

Victor's behavior was hard to analyze. His insistence that Ollie was drunk didn't suggest it was an outright denial, did it? That question had replayed more than a hundred times overnight. Was what was going on with me mutual? Had Victor been hiding his feelings because I'd dated Nese for so long?

A sinking feeling came at the truth of the possibility. Fuck... shit...

I had erected a barrier and shut out the possibility of more. It was exactly what I had done. A shudder ran through me that had nothing to do with a cold shower. I'd felt a... visceral attraction to Victor despite his bruised state when we met. Had that

formed my need to step away, use Nese...

My head dropped, water soaking the back of my neck as my head hung between my shoulders and I braced my hands on the wet tiles.

I used Nese.

A bitter taste coated my mouth. The lack of promises wasn't for her, but for me. Realizing that I'd been a total asshole was a real low point.

I blew out a breath, heaving a sigh. Fucking asshole!

Had this really been about protecting me, or was it Victor? And where did that leave me? He now knew I was bisexual, but would that make him open to more with me? The next thought made me wince. Would he also think I was an asshole to Nese?

Everything so far had conspired to prevent me from having an open conversation about... well, everything.

Was this karma?

I'd felt Victor's gaze on me the day before and I'd never felt more alive. Had Victor calling the guy—I couldn't even remember his name—Mr. Polished, been through jealousy? I admitted I wasn't averse to the idea of Victor feeling a little possessive over me.

I really was an asshole...

I blew out a breath, going back to scrubbing at my body to rid myself of the smell of stale liquor and vomit.

After Ollie's ill-timed confession, then wanting to be ill, we'd left the pool area in an all-fired hurry and got him back to our room before he'd chucked up. He then spent several more hours getting friendly with the porcelain throne. Whatever my idea was of having a memorable first night lying next to Victor after seeing the bed—even if we had done no more than sleep—Ollie's retching and the stench of alcohol induced vomiting ruined our first night in the cabin.

As I saw it, karma had a big meaty hand in this.

My other reward for being a good Samaritan was that I'd barely slept for more than three hours, much the same as Victor as we'd helped Ollie, wet noodle that he was, back and forth to the bathroom. His limbs were all loose and not going in any direction he wanted them to.

When he'd finally stopped puking his ring up at five am and fallen into a deep sleep, he'd ended up sandwiched between us. His skin leaked liquor, making it smell like a distillery, and if that wasn't bad enough, the vomit breath in my face made my stomach churn. It was impossible to forget he was there on the bed and all of that was what drove me into the shower.

Yet another sigh filled the steamy shower as I worked some shower gel into a lather to wash my legs, breathing deep to replace the smell that lingered in my nostrils.

As I finished washing the stench of Ollie off, a loud knock froze me in place as I envisioned Ollie needing to puke once more and ruin the smell in the bathroom.

Before I could groan in complaint, I heard Victor.

"Denny, could you hurry? I need to pee," he called out.

My cock, which was in my hand, reacted to the illicit thought of letting him come in

and use the bathroom while I was showering. Years of sharing a locker room with colleagues had removed a lot of my inhibitions about being naked around others. I hesitated one more second, thinking over what the possible outcomes were.

In for a cent in for a dollar!

“You can use the toilet... I’ll look the other way.” I would. But shutting my eyes was going to have to happen to resist temptation.

“Argh... erm... yeah... maybe not...”

“Get in here. We are both men, it’s not like you piss gold and I need to be jealous.”

There was a choked laugh and I watched the door open at a snail’s pace through the steamy glass.

When Victor’s head peered around the door, I swallowed a chuckle. I couldn’t see his expression through the wet glass, but I’d swear he looked like a deer in the headlights from the way he hovered.

I made a show of facing away. Then I shut my eyes for good measure, resisting the temptation to peek.

“Peeing gold, good one,” he joked, just loud enough for me to hear over the water.

When my cock thickened under my palm at the sounds of sneakers coming closer on the tiled floor, I dropped it faster than a hot coal, blushing. Could he see my hand? See my cock?

Argh fuck!

To keep my body angled away, I twisted my hips and waved my hands around in exaggerated moves, washing off the soap remaining on my skin until I heard him peeing.

I flushed at how my cock thickened like a damn dirty perv.

So fucking wrong, man!

It wasn't at him peeing. It wasn't... I was positive that it was his cock was right there for me to look at, and I wanted to look, desperately.

Don't you dare peek...

My eyelids scrunched tighter together as I kept my word.

How long I stood there was anyone's guess, but my eyes fired open and the air left my lungs, making my body sag in relief, when he called, "cheers," and the door clicked shut.

My gaze dipped to my unrepentant cock that stood proud from my groin, begging for attention. I scowled. "You're getting fuck all off me!"

Talking to my cock? Yeah, I'd certainly reached an all-time low!

~/~/~/~

The karma king didn't seem finished with me as I barely had time to groan at spotting Mr. Polished approach and launch himself into the pool right into my path. I didn't have time to shield my face as his body created a surge of water that smacked straight into me. It ran down my body as I pushed my feet to the bottom of the pool, allowing me to get the chlorine water out of my eyes. My peaceful swim was over.

Mr. Polished surfaced next to me, still looking pretty polished if I discounted the odd looking wet eyelashes.

“Hey,” he said, grinning in a way that reminded me of a piranha ready to feed. “I’ve been looking for you, to finish what we started before we got interrupted yesterday.” There was a sulky edge to his voice that set off alarm bells.

“We got interrupted?” I questioned, feeling a little out of my depth. I made out my feet were treading water and back peddled towards the shallower area of the pool, which was where I’d left the rest of the gang. We’d come to chill and sunbathe after lunch, only I’d been restless after Victor had asked me to rub sun lotion on his back.

If he was attempting to torture me with all that silky, pale skin, it was working. Cooling off had been the order of the day, though now I wasn’t so sure.

From my position, I couldn’t see if anyone was watching me. After my shower this morning, I’d once more gotten no chance to speak with Victor as Leeson had shown up. His first concern was finding Ollie. Leeson hadn’t come alone. Beckett, Garrett’s childhood friend who no longer lived in Sweet Haven, who I’d barely got to exchange pleasantries with, swept a dazed-looking Ollie out of our room without ceremony.

I’d got the impression that Beckett was pissed, but why, when he didn’t know Ollie, was something that wasn’t my concern. Leeson, on the other hand, seemed highly amused by the situation and had laughed his ass off after Ollie left without saying a word. It was then Leeson explained the second reason he’d come. A reminder that after breakfast we had a dress rehearsal for the wedding.

The morning, despite breakfast being a quiet affair, had been long and emotional. It was a complicated thing to get married at sea, requiring considerable paperwork. My belief the captain could marry the happy couple got blown out of the water. This was

not the case and at great expense, Garrett had organized for a celebrant to come on the cruise, especially for Leeson so he could have his wedding at sea like he wanted.

When we got to the rehearsal part, the two men had brought most of us to tears at the depth of emotion expressed by both of them when they'd said their vows to each other. We'd run through everyone's role twice before Garrett and Leeson were happy. By then, it was lunchtime. We'd stayed as a group and eaten, then went to check out the different pools, all ten of them, before finally picking the quietest.

It appeared we weren't the only ones to scope out the ship... or was it Mr. Polished scoping out me? I'd been nothing more than polite the day before, making casual conversation. It seemed Mr. Polished had other ideas on that. Was I going to have to spend time avoiding the guy?

Karma...

He flashed me a high wattage smile revealing teeth that were far too perfect, making me think they had to be veneers. If he was a game hunter, I would have suggested I was what he was intending to capture. As flattered as I was, I didn't want to be captured by anyone other than Victor.

"Yes. It's easy to tell how attracted you were to me, so I've been searching the ship for you. I'm a go-getter. I always go after what I want."

Huh?

How attracted I was to him? Searching the ship! Stalker sprang to mind when he fluttered spiky lashes, which were now drying in the sun and resembled a clump of dead spider legs and were in no way attractive, like I suspected he believed. Creepy was what they looked like, all hundred stuck around the guys eyes.

Fuck, this did not bode well. The man clearly had an abundance of self-confidence. “You seem like a great guy, but I was just being friendly, is all,” I explained, hoping to let him down gently.

His smile got brighter, if that was possible, and sent tendrils of unease through me when he never hesitated. He just kept getting closer as I backed up, feeling like... prey. Those in the pool paid us no attention.

I glanced over my shoulder, sending a ‘someone please help me’ look at those at the side of the pool. I wasn’t too proud to beg at this stage. Leeson’s brows rose from under his sunglasses, but I didn’t have time to suss out what it meant when I finally hit the tiled wall. The air left my chest at the sudden stop.

Water splashed around me, and the guy giggled as he reached to stroke a proprietary hand down my chest, heading south, “Now I’ve got you,” he purred, “let’s see what you have to offer.

Oh fuck!

As a possessive hand—the only way I could describe how it felt with its firmness—landed on my shoulder, I jerk guiltily somehow already aware of who the pale hand belonged to. I sucked in a breath and tilted my head back to look up and met Victor’s upside down expression. Damnation. Was he scowling? Had I fucked up again?

“Babe, can you get me another drink? I’m parched.” Even upside down, I didn’t miss the light of indignation as he shifted his attention to Mr. Polished and I got that he wasn’t asking a question. I had been given my instructions.

I swallowed a chuckle at the thrill of seeing Victor’s ‘back the fuck away, he’s mine’ look.

“Of course, honey pie,” I replied, a flirty grin appearing, though I’m sure Victor never noticed as he didn’t take his gaze off Mr. Polished.

Carefully removing the hand attempting to slip into my swim shorts, I didn’t know whether to smile or not as the guy clearly didn’t know how to read a crowd.

“Sorry. This is Vic, my boyfriend,” I explained, reaching up to caress the back of Victor’s hand, playing along. “He needs a drink, and that’s my cue to take care of my man.”

I side stepped, loving that Victor never let go of my shoulder. I decided not to listen to the voice in the back of my head that said this wasn’t real.

“It was nice seeing you again, and I hope you find someone to have fun with,” I stressed the latter, hoping he got the point that it wasn’t going to be me, then quickly hefted my ass out of the pool.

Victor’s hand slipped into mine, warm and dry, his fingers curling around mine and giving my body an energy drink kind of buzz when his gaze lingered on me. His expression wasn’t one I was familiar with, but it gave me hope, right or wrong, I wanted him to look at me like he was again and again and again...

We sauntered towards the sun lounger he’d been asleep on without a backward glance. I didn’t release his hand as he sat, but moved forward until we were face to face. I mouthed, “thank you.” Then more loudly, I asked, “What would you like, honey pie?”

His mouth quirked up at the edges, a sign of amusement, which I took as a good omen until he said, “I think I’ll have a daiquiri. It’s time to live a little.”

Mouth open and catching flies for about five seconds, I stared at him in confusion

after his declaration in the small hours of the morning that he was going to avoid drinking, after seeing what had happened to Ollie.

“You want alcohol?” I asked in disbelief when I found my voice. My belly was full of nervous knots at what he could be planning.

Victor

When Leeson's elbow had connected with my ribs, bringing me out of a pleasant haze of warm sleepiness, I'd nearly fallen off my lounge. Only when he'd made a show of pointing to the pool did it register why he'd done it.

"Get over there," he'd hissed.

I hadn't needed to be told twice. My self-consciousness about my pale skin had nothing on my desire to get Mr. Polished away from Denton. We might not have had an auspicious start with the interruptions, but Denton wasn't going to be taken from me by someone else, not when he'd declared himself bisexual. I'd scowled all the way to the pool's edge before coming up with a ploy to get Denton out of the water.

A part of me remained in shock at my bold move and calling Denton my boyfriend. Another part was even more shocked that he'd not contradicted me. Yeah, that left me in need of something stronger than a fruit drink. I'd required something strong enough to stop me from having a panic attack at what I'd done. It wasn't in my nature to make such a move. I had little dating experience before Davey and he'd chased me, not the other way around. After him, well, I'd not initially been interested until Denton, who I'd assumed was straight.

"Yes, I do," I replied, watching him with interest when color diffused his cheeks until they were a dark pink.

"Right... okay... if you're sure..."

Why was he stuttering?

I glanced at Leeson, who was muffling his giggles with the back of his hand. When I returned my attention to Denton, unclear what the heck I was missing, I pronounced my nod just to be clear. "I am."

When he spun around muttering under his breath, "karma, I'm beginning to hate you," I once more looked back at Leeson.

"Am I missing something? What does he mean about karma? Is that what Mr. Polished guy's name is?" Strange names were a thing, weren't they?

"How would I know what his name is?" Leeson spluttered in between bouts of deep belly laughter. "I haven't met the guy officially, but I like your nickname for him, Mr Polished."

"Behave, Lee," Garrett muttered sternly, tipping his sunglasses down his nose from his seated position at the table next to the sun loungers where Beckett, Quinton, Nolen, Haines and Teo, the rest of the wedding party, sat with a subdued-looking Ollie.

The bunch were friendly. Of the eight of us invited to Leeson and Garret's wedding, only Teo was family. There was a planned ceremony in Florida on our return for Leeson and Garrett's other family members. Teo, Leeson's brother, was the only male family member brave enough to come on a gay cruise. He was Leeson's older brother and was sharing with Nolen, who was an old school friend of Leeson's. Haines was a chocolatier who was friends first with Garrett and married to Quinton, who had the most amazing laugh. One he unleashed when Leeson attempted to smother his glee using his hands, and failed as he bodily shook with uncontrolled giggles on the lounge next to mine.

What was I missing? Why was he laughing so hard?

Most of the men's eyes held mirth when I swept my gaze around the table, at a loss to what I'd somehow missed. "What gives?" I mouthed at Leeson, doing my best to control the heat wanting to flood my already flushed skin.

When he finally answered, "nothing," Denton was back carrying two glasses which looked like he'd visited a farmer's market to gather every fruit imaginable.

"Wow, I don't remember the cocktails yesterday having so much fruit in them," I murmured as I took the glass Denton offered me, wearing what I'd describe as a guilty look.

He shrugged nonchalantly and walked over to the one remaining empty seat at the table, placing his glass down with a thud before sitting. Droplets of water clung to his golden skin and light danced off them. They glistened and drew my attention to the musculature of his shoulders and chest.

I licked my lips, the hand not holding the glass tingling at the memory of freely touching that warm, wet skin. To stop my thoughts from heading in a direction that could cause me a problem, I took a sip of the cocktail after fighting my way through the bowl of fruit to get to the edge of the chilled glass.

Even though I'd eaten a big lunch, the first sip of the fruity cocktail hit like a pissed off ice hockey player launching himself at another. Of all that was holy, the liquor crashed through my bloodstream with equal force to a hurricane. I blew out a breath, about to place the glass down, when I caught Mr. Polished placing his tiny backside on a sun lounger directly opposite us.

My eyes narrowed, and I brought the glass back to my lips, giving him a warning look. When he replied with a confident grin, I took a big gulp of the drink, knowing I

was going to need liquid courage if I wanted to keep the guy away from Denton. To do that, I was going to have to continue the pretense we were indeed boyfriends. Not that I had a problem with that, I would just need to remind myself it was fake and not real. I could do that? Couldn't I?

I lounged back in a way I hoped made me look sexy, trying not to think about the fact I was neither polished nor sculpted. One glance around the poolside and I realized I fitted in with a good seventy-five percent of the men there. Average. Which I was happy with, I didn't have the energy or money to spend on looking like Mr. Polished.

Was that what Denton liked?

Didn't girls go in for all that beauty stuff? I frowned, trying to recall conversations with Nese about her visits to the beauty parlor. Several sips later, my mind buzzing with the alcohol, I was none the wiser about whether Nese had indeed mentioned anything in particular Denton liked her to do.

Draining the glass of the cocktail, I eyed the remaining fruit. I shrugged to myself and, feeling more than a little tipsy, fished it out, enjoying the fruity hit of liquor.

When I turned in Denton's direction to get his attention for another drink, I found his gaze was on me. It sent a thrill of pleasure through me and I gave him a lopsided grin, waving my empty glass at him.

Something flashed in his eyes and disappeared before I could register what it was, however, he got up and came to me.

"I need a refill." I offered a bright smile, hoping he'd continue to play along, like earlier. "Can I have the same, babe?" I asked, keeping in character, aware Mr. Polished hadn't shifted his attention from us—from Denton.

There was a long pause before he took the glass. “Are you sure?”

“Oh yeah, I’m only just getting...” I tugged on the waistband of his still wet swim shorts playfully, giving him a salacious look, “revved up, babe.”

With my knuckles brushing against his stomach, I didn’t miss how the muscles quivered beneath them.

“Revved up,” he gasped out in a breathy tone I wasn’t familiar with.

It was easier to nod when my gaze followed his to where my hand was and the impressive bulge just a short distance from it, which left me dry mouthed. From my sitting position, I could see he was semi-erect, and it became obvious he was a grower.

Was that due to me?

My ass cheeks clenched tightly, imaging it was and just how he’d feel inside me with the thickness and length of his cock.

“Like what you see, honey pie?”

His husky voice cut through my fog of lust, and I blushed when I realized I’d been intently staring at his cock. My attention moved away from dangerous territory, back to the amused and sexy smirk Denton wore when our gazes clashed.

“Drink... I need...” I blew out a breath, attempting to get my head and body to work together, though with how aroused I was, that felt impossible. “A drink... yeah... that’s what I want... need, another drink,” I stammered and, at the same time, yanked my hand out of his shorts, more than a little embarrassed at my obviously dorky behavior. Well, that and getting caught ogling him.

Denton lowered into a crouching position in front of me, the strain on his shorts becoming more defined, making me tremble with desire. The touch of his hand to my knee scorched my skin like the sun above. “Are you sure about that?” he enquired, his eyes twinkling. “We could go back to the room... chill for a bit?”

Room! He wants to go back to our room...

“Why?” I blurted out, when me, naked, riding his cock, was what I came up with, then I cursed myself for questioning him when we had an audience. An audience that was listening with a snort of amusement coming from Leeson’s direction and a couple of chuckles from those in the peanut gallery—at the table.

“Thought you might be tired after last night.”

Room! He wants to go back to our room...

Then I got a vision of me naked, riding his cock and I cursed the lack of any kind of covering over my lap. My body was fully on board with what Denton was obviously suggesting, but then my brain kicked in. If we left the pool now, it would be totally obvious to the rest of the group what was happening and my stomach squirmed at the thought of being so blatant. I frantically tried to think of something to say that wouldn’t feel like a rejection.

At that moment, I caught movement across the pool, where our friend Mr. Polished had set up camp. He was staring, so adding as much sass to my expression as I could, I slowly and purposefully walked my fingers from the waistband of Denton’s shorts, up to his chest.

“That’s sweet of you to think of me,” I said, when my fingers reached his firm pec, “but I had a nap while you were in the pool. Besides, I fancy staying for the water polo.”

“Water polo?” Denton asked, wearing a look of alarm.

“Yeah, it was on the app. I’m pretty sure this is the pool it’s happening in. I’ve never played before. I thought it might be fun to...play with balls,” I said, looking up to flutter my eyelashes at him as he swallowed, hard.

Obviously still feeling the effects of the cocktail, I let my hand linger on his chest for a moment before rolling over on the lounge, making sure to give my hips an extra little wiggle in the process.

“Oh, before you head back to the bar,” I said, as innocently as possible, “would you mind covering my back and thighs with some more cream?”

Denton

Hell, I'm living in hell and it's all my own doing!

Victor had a playful side that I'd never fully seen and marveled at, or I would have if I wasn't attempting to express to every other guy in the pool—all clambering for his attention—that he was off limits. Victor's shy, flirty smiles set my teeth on edge when he aimed it at anyone else and made it really hard to keep my head in the game and help my team beat the opposing one.

Water polo, I'd discovered, wasn't my kind of sport because a wet and playful Victor was utter torture. He'd had another two potent cocktails, and the extra fruit I'd asked the guy behind the bar to add had made no difference to the effect, it appeared.

Bright, glassy eyes and hands that mercilessly wandered down my body like forty tentacles said karma was having a great time creating this sexy monster. Victor seemed to be everywhere at once and a certain part of me loved it. It just made it hard to remember the rules I was supposed to be following.

I wasn't as bad as Victor, who seemed to forget them the second the whistle blew. He appeared to be playing for both teams, annoying the hell out of the ref who was on the side of the pool, waving his arms around like he was trying to stop a hive of bees from attacking him. All of which Victor failed to notice.

It had all seemed so reasonable on the side of the pool. The referee explained each team required thirteen players with just seven players in the pool at any time. Six field players and one goalie. Each player could only use one hand to hold the ball

apart from the goalie, who could use two hands when within five meters of their own goal. No one was allowed to touch the bottom of the pool, again, except for the goalkeeper, so we had to tread water.

Did Victor get any of that? Fuck no! Only it was impossible to be cross with him when he giggled at doing something wrong, offered a shy smile which made it impossible to remember what the heck I was supposed to be doing and keep a focus on my team.

“Sorry, my bad,” Victor apologized once more at the sour-faced dude who was clearly taking the game far too seriously.

Victor, who appeared to have turned into a damn siren in the water, swam towards the opposing team to chase the ball. The shyness added to his allure, because it was easy to see it was genuine and not fake. The opposing team gave chase, but Victor didn’t have the ball.

Fuck it!

It took all my willpower to wrench the men away when it was obvious Victor wasn’t in the least distressed at getting so much attention.

“I’m here,” Ollie called out, waving his hands as best he could while keeping afloat as Victor captured the ball, clearly not treading water by his static position.

Next thing, the ball flew in the air and hit an unsuspecting opposing team member... Mr. Polished.

Shit!

The guy spun around fast to glare at Victor, causing a wave of water to splash Leeson

in the face. In turn, Victor shot daggers at Mr. Polished, unaware he'd caused the problem in the first place.

I bit my lip to contain my laughter when Victor swam over to Leeson, who was coughing violently.

"You, blondie, you're disqualified," the referee called out.

"Huh... what did I do?" Victor absently rubbed Leeson's back and gave the guy a crooked grin that didn't look in the least bit repentant. It wasn't the first time he'd lobbed the ball at the other guy, who was on the other team. Victor guided Leeson towards where Garrett stood at the edge of the pool, looking concerned.

The ref didn't respond, but Mr. Polished did. "Don't pretend!" he spluttered indignantly, hands going to his skinny hips as he waded to the shallow end, following Leeson and Victor. "You did it on purpose because your boyfriend is more interested in me."

If I hadn't gone after them, I suspected I'd have missed the hurt look before Victor concealed it with an expressionless mask. Gone was the playfulness, and I wanted to kick Mr. Polished's ass for being such a prick.

My heart kicked up a notch when Mr. Polished jutted out his chin in an aggressive move, looking like he was going to attack Victor. I slipped my arm around Victor's waist, tugging him gently against my chest and out of harm's way.

"I've got you," I whispered in his ear, then more loudly, "we both know I only have eyes for you, my love."

His full body shudder rocked wet skin against mine and his ass found itself cradled against my cock, getting an indrawn breath from both of us. He went limp, almost

impaling himself on my growing erection. “You okay,” I asked in alarm, tilting back my hips.

“I don’t wanna play any more... in the pool.”

Mr. Polished glared at Victor, and I gave him a baleful stare. “Sure,” I murmured.

My hands encircled his waist to keep him close, as we headed through the throng of men in the pool who were obviously paying attention to the drama, rather than the ref who was calling out instructions.

At the steps, the blue of the tiles had an edge of white to make them more visible, but that didn’t stop me missing the first and stubbing my toes on the second when Victor’s backside connected with my cock once more. Any interest I may have had in staying at the poolside disappeared as I worked to keep my cusses to myself.

“Where are you going? The game’s not over, there’s still one more section to play,” Leeson said as we exited the pool.

“It is for us,” I replied, not pausing as we passed him and Garrett, both looking bemused. They weren’t the only ones when, as I exited the water, my attraction to Victor became more obvious with how my swim shorts clung like a second skin.

“Let’s grab our things,” I said while doing my best not to let my hand follow the path of the water running down the pretty pink skin of Victor’s back to his bubble ass.

Back at the loungers, I silently grabbed the bag with the sun cream, suite key and our wallets along with our towels, getting a grin from Beckett, who hadn’t opted to play.

“See you at dinner,” he murmured.

Flinging both towels over my shoulder, making sure one dangled over the front of my swim shorts, I nodded. “Sure thing.”

The silence continued and I picked up the tension coming from Victor, who didn’t look in my direction as we left. Then I caught sight of Mr. Polished out of the corner of my eye, and I switched the bag to my other hand so I could reach for Victor’s.

He cast a look in my direction, his brows rising as he threaded his fingers through mine. The simple touch, the act of holding hands in public, gave me a spark of deep-seated happiness. It felt right. Felt like he really was my boyfriend, like he’d declared.

Even inside the ship, away from prying eyes, he never let go as we walked back to our room. There was sexual tension between us, I wasn’t wrong. I just wasn’t sure how to make my next move.

Inside our room, I kicked the door closed and dropped the bag. It thudded at my feet unnoticed as I stepped to Victor, one thing on my mind—kissing him.

His eyelashes fluttered and lowered to conceal his thoughts from me.

“I want to kiss you,” I murmured softly, not wanting to break the mood.

In a move that was sexy as fuck when it came with a bashful smile, he slipped his hand along the sensitive skin above my shorts. The muscles beneath the simple touch quivered and my aching cock pushed against the damp material, letting Victor know I wasn’t unaffected by the move. When his hand came to rest on my hip, he rose onto his toes. His plump lips parted, and I could scent the fruity alcohol when he ran the tip of his tongue over his full bottom lip before his eyelids dipped once more.

“Okay.”

The breath I'd held whooshed out of my lungs at the simple reply.

I searched his expression as I let go of his hand to cup his cheeks, making him look at me. "This... I'll go at your pace... whatever you want, love."

I had no idea how long we stood like that, but my lungs were screaming by the time he came forward and ever so softly brushed his mouth over mine.

His pace. His pace! Fuck it all to hell and back.

I groaned at the back of my throat as the kiss remained as gentle as a breeze on a summer evening. It sent flutters of delight somewhere in the center of my chest. I held my need on a tight rein, wanting desperately to let Victor do what he wanted, no matter how I ached to deepen the kiss.

When Victor eased back all flushed and wearing a curious expression, I'd never come closer to losing my composure. He looked so fucking gorgeous. Breathtaking.

He came close again and ran the tip of his tongue over my lower lip as if chasing my taste. A sexy fucking move if ever there was one. The eroticism of it left me gasping for air, hands dropping to my sides to clench tightly to stop me dragging him to the bed. There was a bite of pain as my fingernails dug into flesh, which made no difference to the violent urges.

His wet chest touching mine broke me. "Can I touch you?" The strangled sounding voice that came out of me was that of a stranger.

He reached for my hands and placed them on his hips in a way that added to the sexual tension fizzing between us, adding to the euphoric moment. Then he rose once more, and the kiss was soft, explorative. Just lips moving softly over mine with a definite edge of hunger that sent fire through my veins. The last guy I'd dated had

been all about getting to the end result. Quick, hard fucks.

What we were doing was the polar opposite and so much more of a turn on. My cock throbbed in time to my pulse, and I worked to keep my position so as not to frighten Victor. When his lips parted and he encouraged me to open to him, there was the sweetness of the drinks he'd consumed but also an underlying taste that was all Victor. Staying still and letting him control the situation was hard and easy in equal measures.

There, in the back of my consciousness, was his past trauma and I wanted him to be the one who led, who said how far we'd go. No matter how much I wanted him naked, I wanted his trust more. The problem with that was the tentative kisses were better than any aphrodisiac and they were taking apart my control piece by piece. To experience his desire in this way... it was fucking hard to not want to show him how I felt.

When he pulled back, looking dazed and oh so fuckable, I released a shuddery breath. "Fuck, you're so beautiful, I could kiss you all day and never want to stop," I murmured unintentionally. The thought came out before I could get my head online.

"I am? You do?" he replied shakily.

The need to reassure came with the hate at how Davey had treated this beautiful man. I gently ran my hands over his shoulders, trying to convey the truth, only the skin under my hands felt warmer than it should. Was the heat of his skin from excitement?

It radiated against my skin and when I pulled my head from my lusty thoughts, it struck what the issue was. "Shit! You've got sunburnt!" I exclaimed in worry, making me sound a little harsher than normal.

Victor blinked dazedly up at me. "Huh?"

“Your skin is boiling, we need to get you in a cool shower and put some after sun on.”

“Huh,” he repeated, a furrow appearing between his brows.

Goddamnit, he looked adorable, making it hard to resist him. Resist I did when taking care of him was top of my priorities.

“Love, you got a little burnt in the sun.” I skimmed a finger over the top of his shoulder, where the once pale skin now glowed a deep red. “I thought I’d put plenty of cream on you. What factor was the lotion? We should have put more on your shoulders before you got in the pool.”

I was cross with myself for not doing exactly that after getting distracted by adding more to his back and legs. Clearly, I’d forgotten his shoulders.

He glanced towards where I was touching, and the frown deepened. “I’m red!” he exclaimed, like I hadn’t just said it.

I chuckled and tugged him towards the bathroom. “You need to shower off the sunscreen and chlorine and I’ll rub some after sun on for you.”

In the bathroom, he stared at me with big blue eyes that were brighter than the sky and begging for something that clearly wasn’t what we were about to do. I hesitated when he made no move to undress and continued to hold my gaze.

“Do you want me...” I swallowed, my throat clicking, “to help wash off the sunscreen first?” What he was potentially wanting gave my cock a boost of adrenaline and it perked up again after the worry for him.

Sucking his plump lower lip between teeth, his eyelids dipped and he nodded quickly.

Fuck!

You can do this.

You can do this!

No... yes... no... Oh, fuck you, karma!

Victor

Something brought me from sleep, a noise possibly. I couldn't be sure as I rubbed my eyes, my brain working to get back online.

Oh crapola!

My arms hung suspended in the air when a flood of reality hit me. I swallowed back a groan of mortification and carefully pushed the covers off—noting in the back of my head that there was no tenderness from the sunburn—as I rolled to look over my shoulder. With a thudding heart, I eyed the empty bed. Two things registered at once as I glanced about and strained to hear. I was alone in the room and the beautiful array of orange and pink gracing the sky I could see outside the balcony didn't tell me if it was sunset or sunrise.

I ran my tongue over my teeth and groaned at the awful taste, then moaned when there was a slight tightness to my upper back, reminding me of my stupidity.

“Who the heck gets sunburnt when they've put on sunscreen?” I muttered crossly, avoiding thinking about everything that came before and after. Because right now, that was the safest thing for me to be worrying about, with no sign of Denton.

I shut my eyes, but that didn't help when images of me in the shower—naked, I was naked with Denton in the shower—decided I needed chapter and verse on just how needy I was. How Mr. Polished had hurt my feelings with his declaration that Denton was more attracted to him, and I'd looked for reassurance.

My eyes fired open when everything Denton had done for me said that Mr. Polished couldn't have been more wrong! I jerked up to a sitting position.

“Denny likes me!” I exclaimed to the empty room. “Fuck... he like-likes me.”

Back up a minute.

“He stopped the kissing.”

Yes, but he was angry, and upset that I'd got sunburnt.

My eyes widened and heat flooded my cheeks at my daring at asking him to give me a shower. I couldn't blame the three cocktails I'd had, because I was more than aware of what I was doing and the snarky voice in my head would be very capable of reminding me of that. My logic was that I'd wanted some way to get him to notice that the attraction towards him was very real. Being naked in my tipsy state was the answer.

My thoughts ran into each other. Him in the shower with his shorts on.

Why had he kept his swimmers on?

The thought stayed put and nagged at me as I tried to think beyond how aroused I'd gotten and how he'd never mentioned it or touched my cock. Which I was grateful for—maybe—when I was positive it was because I hadn't asked him to. During the kiss, he'd clearly wanted to let me be in charge. Not something I enjoyed, but my past was there, sitting between us. Would he expect me to make the first move? Maybe I'd been a little more than tipsy and not noticed any signals he'd been sending out? Wasn't inviting him into the shower a first move?

Your skin was burnt. He was taking care of you.

My mind scrambled at how much that notion warmed me, along with the reminder of gentle touches as he'd washed my body. No demands. No getting cross at me for spoiling the afternoon. Just Denton taking care of me.

But my fascination with why Denton had left his shorts on wouldn't abate. Was it to hide his reaction to me? I scoffed at the idea. His cock was way too big to hide. Would it have been too much of a temptation for us both to be naked?

Possibly.

I liked that idea a lot as it meant the next time we were in the shower, there could be shower sex, something I hadn't had in years.

Whoa there, hold those damn horses.

I glanced back out the window, frowning. When did Denton leave? Where was Denton now? Hiding? With Mr. Polished?

"No! You stop that right now. He couldn't have been any clearer. He's attracted to me!" Hearing myself say it aloud helped settle the nerves wanting to take away my happiness. Full of restless energy, I hopped out of bed.

One look at the towels cast aside on the chair from the previous day got more heat coursing up my neck and flooding my cheeks, making them burn hotter than the sunburn. Glancing back at the bed didn't help either when I could see myself there, spread out after Denton had dried me. His firm, calloused hands stroked cooling lotion from my shoulders, down over my back, to the top of my ass where he'd lingered before moving to my legs. The hair on his arms and legs brushed against me.

Dropping my gaze to my twitching cock, I groaned in dismay at how I was going to struggle to keep my attraction around Denton under control.

Why do you need to? The sly voice asked, making me hotter and more bothered when it was secretly what I wanted.

In search of a distraction, my gaze swept the room, looking for my phone. Seeing it sitting on the larger set of drawers, I skipped around the end of the bed, no more than three steps away. A noise brought my head around to look at the door.

Heart pounding, I froze on the spot and watched, wide eyed, as it swung open to reveal a rather sweaty looking Denton. He was looking down at something he was holding, so didn't notice me initially. Hungrily, my gaze roamed down the sweat soaked T-shirt and gym shorts that were frayed at the edges and hung low off his hips, revealing powerful thighs. His dark hair was as sweaty as the rest of him. It stuck to his skull, framing his face.

God, he was hot!

As if he sensed my perusal of him, his head rose slowly, and our gazes clashed. His lips curved into a smile that sent a direct spiral of pleasure to my cock, which thickened further.

Gods!

Noooooo!

Not now.

He was the first to recover and before I'd blinked to register the move, he kicked the door shut with his sneakered foot and brought me from my stupor. I moved my hands to cover my cock like a damn fool when we were way past modesty after he'd seen all of me the day before.

His eyes twinkled with humor as he followed the move. “Got a problem, love?”

I hoped like hell that he would think the flush to my skin was from the sun and not because he was making my innards melt as he rocked the sexy grin.

“Yes... no... what? Maybe?” I waffled, feeling my body burn with embarrassment.

His smile widened and he stepped further into the room, dropping what he held onto the stand close to the door. I couldn’t figure if I should dart for the bathroom and hide or jump his bones.

My cock was going with option two and I wanted to be brave enough for that...

“How’s the sunburn this morning?” he asked, his hands grabbing the hem of his T-shirt and yanking it over his head to reveal his hairy chest. The two days on the ship and his skin had darkened to a beautiful golden color.

I was so fixated on his chest, it took more than a second to register he was now within a few feet of me and staring at my shoulders.

“Fine... the skin feels... tight... is it morning?” I gawped when that part of what he said registered.

“Yep,” he said with a chuckle. He dropped the T-shirt onto the floor, coming closer. “You slept so soundly, I thought I’d grab you some food after my morning workout cause you must be starving.”

He was so close now I could feel the heat radiating from his body. Food was the last thing on my mind. I couldn’t look away from him as he reached out to touch my shoulder. “Much better than yesterday,” he murmured huskily, gentle fingers stroking over my reddened shoulder and down my arm towards where my hands were.

His mouth was so close it was all I could focus on when I remembered how it tasted. How soft his lips were.

“How are you feeling?”

Hyperventilating from the hand getting closer to mine, my tongue ran over my drying lips, hoping wetting them would help me form a reply. I had nothing, so I nodded.

Little lines around his eyes appeared as he came closer, his hand now covering mine, and a breathy moan escaped past my parted lips.

“You don’t need to be shy with me.” His lips brushed the corner of mine as he continued to hold my gaze. “You’re beautiful. Every inch of you is a miracle I want to touch,” he licked at the same corner he kissed, “taste.”

Seduced, air rushed out of my lungs at the desire he revealed. I moved a fraction so our mouths could meet and lost the battle of indecision. His damp, furry chest rubbed against mine, sending tendrils of desire to where his hand remained. Although my own hands were still covering my cock, I could feel every touch of his fingers as though he was stroking my cock.

The kiss, this time, held all the passion he evoked in me. All the passion I’d held in check, believing he’d never be interested in it. His responding groan was harsh as his hand let go of mine. There was no opportunity to complain when he bodily lifted me up.

Yes!

Not needing a second invitation, my legs wound around his waist. My hard cock met a cock that left little to the imagination as it strained under the gym shorts. Springy hair caressed my nipples, and they budded painfully. Large, callused hands squeezed

my ass, encouraging me to rock against him. Gasping at all the sensations bombarding me at once, I struggled to understand what was happening when the kissing stopped and I found us in the bathroom.

“Shower... I need a shower,” he panted.

“Oh...”

He lowered me down and I mourned the loss of skin contact, feeling really awkward.

“With you. Fuck, you make me crazy.”

He ran his hands through his hair, returning his attention to me, wearing an expression that gave me hope. “I’ve spent two hours in the gym this morning working off my frustration at lying next to you all night and not getting to touch.” His head tilted back and his chest heaved as he rubbed at his face. “Showering you yesterday was one of the best and worst things I’ve ever done.” As he spoke, he dropped his hands.

Worst? That can’t be good. I stood there, unsure of what to say.

When I met his stare, the desire rocked me back and got my cock throbbing with a renewed vigor at the intensity in his eyes.

“I wanted to get on my knees and suck that pretty cock. Taste you. Feel you come apart for me.”

Shudders ran through me. My legs grew weak whereas my cock had no such issue. It was hard enough I worried that if he touched me, I might come from the visuals he’d painted with his need. No one had ever been so explicit with what they wanted to do to me and I found I liked it a lot. My cock leaked in appreciation, speaking for its damn self.

“I want... that... please,” I stuttered and begged, the shakes of desire making it impossible to do anything more.

Denton

My internal debate ceased the second I saw a naked Victor standing looking utterly delectable, flushed, and aroused. Watching him step closer on trembling legs and push an even shakier hand inside my gym shorts was sexy as fuck. There was vulnerability and bravery in eyes that held mine as he pushed the damp material down my thighs, his fingers a soft caress through the hair.

I followed the move when my cock bounced free and slapped my belly, holding all Victor's attention. The sounds of our labored breathing were the only noise in the bathroom as I stepped out of my shorts.

As naked as Victor, my gaze roamed hungrily down the golden trail of hair that finished at the slim, erect cock with a patch of trimmed blond hair at its base. I'd noticed the foreskin covering the head. And the image that had kept me awake most of the night. The thought of me sucking that cock into my mouth, nibbling at the skin, feeling its silky hardness against my tongue, was too much to resist now. Because this time wild horses wouldn't stop me from giving in to the siren in front of me. Not when he asked so fucking nicely.

Reaching for a towel to drop on the floor, I lowered in front of Victor, giving him a sexy smirk as I came forward to inhale his scent. My nose ran down the crease of his leg and to the sac that hugged his body. He trembled and shifted his legs wider, causing me to moan in approval as I kissed his inner thigh.

"So soft," I murmured, loving the silky texture of his skin against my lips.

His moan encouraged me to explore further, gauging each reaction and repeating it when he whimpered, moaned, or groaned loudly. The erotic sounds he made drove my pleasure to new heights.

I laid open mouth kisses over his balls, inhaling his musky scent. I sucked one ball into the cavern of mouth and rolled it in the sac with my tongue. His hands landed heavily on my shoulders as he lurched closer, making me chuckle.

“Argh...” he cried out, so I chuckled again, getting a similar response.

I took my time kissing and licking the pale skin until the head of his cock was slick with his pre-cum. His cock gleamed like a polished surface as it dripped between my thighs, occasionally hitting my cock. Each touch sent sparks of fresh desire curling in the pit of my stomach building my inner tension. Every inhale, I smelled his and my desire. Intoxicating, they encouraged me to rush, to dive right in and taste. But I’d waited too long for this moment and I wanted to savor every fucking second of it. I wanted Victor mindless for my touch.

His cock rubbed against my unshaved cheek as he tilted his pelvis, encouraging me. “So good... fuck... please suck me... I’ll do anything... just suck me,” he gasped, flushed and with a wild look in his eyes that triggered a violent surge of want in me.

As he was, there was nothing I wouldn’t do for him. Sucking my fingers into my mouth, I ran my tongue over them until they were dripping.

Victor followed the move. His nostrils flared and he worked his lower lip between his teeth when I cupped his sac. Using the wetness, I slid a finger under his balls and along his taint to circle his hole, eliciting a full body shudder. His legs once more shuffled wider, giving me easier access.

Holding his gaze, I poked out my tongue and waited as I circled his hole, teasing the

sensitive nerves. When I didn't move, he groaned, and a flush darkened his chest as he hesitantly moved until the head of his cock painted the tip of my tongue with his essence.

His musky scent filled my nose as I lost the battle to resist tasting his pre-cum. I brought my tongue back into my mouth, savoring the bitter saltiness. My eyelids lowered at the wave of pleasure coursing through me.

"Fucking delicious," I growled and wiggled my tongue at him.

This time he was less hesitant and released one shoulder to hold the base of his cock to paint my tongue. He wriggled his backside at the same time, pushing the tip of my finger against the rim of muscle protecting his ass. I circled the puckered flesh, making it slick before easing the tip of my finger in. The muscle closed tight around me and we groaned together.

"Ohhhh..." His mouth formed a perfect O as he squeezed and released, his cock painting me in pre-cum as he pushed it harder against my tongue. I retracted my tongue and sucked the head of his cock into the cavern of my mouth. He wasn't overly thick, but he had some length. Carefully, I sucked him deep, opening my throat, then swallowing, getting a broken cry.

"More... ohhh... yeah... I can feel you squeezing the head," he gasped, whimpered, and whined.

There was never a more wonderful sound than listening to how responsive he was. Each touch, caress, taste brought yet more noise. It poured from between his lips as he lost himself to the pleasure I gave him. He captivated me in so many ways, but seeing him lose himself this way left my heart wanting to burst with his rapture. He was bewitching, casting a spell over me as I watched him come apart for me.

I pushed my finger deeper, locating his prostate. I stroked the bundle of nerves, wanting to make him fly while I sucked and swallowed. The clasp of my throat closed over the head of his cock.

“Fuckkkkkkk!” he wailed. His head rolled back, his body going motionless when his cock thickened and cum spurted down my throat. I eased off, catching several spurts of cum on my tongue as his fingers dug into my shoulder as he found his release.

I watched as he breathlessly rocked on my finger, chasing his pleasure. Flushed, sweaty and looking sexier than sin, he was everything I’d dreamed of. I swallowed and licked at my lips, making sure I got all of his cum. “Stunning, so fucking beautiful coming for me.”

His head lolled forward like he’d lost all control of his muscles. Easing my finger out of his ass at the dazed expression he wore, I rose and slipped my arms around his waist for fear he’d slip to the floor in a heap. His head rested on my chest, hot breath brushing over my nipple as he caught his breath. As aroused as I was, and it was torture the way he felt pressed against me, taking care of him was my priority.

I kissed the top of his head and he made a snuffling sound as he burrowed as much as he could into my chest hair.

“We need to shower,” I said, chuckling.

“You do it,” he murmured sleepily.

God, was he trying to break me?

My chuckles became strained as I got us in the shower and kept him out of the cold spray, hoping it would take the edge off my arousal. I forced my hips sideways so the icy water could hit my cock. I gasped, but Victor never so much as moved his head

from against me. He occasionally made happy little noises that weren't helping me.

The shower was the fastest I'd ever had, the cold water doing little to dampen my ardor with a soapy, sleepy Victor clinging to me.

In record time we completed a perfunctory wash and dry, then we were back in the bedroom. Victor sat on the edge of the bed—the covers over his lap to prevent me from staring—with the food I'd snagged for him.

He munched on the pastry, heavy-lidded eyes followed my every move as I kept my distance, knowing he hadn't eaten since lunchtime the previous day. I'd slipped on a fresh pair of baggy shorts but remained topless as I tidied up after us.

“Don't you want...” he stopped and shoved the pastry into his mouth until his cheeks bulged.

I paused with the towels in my arms. “Want what, love?”

He chewed, looked away, swallowed, returned his gaze to me and back was the blush I was coming to love. “Sex,” he whispered.

Oh!

I dropped the towels where I was standing and went to crouch in front of him, resting my hands on his thighs. They were tense under my touch, revealing his inner turmoil. Looking him directly in the eyes, I nodded, wanting him to see I was telling the truth.

“I do.” I kissed him softly, getting a beautiful sigh of pleasure when I stopped. “I want you more than taking another breath.” I pressed our foreheads together, needing the contact as I explained, “But taking care of your needs is more important to me. I'm not a selfish twat that couldn't see how wiped out you were after you came hard

enough to punch at my tonsils,” I joked, getting a burst of giggles in response. “There’s no rush... is there?”

It was hard to wait to see if he got what I was meaning. I wanted him beyond the holiday. I wanted... forever, if he’d give it to me.

I saw it the minute he registered what I was getting at. His lips trembled. “Do you mean... after? Like, when we get home?”

Heart flipping around, I had to swallow twice to get my head in the game. “Yes. Wanna be my boyfriend?”

The air got knocked out of me as I landed hard on my tailbone with Victor in my lap, tangled in the covers as he peppered kisses over my face.

“Is that a yes?” I asked when I got my breath back as the laughter came out more like a breathless cough.

“Yes...” kiss, “yes,” kiss, “yes,” another kiss, this one to my lips, and I lost myself to the man who made me so fucking happy. My laughter switched to moans as he sucked on my tongue, giving my aroused cock a boost.

He ground down, and I had to remind myself once more we had all the time in the world. His eagerness cut through my control like a knife through butter.

“Housekeeping,” someone called, and it took a moment to realize past my lust that the voice came from somewhere behind us.

“Shit,” I muttered and shielded Victor, who had grown still. “Can you come back in ten minutes please,” I asked, not looking back at the guy who was probably staring.

“Sure, Sir. No problem.”

At the click of the door, I started laughing at how it wasn't only me trying to get me to behave. The universe had spoken!

“Shall we get dressed and go find the others? I can't remember what the plan was for today?”

Victor scrambled off my lap, sheet flapping about his legs as he ran to the closet. “We're leaving for a trip today...” Clothes flew in the air as he yanked things out in a rush.

Doing my best to hold back my amusement, I got up and went to grab my cell phone. “It'll be fine. Let me ring Leeson and figure it out.”

“Yeah, do that,” he muttered and more clothes landed on the floor. “We don't want to be late and left behind.” He flashed me a quick look that made my dick twitch. “Unless you want to stay behind.”

I pointed a finger at Victor, doing my best to give him a stern look. “I'm trying to take care of you. Now get dressed before I change my mind.”

I was only half joking, so I turned my back on him and dialed Leeson's number, counting to ten under my breath.

Don't look at him.

Don't do it.

“Denny, Denny, answer me! We docked in Aruba an hour ago. Why aren't you here?” Leeson's question helped to get me to focus.

“Hold them for us. We... we slept in. We’ll be there in ten minutes.” I rolled my eyes to the ceiling when Leeson snorted and Victor giggled. Lying evidently wasn’t my forte!

Victor

Flustered and flushed from running to get off the ship, my Hawaiian shirt, which I'd remembered at the last minute for today's trip, flapped about my body. I didn't dare look at Denton, who was keeping pace with me, when he smelled of the coconut cream he'd smeared all over himself and me before he'd let me get dressed. I might have had one of the best orgasms of my life but my body hadn't worried about that and had perked right up at the attention. It seemed my libido had woken up and was back to that of a horny teenager. I felt bad because I'd been so tempted to ditch the day, and with Denton was being so... restrained, I kept quiet.

Why was he being like that?

I'd never had a boyfriend who hadn't put their needs above mine... had I?

The sun was blinding as we exited the ship and rushed down the jetty. The glare was enough to distract me and I slipped my sunglasses on. I glanced at the busy port and found Leeson in the crowd waving at us, close to a big bus. On my returning wave, he disappeared into the bus.

I groaned at noticing a guy standing by the open door of the bus looking at his watch. Tall, toned, and good looking in a dark swarthy way, his navy T-shirt with the logo on the tour bus said he was our tour guide. When he smiled as we approached, his teeth were blinding white but the smile never touched his eyes.

"So sorry we kept you waiting for us," I said before I'd even stopped. We'd been an extra five minutes because Denton insisted on applying the sun cream before we left

the ship. I didn't sigh at the guy's obvious displeasure. Instead, I plastered a smile on my face.

"Your friend explained," he replied. "Now if you could get on the bus, that would be great."

It didn't sound like that would be great from the way he said it. It kind of implied the exact opposite. Denton placed a hand on my lower back, connecting us as he stepped closer in a protective stance. When I glanced sideways at him, I could see him scowling at the guide.

It was wrong, I know it was, but I liked how he was with anyone that wasn't nice to me. No one had ever cared enough to be bothered before.

I got on the bus, noticing first how full it was, giving those we passed an apologetic smile while enjoying the air-conditioning blowing cool air on my overheated skin. My sneakered foot caught on the strap of a bag when my gaze collided with the smug smile of Mr. Polished.

Was I ever gonna catch a break?

The fucking dude had to be worse than a creeper. There was an air about him of self-satisfied smugness that gave me the urge to hit him in his fancy veneers.

When I looked at the vacant seats right opposite where he was sitting, I cursed under my breath. The only two empty rows of seats left were so close by, it made it impossible to avoid Mr. Polished. And as I'd got on the bus first, there was no escaping him getting close to Denton. I would have to take a window seat or reveal that I was actually worried about the guy stealing my boyfriend.

He's my boyfriend, my eyes fired at him before I slid into the seats, not missing

Denton's reaction. His cursing was loud enough for those closest to us to hear.

As I settled in my seat, Mr. Polished didn't take his predatory gaze off Denton and I got a heavy feeling in my stomach, figuring exactly how this day was going to go. We'd already pissed off the guide before even starting our day of sightseeing around Aruba, now this. What the heck would be next?

"Now everyone is on board," said the guy up front in perfect English. He even had a perfect, sarcastic tone over the microphone. "My name is Reinaldo, and I'll be your guide today. So let's get started on what you can expect to see and do today. If you have questions after I've finished, then just ask."

This time, as I looked forward to avoid looking at Mr. Polished, his smile appeared genuine and his eyes crinkled at the edges.

Doing my best to keep my concerns about Mr. Polished to myself, I stored my backpack under the seat and retrieved my bottle of water. The smile Denton gave me was reassuring as he settled next to me. I released a breath.

It's all gonna be fine.

I gave him a sunny smile and placed my bottle of water in the cup holder, acting like I didn't have a care in the world.

When Denton reached over and took hold of my free hand to place it on his thigh, I lost focus of everything else.

"Our first stop in Aruba is the Aloe Factory where you will learn about Aruba's long history of aloe vera cultivation. There, you'll be able to try some of their wonderful products and have an opportunity to purchase some."

I heard none of what Reinaldo said. It could have been total gobbledygook for all I knew, all my attention was on the flexing thigh warming the palm of my hand. The thin material of Denton's shorts was no barrier to the heat coming from his skin.

"Even in Hawaiian print, you look gorgeous," said Denton, leaning in to whisper directly in my ear.

I snorted out a giggle at his ridiculousness and shook my head as I faced him. "We look..."

I glanced at the others in the wedding party, all of whom were easy to spot as they were all wearing the bright pink hibiscus flowered shirts Leeson thought were cute. With my pale skin, I looked anything but cute. "We look like we have lost our suitcases and had to go to the same tourist shop to get clothes."

Reinaldo gave Denton a hard stare when he burst out into fits of laughter, getting most heads on the bus to turn in our direction.

"Shush," I whispered out the side of my mouth, offering Reinaldo an apologetic smile, paying more attention.

"Our next stop after California Lighthouse, on top of Hudishibana hill, is a visit to the unique boulders of the Ayo and you'll see the Casibari Rock Formations where you can climb them if you feel energetic. It's worth it, as is paying to go up into the lighthouse. The top gives you a 360 degree view of the whole of Aruba. It's also a great place to take pictures."

He continued on as the bus trundled off down the road. I glanced out the window when Reinaldo finished speaking and took his seat at the front. My excitement at spending the day with Denton grew.

At doing boyfriend things together.

I squeezed his thigh without thinking as I marveled at the color of the sea, which was a beautiful shade of green that made the sand appear white.

Everything looked so pristine. So stunningly beautiful, and I turned to Denton, grinning. The words died on my lips, along with my smile, at seeing Mr. Polished watching us, watching Denton too closely for my comfort.

“Don’t let him bother you,” Denton murmured next to my ear.

“Okay,” I mumbled, averting my gaze from the guy who so far hadn’t gotten with the programme that Denton was with me. The heavy feeling in my gut increased when I realized he probably wasn’t going to, either. The guy had definite plans for his cruise, and they included Denton and not me.

When the bus slowed, I returned my attention to the window, My eyes widening at the sign that welcomed us to our first stop of the day trip. There were six stops from what I remembered, the last was at a beach where we’d get a late lunch and could try our hand at snorkeling.

When we came to a full stop, Reinaldo stood up. “We have thirty minutes here. The bus will leave at ten-fifteen promptly.”

He clearly was aiming the last part at us when his gaze came in our direction. Men stood and blocked us from view, making me sag in my seat. “I don’t think that guy is too happy we delayed him.”

“You apologized. What more can we do?” Denton replied, reaching for my backpack, then retrieved his own. “We aren’t going to let anything spoil the day.”

It wasn't Reinaldo I was worried about and it appeared Denton got that. I nodded, saying nothing as Mr. Polished got up at the same time as Denton. Mr. Polished moved in a way that meant his body made full contact with Denton, who froze while Mr. Polished gave him a flirty wink.

I did my best to suck back the sob catching in the back of my throat when my eyes started to sting with tears.

I will not cry!

I will not cry!

Trembling, I got up, keeping my gaze down. I wasn't one to cause a scene or confront someone for inappropriate behavior. I'd learned the hard way that could end up with me being the one who got hurt. So I exhaled a shuddery breath and stepped out when Denton waited for me to move. He followed closely behind me, his closeness somewhat helping to allay the horrible feelings clawing at my raw throat.

"There you are. I think we need to get you some of the aloe vera, it's great for treating sunburn," Ollie said as I exited the bus, dragging me towards the shop rather than in the direction where everyone else was heading.

"How did you know I got sunburned?" I asked in confusion, my sneakers dragging over the ground as I resisted looking back to see where Mr. Polished was in relation to Denton. "And shouldn't we be going in that direction, with the others?"

Ollie didn't let go. If anything, he increased his hold, so I went with him, not wanting to attract any more attention when Ollie clearly had something to say.

"Denton rang Leeson last night to say you got sunburned and were sleeping, so you weren't coming down for dinner."

That got my attention. I'd not considered what Denton had done the night before with how shocked I'd been that I'd slept for over twelve hours straight. "He didn't come to dinner with you guys?" I asked, to be clear.

"Nope. Leeson said he was adamant he'd just get room service because he didn't want to leave you alone in case you needed him," Ollie answered, looking about furtively. "Is that why you didn't come for dinner..." he returned his attention to me, "or were you... bumping uglies?"

Shoulders shaking at his words, I couldn't stop my giggles as we entered the busy shop, scented solely with aloe vera. "No, we didn't bump uglies last night."

"You're blushing. Why are you blushing?" He searched my face, which flamed. "Oh my god, you did it this morning, didn't you? That's why you were late!"

"Keep your voice down," I hissed, looking around to see if anyone had heard him, only relaxing when I could see no one paying us any attention. "We did something..."

"Something? What does that mean?" he whispered.

"It means we did something, and I don't ask you to talk about your sex life."

"That's because I didn't have one."

It was his turn to blush. Something about what he said got my eyes narrowing on him as he fidgeted next to me. "Didn't... past tense. Does that mean..." My mouth dropped open when I put two and two together and came up with four.

"Beckett. You had sex with Beckett!" I exclaimed loudly, doing exactly what I'd asked him not to do.

“Don’t tell the whole damn world!” Ollie snapped, his skin darkening further before he stomped off.

I gave chase. “Hey, wait up. We haven’t finished this discussion.”

“We have.”

I kept pace as he headed to a large display of aloe vera products with signs saying in English what the benefits were.

“No, we haven’t. I thought he was annoying you? I mean, you don’t really know him. Not that I’m judging you. The cruise was all about us letting go and enjoying ourselves. I just didn’t know you fancied him?” This time, I kept my voice down. “You knew I was interested in Denton. I never kept it a secret from you,” I said, feeling a little hurt that he’d not mentioned anything other than his annoyance at Beckett’s bossy behavior.

“I’ve met him before... online...” He didn’t meet my gaze, which made my stomach lurch at how anxious he looked at confessing that.

“So, what’s wrong with that?” I placed a hand on his arm, feeling how tense he was. “You know I’ll never judge you?”

He deflated right before my eyes. “I know...” he dropped his gaze to his sneakers, “it’s just that I like certain things some folks might think are weird and make me a freak.”

I squeezed his arm gently, aware there were a lot of people that could overhear us. “Never,” I stated vehemently. “I swear on my life. You can trust me.” I kissed his cheek and came in to give him a hard hug. “You’re my best friend, along with Leeson. I love you. That’s all that matters to me.”

I pulled away and gave him a wide, reassuring smile. “If you ever wanna talk to me, then know I’ll listen.” I glanced away when his eyes sheened with tears, giving him a moment to pull himself together. “So, what should we get to protect my over sensitive skin?”

Denton

Avoiding Mr. Polished wasn't too difficult when we were off the bus and exploring the places we stopped at. It was on the bus that things got tricky. We had little choice in our seat selection after arriving last and it wasn't the done thing to take different seats when folks had already chosen theirs.

So we had to put up with Mr. Polished right there, watching our every move. Or my every move. I wasn't stupid enough to not register that the guy had an ego the size of the United States and wasn't listening to the word 'no'. Four times he'd touched me inappropriately and was taking any opportunity he got to engage in conversation.

At the first stop, when Ollie and Victor had gone into the shop, I'd taken the time to once more explain to the dense fucker that I wasn't interested. He'd just given me a knowing smirk, like in the end I'd give in. He was wrong, but it was fucking exhausting.

Some men could be like him, seeing my refusal as a challenge, completely disregarding the fact I'd stated I was happy with my boyfriend. He didn't need to know that what Victor and I had was brand new. It wasn't his business. Thing was, I didn't want to give the guy an ego check, but his attempts to attract my attention were pissing me off and spoiling what should have been a perfect day.

The weather was glorious, Aruba was beautiful, and the people were so friendly. And then there was Victor, looking like a bright flower in the middle of an arid desert. His excitement for the places we went was contagious and I'd snapped so many photos of him, I could start my own Victor appreciation club.

“Look,” he tugged on my arm excitedly as the bus slowed once more while we passed Bushiribana Gold Mill Ruins. “The information says we can walk around the Bushiribana gold smelter ruins.” He waved the guidebook at me. “Oh, and the sands here are red and the contrast of the blue skies with the red sand makes the ocean a gorgeous, deep blue. I hope it’s as pretty as the photos they’ve taken.” He gave me a cheeky wink. “It should be a great photo op for you and then maybe you’ll stop taking pictures of me.”

“There are most certainly better things to take pictures of than you,” Mr. Polished snarked and set my blood boiling.

Victor’s eyes welled with tears and he glanced away quickly, shrinking into himself in a way that hurt my heart.

It had been at least two years since I’d seen Victor withdraw in this way. That Mr. Polished’s hurtful comments had hit a tender spot inside Victor was too much. Rage bubbled to the surface, and I didn’t wait for the bus to stop as I rose and glowered down at Mr. Polished. “How dare you say such a hurtful thing! Victor is both beautiful on the inside and out. You are clearly not if you think it’s okay to demean another person with your catty and downright disrespectful comments.

“Up to now, I have ignored your blatant and obvious disregard to the fact that I am with this gorgeous man. I stupidly believed you’d be able to check your own ego. Evidently not.”

Mr. Polished gave Victor an ugly sneer. “Beautiful, him, I’m not catty just telling you how it is and keeping it real,” he scoffed, his hand indicating to himself in such a way that drew attention to his own perfection, totally not getting that it was just a veneer with nothing beneath. “You know what they say about someone who protests too much!”

Anger drove me to bend down close enough I could smell his cologne. “I am not interested in you, and I never would be. Not even if you were the last man on the planet.”

I jabbed my thumb towards where Victor sat, not taking my eyes off the toad in front of me. “What I love is the sweet kindness of the man who you’d be privileged to befriend. Now keep your damn thoughts and hands to yourself.” I gave him a threatening stare. “I won’t tell you again.”

I spun back to my seat to see Victor’s mouth gaping open and a bus full of men all staring at me. The silence was deafening. “He’s my boyfriend and I won’t have anyone disrespect him,” I announced to everyone, seeing as Reinaldo was up and heading my way.

There were several cheers that came from Leeson and Ollie’s direction, as well as from a fair few men I didn’t know, as I retook my seat.

Hoping I’d not just fucked up big time, I didn’t have an opportunity to do more than part my lips to apologize when Victor’s hands cupped my whiskered cheeks and his mouth claimed mine in a kiss that set a blaze under my ass.

Whatever sounds came from those around us became drowned out by my pulse thundering in my ears. The kiss lasted long enough to make my chest feel as if it was about to burst but I didn’t want it to end. His hunger was everything I’d imagined late at night, alone. It swept me into the current of its passion, leaving me dazed and wishing we were alone in our room—naked.

I was pulled back to reality when the tour guide squatted down beside me. Mentally preparing myself for whatever shitstorm was about to come my way, I was surprised to realize that he had turned his attention to Mr. Polished instead.

”Sir, Unique Voyagers take a strong, zero tolerance stance to bullying and harassment. You’ve been so blatant about throwing yourself at this individual that I assumed it was reciprocated but that clearly isn’t the case. I will be providing your details to the crew once we get back to the ship. If any further reports are made against you, further steps will have to be taken. Am I understood?”

Mr. Polished looked mortified and terrified at the same time, to the extent that I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

As Reinaldo stood back up, he gave me a brief nod, before stepping aside and ushering Mr. Polished off the bus.

When I turned back to Victor, he was rosy pink, with puffy and slick lips, and had blown pupils. He made it hard to get my head to think about what had just happened other than getting him naked.

“Come on, you two. You don’t want to miss lunch.” A hand on my shoulder made me groan. “Whatever you’re thinking about, forget it,” Garrett stated firmly. “We’re already likely to get left behind if you pair get into one more scrape, despite what Reinaldo just did.” His grin contradicted his gruff, no nonsense tone. One that Leeson said often was just for show.

“Wasn’t thinking anything.” It wasn’t a lie, I was more feeling it.

Victor pushed at my chest half-heartedly. “We better get off the bus.”

I glanced at my lap when Garrett walked away. The boner tenting my shorts made it impossible to leave right then.

When I returned my gaze to Victor, his was where mine had been. Only, he was licking his plumped lips with an eagerness that made it hard to resist him. I held up

one hand and, with the other, I shoved at my cock, conjuring up images of the worst traffic scenes I'd attended to collect casualties.

"Stop staring at me like that," I rasped past my dry throat when Victor grew more interested in what I was doing.

"Like what?" he questioned distractedly, his gaze unmoving from my lap.

"You know, you cheeky devil. We need privacy for what's going on in your head. Now, please," I begged, "look away for a minute until I get myself under control."

I shut my eyes for good measure and waited until the tightness of my shorts lessened as I ran through the horrible things I'd seen. Only then did I open my eyes again.

Victor, thankfully, was looking at the guide booklet. "So tell me a little about Baby Beach, which I have to say is a cool name for a place."

"It's got a man-made lagoon and is recommended as a great place for snorkeling. The local beach restaurant has a load of positive reviews saying the food is great, but we should try the local fish dishes." He looked at me. "If you're a fan?"

"I am." I slid out of my seat and held out my hand to him. "I've never tried snorkeling and I've always wanted to. Wanna try it with me?"

His smile made even the brightness of the sun outside seem dim. "I'd love to."

He bounced up out of his seat, his eagerness removing the shadow that Mr. Polished had attempted to cast over the day.

Off the bus, holding hands, I glanced at the kiosk hiring snorkel gear, then at the restaurant just down the beach. "What say we snorkel first as we have a few hours

here, then eat?" If I could see Mr. Polished heading to the beach restaurant with a group of men, then shoot me for not wanting to go there after the run in on the bus.

Victor's fingers squeezed mine. "Yeah, sounds good to me, I'm not all that hungry right now. And I'm sure swimming on a full stomach isn't a good thing to do."

We walked to the hire shop, the sun beating down on us, making the water look more and more inviting. Ten minutes later, after I'd paid for our snorkels, masks and fins, we headed down to the water's edge, where Garrett, Leeson, Beckett and Ollie were. We all seemed to have the same idea.

"Beckett and Ollie have decided they'll wait and watch over our stuff. So pile your things with ours," Garrett said, looking around. "It seems safe enough, but I'm not leaving my wallet on the beach."

Garrett and Leeson were the first in the water, but it took me and Victor a few more minutes to learn to breathe using the snorkel. The two-minute talk from the hire guy, who made it sound easy, had gone in one ear and out the other.

"This is harder than it looks," Victor complained, kneeling in the shallows, frowning through his snorkel mask. The water was crystal clear and as warm as a bath, but it was Victor that gave me the buzz of joy running through me.

"Breathe through your mouth once you put it between your teeth. Do that a few times, then try it with your face into the water," I assured him while kneeling next to him in the water, checking his shoulders looked shiny with the sun lotion I'd reapplied.

He did as I suggested, his head popping up seconds later, splashing water at me as he grinned around the mouthpiece and gave me a thumbs up. He looked a little ridiculous, but he'd never looked more beautiful when he gazed at me with such

happiness it stole my breath. Heart pounding against my ribs, I came forward and kissed his forehead. “I’ve wasted so much time,” I murmured, more to myself than to him.

He tugged out the mouthpiece and gave me a serious look—or it would have been if he wasn’t wearing a snorkel mask. “We have now. That counts... means everything to me.”

Fuck!

He slayed me better than any dragon hunter.

Victor

I cracked a yawn and walked to the balcony door to open it and step outside. I could seriously get used to the view and the tranquility I'd not expected. I tipped my head back and closed my eyes, basking in the warm scented air as it bathed my face. The hum of the ship, for the moment, was the only sound, so I stayed put enjoying the peace.

Unsure how long I stood like that until voices broke my trance, I blinked slowly, grinning at someone reflecting my thoughts on the peacefulness. I lingered for another moment, staring at the beautiful expanse of water. I slipped a hand down my shorts to tug on my sac when my bladder and morning wood interrupted my quiet moment.

On a sigh, I returned inside and shut the glass door, going to the bathroom. It took three attempts to pee when my upper brain sent all the happy blissed out feelings the day before had brought. Basically, I had a chubbie since Denton had declared how special I was to him. I eyed my dick and shook my head. It was going to be—hard—impossible to keep my appreciation to myself.

Inside the shower, that felt enormous when it held just me. It was the same when we'd returned to the ship after the day trip, and I'd had a quick shower—alone at Denton's insistence—before we'd gone for dinner and dancing.

My hope we might have done more than cuddle when we got back to the room last night had crashed and burned with how exhausted we'd both been. Neither of us had kept our eyes open for more than a few seconds when we'd gotten into bed. When I'd

woken alone, I'd expected it as Denton had explained he liked the gym facilities on board. As they were right there, he explained he was going to take advantage, so there was no guilt for eating all the extra delicious food.

The sigh that slipped out this time as I soaped my cock was pure disappointment at how it meant I probably was going to wake alone every day. The upside was he didn't expect me to join him, it really wasn't my thing. It was one more plus to add to the growing list of things that made Denton a great guy. Top of the list was 'not pushing at me for anything', and it was great... if not a little frustrating.

My balls throbbed in agreement as I tugged my sac gently and glided my soapy hand up and down my shaft. Pleasure, wave and wave swamped me and, despite my disappointment at being alone, my whimpers increased. My eyes slammed shut thinking about what Denton had said on the bus. The pressure built in my balls and I groaned anew at Denton's passionate declaration.

"Fuck, yeah... love me," I demanded as I trembled, driven past the point of no return. Cum splattered the tiles as I slumped back against the wall, dragging in steamy, sex scented air in deep gulps. Fuck, I really wish I'd been able to see his face at the time. I could only imagine how hot he'd look all passionate in one of the most memorable, wonderful moments of my whole life to date.

As my brain came back online, it was quick to remind me what the circumstances were that brought about such a declaration in the first place. And, yeah, Mr. Polished evoked the strength of reaction, but Denton's way of dealing with it left me floating on a damn cloud of bliss. Just recalling that got my dick twitching once more and me eyeing it with worry. If I wasn't careful, I'd be spending the rest of the cruise pitching a tent.

Blowing out a breath, I finished washing myself, trying to think of anything other than what had happened. It was too damn easy to circle back to what had gone down.

Had Denton really told Mr. Polished he loved me?

“What I love...”

He’d said that aloud—like I hadn’t imagined it—those words had come out of his mouth?

Dancing beans took up residence in my gut as I once more ran over the conversation driving myself batty. Out of the shower, towel around my hips I scurried through to the cabin to find my phone. I needed some perspective that wasn’t my own. I sucked my thumb into my mouth and eyed my WhatsApp group chat with Ollie and Leeson.

Vic: Help! I’m driving myself mad, overthinking what happened yesterday.

Message bubbles appeared.

Ollie: I’m having breakfast on the top deck. I booked a table up here if you wanna join me?

Vic: On my way.

Or I would be once I’d gotten dressed. I didn’t obsess—or not much as I shoved on a pair of shorts and a black sleeveless T-shirt as I tried to recall what the plan was for today. It was hopeless when all I wanted was to get to the top deck and talk to Ollie. Everyone had been together last night, so there’d been no chance to talk to anyone, alone. Right now I just wanted to check, I somehow hadn’t dreamed the whole thing up. And maybe talking about it out loud would stop my brain from overthinking. Because, who tells a bunch of strangers they love someone when Denton hadn’t said it to me?

It needed discussing, pulling apart, and for someone to tell me I wasn’t delusional. So

the topic of Denton's love, absolutely had to be on the top of my list of today's activities or I drive myself mad.

Leaving a message for Denton telling him where I'd gone, I darted down passageways, trying to recall where the gym was and avoiding the possibility of bumping into Denton when I wasn't actually aware how long he'd been gone for.

The ship was enormous, but the signage was easy to follow, and it only took me ten minutes to find Ollie sat on the top deck under a sun umbrella with a plate of pastries and two large glasses of what looked like grapefruit juice in front of him.

My stomach rumbled in appreciation of his choices, and I grinned, giving him a wave as I weaved through the tables set up for breakfast. The top deck was nowhere as near as busy as it had been the night before, full of men, dancing and drinking. The pool got covered over so they could create a dance floor, which was a little weird at first when I knew there was water beneath my feet!

I made sure to not slow as I passed guys having breakfast, they, like us, weren't missing the opportunity of an alfresco breakfast. Offering polite smiles, I aimed for friendly in case anyone had been on the bus the day before and witnessed what happened. It was possible, as I'd had several men come up to talk to me last night and mention it. Denton had been right there giving them back off signals. Gay men could gossip with the best of them.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting. You could have eaten without me," I said before I'd come to a stop, seeing the plate in front of him was empty.

"It's not an issue. It's not like we're in a rush, are we?" Ollie said, his grin appearing more forced than normal.

Was he not happy we were staying on the ship today? This was another day at sea, so

more of a relaxed vibe. Or so it should be.

Before I had a chance to take the seat opposite him under the sun umbrella, when I recalled I'd forgotten to put any sun cream on, he visibly gave himself a shake. "You look happy," he said, his head tilting to the side as he eyed me.

I took the bait, knowing that Ollie wouldn't let me push him into telling me what was wrong until he was ready. "I am happy," I swept my arm wide, pointing to the cloudless blue sky and expanse of jade colored water, "what's not to be happy about with this? Two great friends have paid for us to have a holiday. I'm here with you and Leeson—"

"And Denton," he pointed out, grinning as he pushed the plate of pastries towards me. "I got a selection of what they had on offer."

"Yes, Denton," I replied around a wide grin and nodded at the full plate. "Thanks, they look delicious," I murmured, pursuing the choices before I reached for one which had apple slices fanned out on the top.

I pushed the plate back towards him and nibbled on the corner of the pastry. I groaned at the attack of flavors of cinnamon and crusted filo pastry that were a taste sensation on the tongue. "They sure know how to make a pastry!"

Ollie shrugged and didn't pull the plate back to him to take one.

The larger bite I'd taken, I chewed slowly, eyeing Ollie. "What's with you?" My eyes narrowed on him, getting a sinking feeling when he shrugged and looked away. "Aren't you hungry?"

"No, I'm not... hungry this morning."

I snorted before I could think about my reaction when he returned his attention to me wearing a sad expression. “Ollie, what gives? I know you love breakfast, what’s changed in three years? Isn’t it you that told me breakfast is the meal you love the most?” His lips thinned, making the sinking feeling increase when a thought crashed through my head at rocket speed. “Beckett hasn’t said something about your weight, has he?” I demanded, more worried for my friend that eating suddenly wasn’t my priority as my indignation rose at the possibility Beckett might have been an ass to Ollie.

“No... no.” He rubbed at his reddening cheeks and glanced away once more before looking back at me with a defeated expression. “I look so different to him when I’m naked. He’s all buff and toned. Me, I’m soft and squishy.”

Setting down my pastry back on the plate, I got out of my seat, dusting off my fingers as I came around the table to sit in the seat right next to Ollie so I could take his hand. “Look at me.”

He sighed loudly. “Do I have to?”

Although even as he said it, he shifted to face me. His fingers were icy even in the heat and I squeezed them, attempting to warm them, my worry growing by the second. Any thoughts of talking about Denton were long gone when my friend’s concerns about himself became more important. “You and Beckett, have you...” I blushed and pushed on when talking about sex wasn’t something I was comfortable with, especially after the possibility of what Ollie was into, “been naked... together... alone?”

He blushed too and nodded so slowly it was like he was in slow motion.

“Did he criticize you? Say something demeaning?” I held my breath, hoping I hadn’t read Beckett wrong. He’d seemed like a decent guy. But then I wasn’t the best judge

of character, as my past had proven.

“No, he’d never do that,” Ollie snapped, wearing a frown.

I breathed out like a balloon popping. “Then is this you feeling... uncomfortable with your body?” He had issues with how others perceive him, and I got it. I’d had many judge me because I’d stayed with Davey for so long when he beat me. Davey’s lawyer had hammered that point home when he was calling me a liar.

Ollie blew out his breath and sagged into his seat. “Why can’t I resist all the foods that makes me fat? Why can’t I find the willpower to get off my ass and exercise enough to get rid of the rolls of belly fat?”

His weight was a delicate subject for him, and I understood it never mattered what anyone else said, Ollie needed to believe that he was beautiful despite what society deemed as perfect. The problem with perfection, it wasn’t real. It was unattainable and what someone saw as perfection wasn’t someone else’s idea, making the entire perception of perfection pointless.

I’d learned we have to look in the mirror and be happy with who we are because inner happiness is the sexiest thing on the planet. Mr. Polished had given me a hard reminder of just that, along with a little help from Denton. It wasn’t Mr. Polished who had the power to make me insecure, but my own feelings of self-worth and the power that came from claiming that back. I’d done that after Davey, but sometimes with emotional attachment, it was harder to remember this when I’d clearly let Mr. Polished words cut at my self-esteem.

“I can’t answer that,” I said gently. “What I can ask is, are they the right questions you should ask yourself? I see a gorgeous man who would give away his last dime to help someone out. A man who has a love of life and yes, that includes food. What’s wrong with that if it makes you happy? Who gets to tell you differently? No one.

Only you get to decide what's right for you, except for you." I came forward and kissed his cheek when he looked ready to cry. "I could say a thousand times how wonderful you are. How beautiful you are and none of how I perceive you is because of how much you weigh. I'm sure that Beckett feels the same.

"Problem is, until you can be happy with who you are, then no matter what anyone tells you, you will not believe them. Trust me, I know. Davey told me often enough how worthless I was. You, Leeson, Garrett, and Denton helped me see differently, but in the end, I had to believe it for myself."

"Bravo," came a male voice from behind us and I darted a look over my shoulder at Beckett.

Oh shit!

How much had he heard?

By his expression, I'd have gone with nearly all of it and I couldn't find it in me to be cross if it meant that Beckett got some insight into Ollie's insecurities without my friend having to explain them.

"Erm... thanks." I gave Ollie's hand a quick reassuring squeeze, deciding that it was time for me to leave. "I think I'll go find Denton and leave you to it."

Ollie gave me an imploring look. "Didn't you want to talk to me," he asked, his eyes beseeching me to stay, "alone?"

When I met Beckett's gaze, what I found there made it a simple decision. My friend deserved the unreserved affection Beckett didn't hide when he looked at Ollie. There was something more I wasn't able to pinpoint, but nothing bad. So I took a chance, hoping against hope I wasn't making a huge mistake and Beckett was as strong and

dependable as I thought. Being older, too, didn't hurt. It was something Ollie liked about the men he found himself attracted to.

I bent and kissed his cheek, murmuring, "Talk to Beckett about how you feel, I think he'll surprise you." On that, I rose and nodded at Beckett, speaking loud enough this time for him to hear me. "Please be careful with him."

Ollie gasped, releasing my hand, so I darted off, hoping my friend would still be my friend at the end of the cruise and deciding it was time to follow my own advice and face some of my demons.

Denton

Setting aside my disappointment at finding the note saying Victor had gone to meet Ollie for breakfast and hadn't waited for me, I had gone for a quick shower. Now, naked standing in front of the closet as I air dried with the balcony door open, I contemplated what the plan for the day was. This afternoon and evening, there was going to be a celebration of pride. The party was being hosted in a place called Manor, where the main cabaret shows were held nightly. As yet, we'd not been there. From the information I'd read, the place had three bars and was over two stories, with lots of space to dance. Today the Atlantis drag queens were hosting the pride party, so anything went, and Leeson had relented on the need for everyone to wear Hawaiian shirts.

As I stared at my options, I couldn't decide what to wear, and I wasn't going anywhere near Leeson's suggestion last night everyone should wear a leather jock.

Just no!

Leather and hot, sweaty bodies... I didn't even want to imagine. I shuddered and reached in for a pair of swimmers that had a rainbow flag down the side of the legs I purchased after finding out about today's event. I glanced at the door when the sound of the lock disengaging.

Not again!

My free hand dropped to my junk as it swung open, and I breathed a sigh of relief it wasn't a crew member but Victor. He didn't see my expression as his gaze zoomed

straight down my body to where my hand was covering my dick, which took instant notice of Victor's interest.

I grinned, chuckling when he remained exactly where he stood with folks walking past outside. "You might wanna shut the door unless you want me to become the entertainment of the morning." I gave him a cheeky wink. "I'm game if you are."

The slow blink didn't hurt my ego, nor did the door slam that happened a few seconds later when it must have registered what I'd implied.

"Sorry," he muttered, scratching at his neck, seemingly at a loss for what to do next when he didn't come any further into the room.

I faced away to give him my back, hoping to ease the sudden feeling of tension between us, and went to slip on my shorts. A hand touching my ass cheek startled me and I looked over my shoulder, stilling at the intensity of Victor's expression. I held my breath when the hand didn't stop exploring the contours of my ass.

"God, I wanna sink my teeth in and bite."

I nearly choked on my tongue that felt three sizes too big for my mouth at him doing that. My cock protruded from my groin, making sure no one missed how much I liked the idea. "Do it," I said in a strangled whisper.

He lowered to his knees and I couldn't decide where all the air in the room had gone as his other hand came into play. He stroked up and then down gently to start, then things got interesting as he flexed his fingers. They dug into the muscle and he groaned right along with me as he pulled my ass cheeks apart. Hot breath grazed my hole, and I started to hyperventilate at how close he was and that I could no longer look with how little control I had.

“I came back to talk... to you...” the fingers dug in a little harder, creating an ache that went straight to my pulsating cock.

“Talking’s overrated,” I rasped past the dryness in my mouth from panting. I bent forward and placed my hands on my thighs, uncaring my shorts were dangling halfway up my legs.

More warm air touched my hole.

Had he moved closer?

Was he... “Hot damn,” I ground out as I got my answer when his tongue swiped over my sensitive flesh tentatively, then in a bold, frisky move that made it impossible to think beyond anything other than what Victor was doing. My chest felt like it may burst open with how fast I was breathing to keep up with the pulse pounding in my ears. My cock pulsed in time with the erratic beat. It bounced between my thighs, seeking some attention as it dripped down onto my shorts. To take myself in hand, the temptation I resisted with the knowledge that if I did, this would be over way too fucking quickly.

“You taste...” he licked again, his tongue focused on my hole and a moan vibrated through my channel, making my eyes roll in my head as I trembled. “Better than the pastry I tasted this morning.”

He sucked at my flesh, his lips sealing around my hole while his tongue dipped in past the tight ring of muscle, creating so many wild sensations to flutter in the pit of my stomach I couldn’t decide what to do with myself.

My fingers dug as firmly into my thighs as his did the same to my ass as he worked his tongue into me. Lewd noises came with groans of deep pleasure. My eyes slammed shut as he ate me out and I rode each new wave of mind blowing pleasure

like a pro surfing champion. “Deeper,” I demanded having lost the battle to let him do as he wanted when his lips released the suction and one finger came into play teasing the slick rim of loosening muscle.

“Can’t go deeper,” he whimpered. “But I can use my finger too, if you want?”

In no way did I want him to stop, my body shook with how close I was to coming. “Anything, please.”

The tongue was back in action, doing a playful swirl as his finger sank in and I squeezed, reveling in the burn. It had been a long time since I’d had anyone play with my ass and I’d clearly forgotten how much I loved it when before I could take another breath, his finger grazed my prostate and my balls tightened painfully. The ache in my cock drove ribbons of cum up the shaft to decorate my shorts and onto the floor as I juddered uncontrollably. My cock throbbing, it jerked as his tongue and finger milked me dry while I fucked warm air.

The exertion at the gym and coming faster than a fast bowler, my knees gave way, and I lurched forward, landing with a thud, my hands hitting the carpet just in time to avoid me face planting the floor. My chest heaved as I sucked in big greedy breaths, head hanging between my shoulders as I tried to recover some semblance of my composure. He’d slayed me.

The noise, however, didn’t compete with the loud groans that came from behind me before I could look warm, wetness splattered over my ass cheek. I groaned at what it was and lifted my head, quickly glancing back.

Flushed, glassy eyed, his lips glistening, Victor kneeled behind me, cock poking out of his shorts he stroked himself while staring at my ass. My limp cock gave a valiant attempt to twitch at the sight. I wasn’t young enough to consider round two right then as much as I wanted to. Instead, I locked gazes with Victor and stayed as I was

feeling more wet warmth hit, then slid down my butt cheek almost in a possessive move.

Victor's claim on me. I fucking loved it. "Fuck, you're gorgeous. So damn beautiful like this."

When his hand stopped moving and his eyelids dipped sexily, I came back up onto my knees and twisted until I was face to face with him. I eyed the cum coating some of his fingers and inhaled our combined sexy scent. I came forward, keeping our gazes locked, and I licked his fingers.

He released a shuddery moan, "Ohhhhh." He widened his fingers, offering them to me to give me better access to lick them clean. His expression was languid by the time I was happy.

I grinned widely at him. "So what did you wanna talk about?"

He chuckled, his blush darkening as he looked from his hand to me, no longer quite meeting my eyes. "You think I've enough brain cells left to talk after that?"

I staggered to my feet and took off my dirty shorts, using them to wipe at my ass, feeling more than a little conflicted at removing Victor's cum from my skin. Victor watched me as I tossed the shorts aside and, feeling my energy return, I scooped him off the floor before he could get off his knees.

His squeal was loud enough to make my ears ring as he reached up and clung onto my neck like I might drop him as I walked to the unmade bed and sat down. I cradled him to my chest and rested my chin on his head when he let go of my neck.

He instantly relaxed against me, and my chest ached for a different reason as I got walloped by all the feels. I breathed in his scent and murmured quietly, "Talk to me."

His sigh held something that made my nerves jangle and I had to fight myself from tensing up when I wanted him to open up to me.

“Did you mean what you said on the bus yesterday?” Unable to see his expression, it was hard to get a read on him when he remained tucked against me.

“Which part? Give me a clue.” His hand moved up my chest and whether or not it was an unconscious move, it sat right over my heart.

A long silence followed, but I knew Victor, so I waited him out, giving him the time he needed to figure out how to say what was on his mind. “The part where you said you loved me... loved my sweetness.”

Oh...

I tucked a finger under his chin and encouraged him to look up at me. I needed him to see how sincere I was. See I was being honest with him.

A strangled groan became lodged in my throat at the vulnerability that had gotten its hooks in my heart from the very beginning, which brought with it the need to protect him. To love him. Words tumbled from my lips. “I love you. I’ve loved you secretly for years. In the beginning, I wanted to give you time to heal. To show you that you could trust me, and I wouldn’t hurt you like Davey did.

“Only somehow I got too wrapped up in putting up barriers to protect you while I waited for you to heal. Problem was, I struggled with how to take them back down when I realized somewhere in the back of my mind that you have the power to hurt me if you decided you didn’t want my love. It’s a hard line to travel when I never wanted to push you. Take away your choice when you’d had a lifetime of that with Davey.”

Quick shuddery breaths hit my face as he stared at me with tear-drenched eyes that would have taken me to my knees. Then his mouth was on mine, kissing me with emotions that stole my breath and awakened my desire. Hands stroked up my cheeks and finished in my hair as Victor angled his mouth, encouraging me to part my lips.

When I finally came up for air, we were flat on the bed. My cock was hard once more, my fingers buried inside Victor's ass as he rocked his hard shaft against mine. "Condoms, lube," I growled, a fiery need at the base of my spine telling me I was close to coming again. I wanted to be inside him desperately, but his safety was more important despite the frantic urge to thrust bareback with no lube inside him.

"In the drawers," he mumbled through kiss-swollen lips, looking to the side of the bed he'd chosen to sleep on.

We rolled over the bed, barely stopping in time to avoid me clunking my head on the corner of the bedside cabinet. Gone was the patient guy, in his place was a man who couldn't wait a second longer. I opened the drawer with a hand that shook so badly, in the end I had to let Victor up to get what we needed.

My cock jerked as erratically as my pulse when Victor gave me a shy smile as he slid the condom down my shaft, then drove me wild with teasing touches as he lubed me up. I nearly stroked out when he straddled me and titled his hips towards me, his cock thrusting out as he lifted his balls so I could see him stroke lube covered fingers over his asshole, making it slick and shiny.

"You're playing with fire." The husky rasp made me sound like I'd smoked thirty a day for forty years.

Victor shivered, his lips quirking up at the corners while he reached around him to grab my cock and give it a playful squeeze. "I like fire," he joked, his eyes sparkling with amusement and desire.

Then there were no more words, all I could do was feel and try to remember what my lungs were for. I was large and although I'd stretched him, the second the rim of muscle snicked around the head of my cock, the pressure was like no other. A tiny elastic band left on for several hours couldn't have felt this fucking tight. "Jesus... your ass!"

My eyes rolled into the back of my head and I groaned in response at the fucking audacity he had to squeeze the already too tight rim. "So fucking big..." he gasped. "Feels so good..."

Blood rushing to my brain, the one solely in charge, had my hands holding on to his hips in a frantic move when the head rush came with a violent need to come at his declaration. "Don't move... fuck... please... I'm gonna come if you move—"

"You mean like this?" he cheeked back as he ever so carefully moved an inch down my shaft.

Heat and pressure sent another wave of soul altering pleasure to my balls and the ache was too much. My teeth ground together while I struggled not to thrust up and remove any opportunity to go at his pace and let him adjust. I was too fucking big for him, the way he was squeezing the fucking life from my cock. "I'm gonna hurt you," I ground out, sweating bullets. "You're too fucking tight... aren't I hurting you?"

Victor

“No,” I gasped. He was, but not in the way that made me want to stop. This pain was all about the pleasure that chased it. As I stared at Denton’s strained expression, I wished I could have taken a picture he was so fucking stunning. Blown pupils created dark pools of lust I wanted to drown in as they held all my attention. He was there skirting the edge of falling into the desire, this time I’d no intention of missing what he looked like when he came because of me. Although this hadn’t been my intention when I’d come into the room, I’d gone with my instincts and look how wonderful that has turned out.

I couldn’t resist smirking in satisfaction at how he stretched my ass wide enough to make the burn radiate straight to my cock. I couldn’t see a thing wrong with it, even as my eyes watered. Understanding I had to take my time to really enjoy it, but there was a part of me that wanted to impale myself on the enormous cock just to watch Denton come apart before my eyes when he was desperately holding back.

I released my clenching muscles to wiggle down another inch, breathing through my teeth at the pleasure-pain. The fingers digging hard enough to bruise never moved as I panted through my need to come with the mind-fluctuating sensations flooding my lower body. I wanted him fully inside me and nothing else would do before I came again.

Sweat beaded on my skin and the gentle breeze coming through the open balcony door didn’t dry it as I moaned, wiggled, and shimmed my way down the totem pole that was Denton’s cock. Denton looked like a marble statue with two exceptions, the twitching muscle at the side of his left eye. And the way his pulse, at the junction of

his neck, beat so frantically I could see it bound against his skin, impressing upon me his restraint.

By the time I had my ass nestled against his pelvis, his hair had become drenched, and he looked to be in pain. He wore a fierce expression that left me feeling overcome with raw emotions. Convinced I'd have Denton's fingerprint indents on my hip bones—which I had no problem with—I breathed out, letting my body adjust completely. If that was at all possible, Denton was huge.

“You okay?” he ground out.

My nose wrinkled as I rocked ever so gently to see how it felt. There was fullness and slight discomfort, however, the pleasure, jeez it was worth it.

Slowly rocking, my movement dragged a groan from Denton while I held his gaze. “Like that?” I asked breathlessly, feeling his fingers move restlessly and then he rocked me forward.

“Fuck... yeah!”

I gasped as he nailed my prostate and made me want more. Giving him a wicked smile, I lifted off him until only the head of his cock was inside me, pausing for dramatic effect I slut dropped down his cock.

“Motherfuckerrrrrrr,” he cried out as I moaned in bliss.

My ass squeezing hard to keep the burning sensation going, I didn't give him a chance to recover as I rose and repeated the move, wondering if it was possible to punch out my tonsils with how he filled me so fully.

“God's,” he growled.

It was the last thing I heard as Denton came up, changing the position of his cock, which felt so much fucking bigger at the new angle. It directly connected this time with my prostate and stayed put, sending an eruption of fiery heat straight up my cock.

Unsure who moved first, but I met him thrust for thrust, my cock rubbing against the hairs on his lower abdomen, tendrils of tickly sensations just added to the pot of steaminess bubbling up inside me.

Sweat stung my eyes as I kept up the frantic pace, chasing those feelings that would send me spiraling out of control. Every part of me was alight with ecstasy. My muscles screamed with the excessive activity, but nothing, not even the world imploding, would have gotten me to stop. I'd enjoyed sex before Davey, this was... I couldn't describe it when it was so damn different to what I'd had before.

Was it love?

I hung on mindlessly as the thought took root and sent me spiraling off the edge of a cliff. My eyes slammed shut as violent shudders started from the soles of my feet and worked their way through me. Cum barreled out of my cock, spraying Denton as my ass clamped tightly on his dick, unwilling to let go of its prize.

“God’s... you’re squeezing me so fucking good...” his lips ran down the column of my neck, layering waves of pleasure on top of each other. “I’ll have a permanent imprint of your ass on my cock,” he gasped, his laughter sounded scratchy.

It was too much, his words, the feel of his cock growing bigger in my ass before it started to pulse and he came. He sank his teeth into my shoulder and the pain—pleasure combo unbuckled me from reality, and I floated away, content to never return from my bubble of bliss.

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I peeled open one eye and tried to make sense of what I was seeing.

Everything was above me...

Was I lying on the floor?

I groaned when I moved, as my ass rebelled, bringing me back to reality with an ache that I'd be feeling for days. I grinned, giggling at the very thought of feeling Denton for days.

It still didn't explain why I was on the floor. Hadn't we been on the bed?

"You awake Princess?"

"Huh?" Princess?

I twisted my head to look to where the voice was coming from to find Denton naked and stretched out behind me. Disheveled, his hair was a mess, there was something crusty in the hair on his chest and lower abdomen. Despite that, he appeared relaxed, his ankles crossed, one elbow on the floor, his head resting on his hand, looking rather... smug? Self-satisfied?

Well fucked? My internal voice said and my giggles turned to deep belly laughter when it suited.

"What's so amusing, love?"

"Why are we on the floor?" It was the only other thing I could think of, and I glanced at where the bed was, which was a rumpled mess. The cover and sheets were more on

the floor than on the bed. Had we done that?

“When you insisted we needed a repeat after you came too, we somehow ended up rolling off the bed while we were... playing.” His lips twitched as a playful light I’d seen a time or two appeared.

A fiery heat that had nothing to do with the scent of sex in the room and was all my embarrassment when his words brought a flood of memories of exactly how we ended up on the ground. “Oh,” I muttered at a total loss, wondering if I could claim insanity after not having had sex for three years?

“Next time we do this, can you give me some warning and I’ll not bother going to the gym?”

I eyed him suspiciously as he kept his expression neutral. “Are you messing with me?” I asked, coming up to sitting and once more got a reminder of exactly how I’d spent the morning. My stomach chose then to alert both me and Denton to the fact I’d not eaten more than a mouthful.

“I am.” Denton rose gracefully and offered me his hand, giving me a silly grin. “But you are better than any workout.” He kissed my forehead. “I think it’s time to feed you.” His gaze shifted to my shoulder, and another memory surfaced when his brows drew together.

I ran my fingers over the tender skin, squinting at my shoulder, seeing teeth imprinted there. A shiver came with the possessiveness of such a move. One that was totally different from what I’d experienced before. This wasn’t about power, or pain, or controlling me. For my way thinking, it was about his loss of control and his passion... his love for me. “You’ll need to give me a matching mark on the other side.” He came closer, the frown disappearing as his body brushed against mine. My cock twitched at how good he smelled. I buried my nose in his chest hair and inhaled

deeply, groaning.

“No,” he grumbled and pulled back, holding his hands up to ward me off.

My lips curved up, a smile lighting my face when it struck suddenly he had no willpower against me.

I took a step forward, and he dodged back. “Where are you going?” I asked sweetly, following him.

“A shower... we need to shower... eat... we need to eat...” his desperation was cute.

“Okay,” I replied, continuing to stalk him into the bathroom, my cock plumping at the acknowledgement I was going to get what I wanted despite Denton’s denial. “I’ll let you shower with me... for quickness.”

“Yeah, right,” he groaned and laughed as I lept for him.

“I know I can be quick...” I kissed him hard. “Let’s see how quick you can be.”

Denton

Try as I might, I couldn't stop the heat of embarrassment invading my cheeks when we finally walked towards the group of men waiting for us to have lunch. Leeson wore a wide grin that pretty much matched most of the other men sitting at the table.

"Alright... we're a little late," I said, as we came to a halt, attempting to circumvent a conversation about the reasons why. I continued to hold Victor's clammy hand as he fidgeted next to me.

Victor wore a black mesh, sleeveless top that left his skin exposed, leaving the bite mark on his neck visible. It wasn't hard to add up the sums and figure out why we were so late. I couldn't decide if it was good or bad not to have known before just how wanton and demanding Victor could be. I couldn't resist him and that was going to be a problem for our plans on this cruise.

"It's my fault." Although Victor looked contrite, he didn't sound it, and I had to bite my lip to hold back a chuckle.

"Is that so?" Leeson eyed Victor with interest, his gaze lingering on his neck before it switched to me and he arched a brow. "A little? Denny, you might want to look up that definition in the dictionary. You messaged to say you'd meet us over two hours ago," Leeson pointed out, through his laughter.

Garrett shook his head, wearing an amused expression. "You can't be late for everything. We have a wedding booked."

“Leave them alone. They’re here now,” Ollie interjected, giving Victor an odd look I couldn’t interpret. “Vic, why don’t you come sit next to me?”

Victor’s fingers clamped a little tighter around mine, and it was almost like he was attempting to resist stepping back. I couldn’t fathom why. Clearly, I had missed something.

“I want him to sit with me.” The words had barely left my mouth when Victor visibly slumped in what seemed to be relief. The smile he aimed at me was full of gratitude, making me wonder further about what I’d missed between these two at breakfast. “Lesson, can you move down a seat so Vic and I can sit together?”

His reply was to do as I asked, while he continued to chuckle.

“I’m famished,” I said to no one in particular as I helped Victor into his seat, noticing how he winced and moved to perch on one butt cheek. Again, I had to hold back my amusement, understanding exactly why he was tender. He didn’t seem to factor in my size when he was naked, which I wasn’t ever going to complain about.

“We’ve ordered several of the share platters. We figured you’d be hungry...” This came from Ollie, who pointedly looked at Victor’s throat, “and it seems we were right by how you’ve gnawed on Vic.”

This comment got a stern look from Beckett and Ollie dropped his chin, but he didn’t appear cowed more that he was hiding his amusement.

Something about the two men suggested there was more going on between them than simple friendship. As no one seemed to be inclined to mention it so I kept my thoughts to myself as I settled next to Victor. He stayed quiet as the conversation continued around the table.

When it switched to the pride party and guesses about who the entertainment would be, I listened, lounging back in my seat, but my attention was on the man next to me. He had leaned closer towards me, making a fluttery feeling settle under my breastbone. Needing to touch, I placed my arm on the back of Victor's chair, running my fingertips in circles over the silky skin of his shoulder.

"Isn't that cute," Haines said, looking at his husband. "I remember those days you couldn't keep your hands off me."

While I blushed right along with Victor, who didn't move away, Quinton got up off his seat and came around the back of Haines' chair. He cupped his husband's cheeks and tilted his head back, giving him an upside down kiss that was fucking hot.

Every man at the table stared. Even Teo, who was straight, or maybe not, judging by the interest he didn't hide, making me wonder if he might be like me.

"You pair need to stop!" Garrett complained, his lips twitching as he eyed his friends. "You can do as much of that as you like in your cabin or at the pride event."

Quinton took his time and leisurely released his now flushed-looking husband. He winked at Garrett. "Don't tell me I didn't see you in the pool earlier with your hands down Leeson's shorts."

Leeson snorted loudly, then covered his mouth when he erupted into giggles. Garrett reddened and lifted his middle finger at Quinton, who laughed along with the rest of us.

The servers' arrival with food didn't stop the banter as I reached for a plate and filled it with things I knew Victor liked.

When I placed it in front of him, he colored adorably and whispered, "Thanks."

I ignored Ollie, who nudged Leeson, grinning like fools at each other. Raised by parents who'd continually shown their affection for each other with thoughtful gestures, I didn't see a problem with what I was doing. For a second, I considered maybe the color gracing Victor's cheeks was embarrassment. I gave him a quick side eye look then, seeing how chilled he appeared while he tucked into the food with gusto, I released the breath I'd held and filled my plate.

The surrounding noise was voices and music, which kept the conversation light but the need to shout increased as time slipped slowly into the afternoon, alcohol flowed freely and a party atmosphere developed.

When the servers came back to clear the empty dishes, Haines ordered two jugs of cocktails. "If we are going to the Pride party, I need a little Dutch courage to get my groove on."

"Darling, when you shake that magnificent ass of yours, no one will be worrying about whether you're in time with the music," Quinton said to his husband, his gaze lowering and a heated light appearing in his eyes that left no one in doubt about what he was thinking.

"Behave! I'm renowned for having two left feet that prefer to kick out at anyone silly enough to get too close to me."

An announcement cut off Quinton's husky laugh.

"It's time to celebrate all our colors. Are you excited? Do you want to know who the guest star is? I hope so, and I hope you've brought your dancing shoes."

Haines groaned and rolled his eyes, then his mouth fell open as the guy continued. "Kylie Minogue is waiting for you." Haines shot out of his seat along with other men. Chairs clattered noisily as Haines grabbed for Quinton's hands.

“Oh my god, Kylie,” he squealed.

“I thought you wanted drinks first,” Quinton said, staying exactly where he was.

Another eye roll and Haines looked at his husband like he’d lost his mind. “It’s Kylie!”

The rest of us laughed, but Leeson was now bouncing in his seat, as was Teo. “I’m with Haines, it’s Kylie,” Teo agreed.

“We’ll wait for the drinks and bring the jugs with us,” Quinton explained, getting a grumble of complaint from Haines and Teo.

“You two go and we’ll follow,” I suggested, seeing as Haines had remained standing.

“I’ll go with them too.” Victor got up.

“Me too,” Leeson muttered, throwing the few things he’s laid on the table in a small bag he shoved at Garrett.

“If you’re going, I’m coming too.” Ollie followed suit and stood with Leeson.

Before anyone could say anything, the group was already heading after the other men, who were looking like they were in a walking race.

“Who knew Kylie was so popular?” I said to the remaining men.

Their laughter matched my own when, the moment Garrett and Quinton saw our server coming with the cocktail jugs, they were up and gathering their things hurriedly, too.

“It’s Kylie,” Garrett said as he took the jugs, barely taking the time to thank the server before charging off.

“Wait for me,” Quinton called after him, “I don’t want to miss anything!”

“They can’t be serious?” I muttered, eyeing both Nolen and Beckett, who remained at the table.

“It seems so,” Beckett said, lazily getting up, his eyes twinkling. “But live entertainment, who doesn’t enjoy that?”

“Me. I hate when you see an idol live and they can’t sing for toffee,” Nolen, the last to stand, said dejectedly.

I slung my arm around his shoulder and grinned. “Maybe this time you’ll be surprised.”

“Yeah, we can all dream!”

Victor

I'd lost track of time in the crowded club with the lighting geared to mimic nighttime from the get-go. In the charged atmosphere, my skin buzzed as all the tiny hairs danced in time to music. I imagined it was like taking drugs with how high I was feeling. With Denton plastered against my back, his scent surrounding me, it was one of the best days of my life. A sensation I never wanted to end.

My clothes clung to my skin from dancing. I'd lost sight of everyone else after we'd snagged a table and some seats. Once my feet hit the dance floor, I'd not wanted to leave. I'd pushed my way to the front of the stage, not wanting to miss a moment of the second show Kylie was putting on.

She'd performed earlier in the afternoon, which had been fun, granted, but was a little more sedate than what was happening now. Earlier, she'd chatted more and encouraged folks to ask her questions, which was fun but nothing like the full on disco party atmosphere she had rocking now.

The ship had decorated the club in the colors of the rainbow flags. Everything from the seating, decorations, the bars, the servers, right down to the glasses being used had a Pride theme. It was a rainbow explosion and Kylie was right there in the middle of it, looking amazing. Her rainbow dress, slit from ankle to thigh, hugged every curve the woman had. I wasn't into women but she looked fantastic and sounded great as she performed on the stage with dancers wearing nothing but tight rainbow shorts.

They were incredible, all of them, flexible in ways I could only imagine, but Kylie

stole the spotlight. Hands down, she was the star.

Denton's hands moved from my shoulders and slid down to rest on my hips, bringing me back to nestle my ass against his cock. A cock that was showing signs it wasn't as interested in Kylie by the way it thickened as I rocked against the firming flesh. My attention wavered from Kylie, who really was like the icing on the best cake ever, but she couldn't compete with an aroused Denton. Sorry Kylie!

It felt surreal as shivers of desire ran through me, distracting me from singing the lyrics. I'll forgive and forget, if you say you'll never go, 'cause it's true what they say, it's better the devil you know, I sang loudly and off key as one of Denton's hands cupped my cock and gave it a hard squeeze.

Hot breath ghosted my ear as lips touched the shell. "Having fun?"

I shuddered and groaned as he rocked forward, his cock stroking between my ass cheeks right as he trailed his fingers up the outside of my shorts against the straining fabric.

"Yeah..." I panted through the next wave of pleasure.

If I had to choose between this amazing man and getting to experience my first concert with one of my idols, it was an almost impossible choice... almost. I'd never had the money for such frivolity to see a group or singer live. Right now, granted, I was in seventh heaven. Yet, the way my body hummed with the beat of the music was more to do with the man who dipped a finger inside the front of my shorts to tease the head of my cock where it peaked out of my boxes.

He used my pre-cum to slide the roughened tip of his finger over the head of my cock. The roughness gave me a thrill as he used my own essence to glide back and forth. My breathing grew labored as my ass clenched and I squeezed the cock

thrusting up against my ass in the darkened, crazily noisy room.

I wasn't an exhibitionist, and I was clueless to the possibility that someone might be watching us. It should have shocked me that I couldn't find it in me to stop him. To stop myself from rolling my hips forward, to feel the glide of his skin touching mine. It was too fucking thrilling. So much so, my balls tightened enough I thought I might come in a room full of men for the first time.

"Do you know how fucking gorgeous you look right now?" Denton murmured huskily, right next to my ear.

I shuddered, feeling the impact of his words lodging right in my balls as my heart thrummed along so fast, it could have done my inner chest wall an injury.

"No," I gasped when I could catch my next breath, unsure whether he actually heard me.

"You are," he murmured into my ear, then his mouth traveled down my neck to where he'd marked my skin.

How he'd marked me flooded my mind and my senses careened over the fucking cliff at a dangerous speed. I was out of control in the best way ever, which left me chasing the feeling.

His teeth teased the spot while he slipped his entire hand into my shorts, causing me to chug in air like I'd gotten trapped in an airless room.

"I want to take you back to our room and see you do that slut drop move again..." he bit a little harder at the skin and my knees weakened, "and again."

The words floated past my lust haze, or I thought that's what he was saying. It was

hard to tell with how focused I was on the cock pulsing hard enough I felt it against my ass. The groan that came out as more of a strangled moan of delight could have been his or mine when his lips vibrated against my neck.

Kylie was singing her heart out, I was sure of it. The surrounding crowd was singing right along with her, but the words made no sense when all I could focus on was Denton. He increased the pace of his strokes as he worked my cock, sending me spiraling ever closer to an outcome that was gonna leave me with sticky shorts in a crowded room. Did I care?

Fuck, no.

I rocked into his touch, moaning and shuddering through the waves of pleasure as my vision wavered.

He licked a path back to my ear and murmured sexily, “I wanna feel you come all over my fingers, so I can taste you right here and now.”

Shudder after shudder wracked my entire frame as he tugged on my cock and got what he wanted. I gasped and shut out the world as ribbons of cum covered his fingers in hot pelts. On and on my body gave this man what he wanted. There was nothing I wouldn't do for him and even as a distant part of me registered how that had gotten me into trouble in the past, I acknowledged Denton was different. He offered me the kind of love that didn't come with restrictions. Not a boundary that would take away my freedom to choose. Here, I understood if I'd wanted him to stop, he would have.

My spent cock attempted another spurt at that deep understanding. He would do anything for me. A sob caught in my throat, so unexpected I couldn't catch my breath at the rise of emotions.

Immediately, the hand down my shorts disappeared and there was Denton looking at me with eyes clouded with concern. Despite one hand covered in cum, Denton cupped my cheeks, holding my watery gaze. “What is it, love? Was this too much? I’m sorry.”

I pressed a finger to his lips, needing a moment to pull myself together. “I love you,” I finally managed.

“I love you, too,” he said against my finger, barely loud enough for me to hear. “But what did I do wrong?”

I chuckled, I couldn’t stop it even with his serious expression. Then I gave in and went with the cheeky response that was there on the tip of my tongue. “What, besides rubbing my cum over my cheek?”

He froze, which in the crowded space was hard. “Happy tears?”

“Happy tears,” I replied.

With a sultry smile, Denton’s gaze moved to the hand smearing my face. His lips trembled, right before he leaned in, removed his hand, and licked the cum off my skin.

“Fuck that’s hot,” someone said, loud enough that I blushed and avoided looking toward where the voice came from, positive he was talking about me and Denton.

An internal wave of heat hit that had nothing to do with the packed room or the dancing I’d been doing. Had he witnessed me coming?

Denton didn’t appear to have any such issue with the guy seeing what we’d done. The smile he wore sent tendrils of fresh desire straight to my cock. It was predatory.

Wicked. “Not as hot as he tastes,” he shouted out.

“Can I taste,” I heard.

Oh gods!

“Over my dead body,” was Denton’s reply before he looked back at me, “the only person tasting Vic is me.” More darts of desire hit their target with great accuracy, and I bit my lip to prevent myself from begging to leave. It was too soon, right?

“Wanna leave?” Denton shouted, reaching for my hand, tugging me closer, so I got a reminder of his body’s reaction to what we’d been doing.

“Hell, yeah.” I squeezed his hand so hard I knew he had to feel my desperation.

Back was the wickedness of moments ago and my cock was totally on board with that. My ass... well, I wasn’t asking for its opinion.

“Right answer,” he stated in a sexy drawl.

Who was going to turn down a naked Denton with his enormous cock? Not me! So yeah, it was the right fucking answer, because it was the only answer.

Denton

I took a deep breath and released it, then did it again when it had no effect on slowing down the beat of my heart at the sight of Victor when he stepped out of the bathroom. It was the first time I'd seen him dressed in a suit and holy fuck did he look hot enough to steam any creases from my suit.

I took a shaky step towards him and stopped for fear I'd do something crazy, like attack him with the hunger that never ceased to amaze me.

I swept my gaze over him once more and drank in the sight of him. He'd gone into the bathroom half-an-hour ago to get dressed for the wedding as neither of us had any restraint when it came to being naked in the same room together.

Not always naked! A snarky voice reminded me. The day of the Pride event hadn't been the only time we'd not been able to control ourselves. Time and time again, I found myself drawn to the man now standing in front of me, nervously chewing on his full, pink lower lip.

"Do I look alright?" he mumbled past the lip.

The dove gray suit gave him the illusion of being taller due to the flattering cut of the material. He'd paired it with a pale pink shirt which, because of the golden glow to his skin from the sun, made it pop. The deep pink silk tie was a nice touch, as were the polished black shoes.

Another step closer and I got the full effect of the aftershave I bought him at the last

place we'd stopped. He smelled like a little bit of heaven. The musk scent had some oriental tones to it that smelled divine on Victor. He coughed, and I realized I'd not responded.

"You look beautiful." I came closer and ran a finger down the length of his tie. The thought popped right into my head and came right out of my mouth. "In fact, I wish I was the lucky one getting married today."

A wrinkle appeared between his brows. "You want to marry Leeson?" he asked, sounding confused and more than a little miffed.

A grin tugged at my lips as I shook my head. "No." I brushed my lips against his, holding his gaze. "You. I wish I was the one lucky enough to be marrying you."

His breath hit my face as his lips parted and formed a perfect O.

He stood like that, frozen to the spot, and I enjoyed his stunned reaction, which wasn't an outright rejection of the idea that wriggled its way into my brain and lodged somewhere in my heart. It might not have been intentional, but fuck, I loved the idea.

"So that's not a no?" I asked, feeling the need to clarify what exactly his reply might be.

"You wanna marry me?" he whispered, almost like he was frightened of speaking aloud.

"Yes," I answered without a second's hesitation. "Maybe not right now," I added when his eyes widened right before me, making them appear huge in his face. "But in the future, after we've lived together, and you know all my flaws." I added the latter to lighten the mood, only Victor's expression never changed.

“You wanna marry me?” he repeated, like the needle had gotten stuck on the record.

“Yes.” I added all the weight of feeling I had to being lucky enough to have this man in my life, forever.

“Wow.” He ran his tongue over his lips and then my arms were full of a heavenly smelling man as I barely had time to register he’d moved.

His kiss was fervent enough to knock me back a step and barely keep us upright as I clutched at him. Was he saying yes?

Was this a yes?

The thought nagged enough that it was going to give me a headache. “Is that a yes?” I groaned against his lips.

“Yes.” He pulled back and my heart melted and landed somewhere between our shoes. Everything I wanted was right here in my arms. There was nothing more that would make me happier. “You can’t take it back now.”

Laughter rippled through me at the absurdity of the moment and at me wanting to take it back. “Great, ‘cause you can’t take the yes back either.”

He clung on to me, the smile heartbreakingly beautiful as it lit his whole damn face. “Then that’s good, ‘cause you’re stuck with me and my faults.”

I gave a shudder, really making it so I appeared worried as I asked, “And what would they be?”

His nose ran down the side of my neck, his lips landing on my pulse. “I have to have...” he moved to peek up at me from under his eyelashes in a move that was

sweet, “sex. The hot steamy kind where I get to play firefighter with your pole.”

Sweet, hell no. His intention was dirty and made a mockery of that look. A look that went straight to my hardening cock. I groaned aloud at the visual he painted so clearly, right as someone hammered on the door.

“You’re gonna pay for this,” I murmured, stepping back to give him a wicked smile as I adjusted my cock in his line of sight. “Now you have to think about how hard I am as you are Leeson’s groomsman and hope no one notices why I’m limping.”

“Oh gods,” he groaned as I walked to the door, grinning like a fool.

Ollie stood on the other side, looking more than a little flushed with kiss-swollen lips. He didn’t wait for me to invite him in. He pushed past like the devil was chasing him. Before I could consider what was going on, Beckett appeared with a glint in his eyes. One I’d seen a time or two in the mirror after I’d gotten hot and heavy with Victor, but something had stopped us from taking things further.

I could do the math easily as I nodded at Beckett, keeping my thoughts to myself. “Is it time to head up?”

“It’s time for something!” he growled in Ollie’s direction.

The man in question didn’t look in Beckett’s direction, acting like Victor was the only one in the room right then. “We need to leave, or we’ll be late for Leeson’s big day,” Ollie said in a breathy voice that made him sound like he’d been running.

Victor coughed and hooked his arm through Ollie’s. “Come on, Leeson will be ready for us.”

He rushed Ollie out of the room, and I followed at a slower pace, eyeing Beckett.

“Everything okay?” I asked, keeping my voice low so the men now heading down the busy passageway didn’t hear.

“How can a man so beautiful not see his worth?”

I locked the door and turned to face Beckett, who wore a frown as he watched the men disappear. “Ollie has dated a few assholes, from what I’ve heard.”

“Yeah, I gathered that much.” He sighed when his attention focused on me. “If it takes my last damn breath, he’s going to see that not all men are assholes!”

I slapped him on the shoulder and nodded. “Good, he needs someone willing to do that. Anything I can do to help, then let me know.”

“I may just take you up on that when we get back to Sweet Haven.”

“Offer stands for as long as you need it.” I started down the passageway and Beckett kept pace. “But for right now, I think we need to get moving before Garrett sends out the troops to find us. And by that, I mean Leeson.”

~/~/~/~

The rehearsal had been beautiful, yet somehow walking into the beautifully decorated room and seeing Garrett standing in an archway of white roses with a view of the sea behind him, sparkling with scattered cut diamonds across it, amped the visual up a thousand fold.

Gone was the Hawaiian shirt Garrett had worn for the rehearsal. In its place, he’d chosen a morning suit in slate gray with a crisp white shirt. His tan had darkened over the last week and made his teeth appear as if he’d had them whitened as he beamed at us. “It’s a good job you got here before Leeson. He would not have been happy to

have been upstaged by you two.”

The celebrant, a no-nonsense woman with a smile that softened her sharp features, quickly ushered us into place. Garrett and Leeson had decided on everyone to be standing in a semi-circle around them as they made their vows. It felt intimate. Especially when moments later, Leeson appeared in the doorway with Teo and Victor with Ollie flanking them.

Everyone chuckled at once when they noticed exactly what Leeson had on. His suit was also a morning suit, but he’d paired it with his favored Hawaiian shirt in bold blues that complimented the powder blue of his suit. He was sans a tie. The effect was no less impactful with how his eyes gleamed with love when his gaze met and stayed on Garrett as music played and then Kylie fucking Minogue stepped out of a doorway and sang...

Press a petal to my lips

Feels like your kiss

Don’t you know that’s what I miss?

To smell the sweet perfume

Reminds me so much of you

There’s nothing else that I can do

Count the days ’til we’re together (One, two, three)

Though it feels like forever (We will be)

Holding on to each other (You and me)

You will be my only lover (Eternally)

That's when the tears started as we converged into place and Garrett took hold of Leeson, kissing him as gently as the petal Kylie sang about. The moment wasn't about the singer but the couple who parted and reached for each other's hands. Love was there for all to see. To feel. Beautiful and real. No one could mistake their feelings for each other.

When the song finished, Kylie slipped away unnoticed as Garrett and Leeson exchanged their vows. Every man in the room, I'd swear, could feel the love between them and I hoped that one day I'd be as lucky as Garrett and Leeson to show the world just what Victor meant to me.

When I met his shimmery eyes, it was as if he was on the same wavelength as his lips tugged up into a smile that I realized was the one he reserved solely for me. "I love you," I murmured.

Beckett gave me a knock to the ribs with his elbow to draw my attention, but not hard enough to move me. He tilted his head to the couple in front of us as Leeson warbled his way through his vows.

I glanced at him, arching my brows in question before it struck I was supposed to step forward as part of Garrett's family.

Feeling justly told off, I blushed and stepped forward as we'd rehearsed, linking hands with the other men.

"The circle of friendship you all offer today to these two men can be as powerful as the rings they exchange. No love comes without its challenges and these men you

have picked will share that burden.” She looked at each of us, asking in turn, “Do you offer your support, compassion, love, and guidance if they should need it?”

“We do,” we all said.

“You might regret that!” Leeson said, causing everyone to laugh.

Garret got a shit-eating grin. “They, my love, didn’t agree to clean up the kitchen after one of your disasters.”

“Thank god, I know exactly how hard that is,” Ollie said under his breath, but everyone heard, and more laughter ensued, making it hard to stick to the plan of what came next when everyone was trying to speak through their laughter. But then it wouldn’t have been Leeson’s wedding without at least a little hilarity because that man had proven he could indeed create chaos from nothing.

Victor

How was the holiday over?

No matter how many times I'd asked myself this very same question on the flight home, I still had no answer. What I also couldn't talk about with Denton, as he was on a different flight because he'd booked later than everyone else, so would arrive several hours later than me, was Nese.

We'd kind of avoided any actual conversation, as in we, I mean me, as I really didn't want to ruin the trip. Now I had little else to think about as I'd collected my bag. On the plane I'd had a guy who nervously chatted his way through the flight, explaining every air disaster in the history of air disaster—or that's how it felt—by the time we'd landed. I'd never been more grateful to get off a plane, or at least I had been until my thoughts returned to Nese.

“—so you can come with me.”

I caught part of what Beckett said as Ollie made a weird noise in the back of his throat that sounded weirdly like an animal about to attack.

What had I missed?

“We can get the bus,” Ollie muttered, kicking at a stone on the ground.

“I'll drive you both home,” Beckett replied with an authority that made Ollie look... pleased?

Beckett reached for Ollie's bag and hefted it with little effort, along with his own. "I'll grab the car and bring it around."

Once Beckett had disappeared, I gave Ollie a searching stare, trying hard to figure out what I was missing. "What's happening between you two?"

"Nothing." Ollie didn't quite look me in the eye.

"Did you talk to him like I suggested?" I felt bad that we'd not had much time together, alone. My brain slotted together all the times that might have been possible... there were none.

A slow grin slid over my face. "You're dating Beckett."

"Am not," he scowled.

"Are too," I fired back, highly amused, and happy for Ollie. "He's a nice guy." Nothing had dissuaded me differently over the holiday.

"It's not like that," he muttered, once more kicking at the ground. "We probably won't see each other after we get back. It's not like he won't have other options now. He doesn't live in Sweet Haven any more."

I frowned at the sadness. "You know he had plenty of options on the cruise, but he wanted to be with you. If there was ever a time, a guy would want to figure out his options, it was then!" I pointed out, trying hard not to get cross at how silly my friend was being. "And long distance can work too."

He remained silent, and I hoped when his expression turned thoughtful that he registered the truth of my words.

Beckett pulled up minutes later, and we'd still not spoken. I stowed my bag in the back seat before Ollie could jump in, leaving him with the front seat.

I gave him a sweet smile as I shut the door and settled back for the journey home, my thoughts returning to how to approach Nese. Should I leave it? No, that didn't feel right.

No closer to what to do when Beckett parked outside of our apartment block, I got out quickly, grabbing my bag. "Thanks Beckett." I waved and darted for the door, leaving them alone to give Beckett time to talk to Ollie.

Inside the apartment, the smell of stale air got me opening windows as I roamed restlessly through what had been my home for the last three years. When that did nothing more than lighten the scent and leave me feeling uneasy, I went to my room to unpack.

That took no time at all, and I had the washer going long before Ollie came in, his lips puffy and a dazed look of someone who'd received a mind bending kiss. I bit my lip and remained silent, waiting Ollie out, having learned when pushed he'd clam up.

Ollie hovered by his bedroom door a minute later, and I gave him a smile of encouragement. "I'm gonna go unpack... Beckett is coming back to take me out for dinner. He's staying in town for a few days."

"That's great."

"Will Denny be coming here?"

My smile dimmed at how I would not see him until the following afternoon after he'd gotten a message request to work as they were short staffed this weekend. "Nah, he's gonna arrive late tonight and has an early shift tomorrow so he's gonna come here

after that, he wants me to come to Sunday dinner with his folks.”

“Oh, meeting the parents, that’ll be fun.”

“If you say so.” My stomach did a weird flip at how I’d avoided thinking about his plan for us on Sunday. Now it was front and center and took over for the worry of Nese knowing about us.

I’d only briefly met his grandmother and although she seemed nice at the time, I had no clue how she’d feel about Denton dating a guy. How would his mother and father feel about him being with me? I had nothing to compare it to as I didn’t have any family to be concerned about that.

“They’ll love you.” He dropped his bag and came over, giving me a hard hug. “Everyone who meets you, loves you.”

“Not Mr. Polished,” I said to lighten the mood when my throat wanted to close with the rush of emotions at his show of affection.

He laughed as I expected. “The guy just couldn’t take a hint.”

“I hit him in the head with a ball and he still couldn’t see Denny wasn’t interested.” Mr. Polished after the threat on the bus tour had kept his distance.

“I knew you did that on purpose.” Ollie let go and walked back to his bag, he picked it up and swung around, grinning. “I’d have done the same if he’d acted like that with Beckett.”

“Totally understandable!” I said forcefully.

“Yeah, that’s what...” Ollie’s expression was hard to read when his free hand went to

his ass and he rubbed in a way that suggested it wasn't a conscious action. "I thought, only when I mentioned it to Beckett, he had other ideas." He sighed and his eyes refocused on me, where he blushed and dropped his hand like he was holding hot coal. "Anyway... I'm gonna shower and unpack."

He slipped into his room and quietly shut the door leaving me with an impression once again there was a side to Ollie he had never shared with me. I stared at his door trying to figure what it might be, when the bell rang.

Jerking from my static position, my pulse leaped at the possibility, then I checked my watch, knowing it couldn't possibly be Denton. I sighed, disheartened and trudged to the door. One look in the peephole and I hissed out a breath.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" What was Nese doing here?

With a shaking hand, I hesitated for a brief second, contemplating not opening the door, then like a plaster, I opened the door fast. "Hey Nese," I said with forced cheerfulness. "I wasn't expecting to see you." The squeak to my voice revealed the nerves as I stepped aside, working on trying to dampen the heat flooding my cheeks.

She walked in, looked about with an air of expectation I didn't miss. "I was down the street with my friend Lou, the one I got to dance classes with when I saw a car pull up."

"Yeah, Beckett, Garrett's friend, dropped us off."

"Oh, so that was who it was." She gave me a speculative glance.

"He came on the cruise," I answered, unsure what was going on. Before I'd left, she'd hardly said two words to me, now she was coming across in a way I couldn't interpret.

“So Denny didn’t drop you home?”

I shook my head, feeling my innards knot at the direction of the conversation. “No,” I replied hesitantly.

She sighed and plonked herself down on the sofa, then patted the seat next to her. “I’m being weird, I’m sorry. It’s just...” she ran her hands through her hair and gave me a pleading look. “Please sit.”

I did as she asked because it was that or collapse on the floor with how my knees were knocking at trying to explain that I was now dating the man she was in love with.

“I had this whole speech ready and now it just seems silly. Denny broke up with me ‘cause he loves you.”

“Huh?” It was the best I could come up with when the blood was rushing in my ears at her, knowing this.

“Let me try to explain myself and to say sorry for being such a bitch before the cruise.” She took a breath, and I wished I could when the air remained in my lungs, not budging because I couldn’t see why she was the one apologizing.

“I cried, had a few tantrums and then once I’d calmed down, something struck me hard or more my friend pointed something out to me. I never really loved Denny. I was more in love with the idea of loving him. There was something about him, and I couldn’t figure what it was until he broke up with me. He’d always been unattainable—”

“But you dated for three years,” I pointed out, feeling way out of my depth with her logic.

“I know, but even from the beginning, I think I suspected he had a thing for you. The way he was with you, now when I look back makes total sense. It was probably why I never pushed for more from him, knowing it wasn’t possible because he never led me on—”

“But you were hoping he’d propose,” I said, once more interrupting due to my growing confusion.

“I wanted it, yes. Or I thought I did. I think now it was a kind of ‘I need to move things to the next level’ type of thing to shake him up and it turns out, me too, without fully understanding that it wasn’t what I wanted. Does that make sense?”

I grimaced. “No, not really.”

“It’s girl speak for I loved him, but not enough and to prove it I pushed at him to see what would happen.”

“Oh...”

“Yeah, I realize I’m more angry at me than Denny for not pushing sooner and making us both face that neither of us were in the relationship for the right reason. Dumb right.”

It didn’t seem like a question, and I wasn’t dumb enough to agree, so I sat and waited to see if she was finished.

“So, when I saw you were home, I wanted to come and clear the air and find out if Denny got up the courage to ask you out like he’s wanted to for years because you and I are friends. And that friendship is important to me.”

This I could answer, and a smile slid over my face. “He did.”

She squealed and grabbed my hand like she'd done a thousand times before. "Tell me everything... well, yeah, maybe not everything. But you know the good bits."

Was it as simple as that?

"What bits are they?" I asked, just to be sure I wasn't standing on a landmine about to get a limb ripped off by sheer accident.

"Was he romantic, did he do anything cute? That sort of thing."

I nodded, thinking about Mr. Polished and how what Denton did was the most romantic thing that had ever happened to me. "He stood up for me against Mr. Polished."

She burst out laughing. "Mr. Polished, oh gods, this sounds like a saga. Tell me everything."

And we were right back to how we'd been before her break-up. A grin so wide spread over my face as I started by giving a dramatic sigh. "It all began on the first day of the cruise when this guy, Mr. Polished, didn't get that Denny was just being Denny..."

An hour later, she was flushed and gave me a bright smile. "You cruised right into love." She came forward and kissed my cheek, her expression turning serious. "I'm happy for both of you. You deserve this happiness, Vic, and don't let anyone tell you differently."

I sniffed. "Thank you." I rubbed at the tip of my nose. "Catch me up with what's been going on with you."

Her smile turned brilliantly bright. "I went on a date..."

Denton

Mind blown, Nese's visit to see Victor when I'd called him, after I'd finally gotten home later than planned because of a three-hour delay, had been so unexpected. It had derailed my first reason for calling him. It had everything to do with how spending all that time with him, I'd missed him to the point I considered it would be comparative to losing a limb. Two weeks with him and now I couldn't imagine him not being there when I wake up in the morning or go to sleep at night.

My time in the airport, I used to re-evaluate what was going to happen when I got home. I'd not had the chance to see him yesterday and that along with the trip home made my shift this morning, which I now regretted agreeing to, the longest of my life despite how busy I'd been.

"Whatsup? I thought after your vacay you'd be chill."

I glanced at Alex and blinked several times in confusion when it struck we were stationary. "Do you think it's too soon to ask Vic to move in with me?" I asked, giving Alex an expectant look that suggested the only answer he should give me was a 'yes'.

"I'd say you don't need my answer dude, as you've already made your mind up," he said through his laughter as he unhooked his seatbelt and opened the door to exit the wagon.

I followed suit, grabbing my gear as we headed to clock off. "Not helpful!"

He stopped and his expression grew serious. “Listen, you already wasted all that time trying to give Vic time to heal.” He slapped me on the shoulder in a brotherly fashion. “You leapt over the boundary you created on the cruise, now you have to decide if it’s too fast, ‘cause dude I know that’s where your head”’s at. Ask him to move in with you and see what he says. No harm, no foul.”

Two hours later, those words ran through my head as Victor got in the car for the quick trip to my parent’s home for Sunday dinner.

The second he shut the door and placed a bag at his feet, I moved, puckering up my lips in an exaggerated move. “Kissy.”

He shook his head, giggling. “Kissy? How old are you?”

“Old enough to know my boyfriend should kiss me right now.”

He blew out an exaggerated breath, which was hard to do when he was trying to hold on to his laughter even as he came forward to kiss me.

His scent, the one he’d worn at Leeson’s wedding clouded my senses and the moment our mouths met, what was going to be a quick kiss, was anything but that. Hungry for him, I fought against my seatbelt, wanting to get closer to him. To feel his body crushing mine. Feel him in my arms as his lips parted, and the kiss turned hungry... needy.

Breathless, he pulled back, his hand in his lap, pushing on his cock. “We gotta stop—”

“Or we could go inside...” I supplied, looking hopeful.

My parents would understand... possibly.

His hands fluttered about as if he couldn't decide what to do with them. "No... yes... no, definitely not," he finished with no conviction, causing me to grin at him.

"You sure?" I prompted, loving how flustered he was when it eased some of my worry he hadn't missed me the same as I'd missed him.

His answer was to fasten his seatbelt, and I sighed for dramatic effect when he pushed me back when I didn't initially move away.

"Parents, we're going..." Again, there was a lack of any actual force behind the words, only this time he sounded nervous rather than conflicted.

"They won't bite. They're good people. My Mom and me we're tight so she'll be a little over the top, but she'll be cool once she gets over her excitement at officially meeting you."

He gave a strained smile that showed in the tight lines bracketing his mouth. "I know... but what if they don't like the fact you're dating a guy?"

Oh!

Not something I had factored in at all. My parents had been accepting from the beginning when I'd discovered my sexuality was more fluid than most. Now they didn't bat an eyelid if I brought a guy or girl home. Not that I'd brought many home to meet them, Nese had met them, but it had taken me a year to decide to bring her to Sunday dinner. Something I wasn't about to share with Victor when we'd been officially dating for about ten days. He was nervous enough and with what I wanted to ask him after dinner, I needed him to relax.

I released my seatbelt and twisted to face him, cupping his smooth cheeks, uncaring we would be late. "My parents and Nana know that I've dated both men and women.

You don't have to worry that they won't be accepting of you. They will and they're gonna love you, too."

His lips trembled, and I couldn't resist kissing him again when the past two days of not seeing him whelmed up. I kissed him hard and fast, relaying how much I'd missed. How much I wanted him. Loved him.

The past two weeks of being with him twenty-four-seven were what I wanted. I was greedy, and I hoped like hell he felt the same. The second time he pulled back, a deep pink hue and dilated pupils made it difficult not to kiss him again to keep that dazed look in place. "It's gonna be fine," our foreheads touched as I stared at him, conveying everything I felt for him, "but we need to leave, so we can eat and get out as quickly as possible... I missed you."

The color over the bridge of his nose darkened. "I missed you too."

The hardest thing right then was letting go when he looked at me with devotion and love. I'd wanted that and now I had it, I couldn't get enough of it. It brought me right back to the dilemma of rushing to the next step. My hands trembled as I did the last thing I wanted and fastened myself back in and went into automatic mode while my brain was racing with craziness.

Was it crazy to want to not let a moment pass me by when I loved him?

What we discussed on the drive could have been anything from who landed on the moon first to what was the best place to buy salami. It was a blur as I parked up and got out and came around the hood to help Victor out of the car.

"Someone is watching us from the window," Victor whispered, bringing me from my thoughts as he clutched the bag he'd brought to his chest in what seemed as a defense move.

I glanced at the house that had been my childhood home, clicking the fob to lock the car. The house was two storeys, and I supposed a traditional home. Four bedrooms, an enormous kitchen for family and a wrap-around porch that held an old swing that I'd insisted my parents buy when I was four so my friends could come and sit with me. I waved at Nana who watched us and pulled a face she'd recognize as 'behave', not that she'd care.

A second later the door opened, and Mom appeared wearing cropped jeans and a white T-shirt with the words, 'Mom's slay the food dragon'.

The tension in my shoulders increased when she smiled, and a twinkle of mischief appeared in her pretty eyes. "I considered sending out a search party. It's not like you to be late when it's your favorite, but now I see how pretty Victor is, I get why."

"Ohh..." Victor said under his breath.

She held out a hand, encouraging us up the steps as I placed a hand on Victor's lower back and whispered in his ear. "I come from a family with good taste," while I ushered him up to the house.

On the top step Nana appeared, giving Victor a look from head to toe. "Do you get a discount at the chocolate shop?"

Victor glanced at me, his eyes widening, then back to Nana and nodded, offering her the bag he held. "Some. I noticed what you liked to buy, so I raided my supply."

Nana and Mom both got a soppy expression that made me forcibly swallow the sigh at what was coming.

"What a thoughtful boy," Nana said.

Whereas Mom slipped her arm through Victor's and tugged him towards the open door. "I hope you like roast beef with all the trimmings. And you have a sweet tooth, too, with a big appetite..." Mom winked at me, and I blushed as hard as Victor was.

She wasn't referring too...

"I know my boy does," she finished, causing Victor to make a choking sound and Nana to laugh.

I opened my mouth and shut it before I could find my tongue. "Behave, the pair of you, or you'll frighten Vic off," I scolded, mortified, and somewhat proud of them for being so friendly with Victor. Although he wouldn't know, it usually took time for my family to act so naturally around one of my partners.

Victor gave them both the shy smile I'd fallen in love with, and my heart clutched in my chest. "I do," he said, then he flashed me a cheeky grin, and I braced, feeling my family were about to see firsthand Victor's cheeky side. "Big... though that doesn't quite describe it."

There was a pause before Nana and Mom burst out laughing hard enough Dad appeared in the doorway. "What am I missing out on?" As tall as me, he met my gaze. "It's so like your mom to start the fun without me," he complained gruffly.

"It wasn't me... it was Victor..." she snorted through her laughter.

"You started it," he fired back, causing more laughter.

"Looks like the boy has already got a measure of you, my love," Dad said, his bearded cheeks lifting as he grinned widely. "Seems like your Victor will fit in well here."

“He does, Dad,” I replied, staring at Victor. “He fits me perfectly.”

Victor

My eyelids drifted shut as my head lolled on the headrest as Denton drove us away from his parents' house with plans to return the following week. The 'meet the parents' hadn't been as scary as I'd thought. Most of Saturday night I'd lain awake worrying they'd not like me and the rest of the night missing Denton's large body, spooning me from behind. A position we gravitated to on the cruise and one I loved. It left me feeling loved and protected, something I'd never truly had for some time.

Memories of my parents were vague. My aunt, who'd cared for me after they'd died, lacked any genuine affection towards me. She'd tolerated me, fed, and clothed me until I'd turned eighteen and I'd appreciated that when I considered all the horror stories out there about kids in care.

Davey had easily picked up on my need for affection and manipulated me, I could see it now clearly. Comparing the past to the present was like suggesting cheese was an excellent substitute for cake—it clearly wasn't and never would be. I couldn't change what happened, but I could choose what happens now.

Asking for it... that was the tough part, despite how much Denton loved me. He was old-fashioned, he'd said it. Would suggesting we live together after such a short time dating be wrong? It didn't feel wrong, yet...

I sighed quietly and tried to shift my thoughts to how wonderful the afternoon-evening was with the open affection displayed between Denton's family. In fact, it had been... amazing because they'd included me without hesitation. I'd slotted right in, and it felt like I belonged...

I belonged with Denton.

I did...

I blew out a breath and put the sudden rush of blood to my head, making me dizzy down to how much I'd eaten rather than the sudden need to say what was on my mind. It was true, I could barely move after all the food I'd consumed, and I was ready for a nap. Because any thoughts of rolling around naked with Denton with how full I was would be asking for trouble. When I'd joked about my appetite, I hadn't considered that Denton's mom would make enough food to sink a battleship. To my surprise, the table hadn't groaned under the weight.

I'd definitely shown my appreciation and eaten way more than I would normally, but Denton's mom was as hard to resist as Denton was when she gave me a smile so similar to Denton's, it was spooky.

I groaned when the car slowed, and I opened my eyes to stare at Denton's small house I'd visited before. "I don't think I can move." Coward! The idea of going inside was scary with how much I wouldn't want to leave.

"Eaten too much?"

I unclipped my seatbelt and looked down at my potbelly, distractedly rubbing at the roundness that resembled a pregnant lady. "I don't think I've ever been so full. You'll need to carry me inside... or just leave me here," I joked, in part because seriously moving didn't feel possible when I considered it.

Unprepared for his next move, I watched wide eyed as Denton got out of the car and walked up the dark sidewalk to his front door to open it. A light flickered on revealing the intensity of Denton's expression.

A breath shuddered from between my parted lips as a feeling of something

monumental was about to happen settled in my gut. Door wide open, he strode with purpose back to my side of the car. My lips parted to ask what he was doing after he opened the door, only for him to reach and unclip my seatbelt. An arm scooped up under my legs, and I released a startled breath when his other arm slipped around my upper back, and it sank in what he was about to do. “Hook your arm around my neck,” he murmured.

I was so stunned by what he was proposing, I didn’t quibble. Say I was too heavy for him to carry into his home and did as he asked. A part of me swooned like some princess he’d once called me.

After a little jiggling, he carefully eased backwards, then rose, making my heart flutter wildly in my chest as he kicked the door shut and turned to the house. Emotions clogged my throat, and I blinked, trying to ease the ache at the back of my eyes at such a gallant move. When it didn’t work, I pressed my face into the side of his neck while nestling my head against his shoulder. I inhaled his familiar scent, shuddering.

His arms tightened around me, pressing me closer to him and feelings of being cherished lodged right there in the center of my chest. Like a security blanket being pulled over me, they expanded and cocooned me in Denton’s love. How did I get so lucky?

At the open door he paused, and I glanced up expectantly, the feeling in my gut increasing as the intensity was back. Although the light from inside cast half his face in shadow, I could see the love shining in his eyes. His lips were right there, hovering close to mine, and I could scent the chocolate fondant he’d eaten. He didn’t move as his gaze turned to affection, then something that looked like conviction came and went before he kissed me with a passion that left me clinging to him.

It melted my bones with how it seared me and turned my blood to molten lava. Fierce passion took hold, and I groaned needily into his mouth, grateful I wasn’t standing as

I wasn't sure I'd have been able to keep upright. My fingers dug into the nape of his neck, holding on, scared I'd float away with how damn bubbly my insides were.

"Move in with me," he murmured against my lips, not releasing my mouth. Kissing me deeper, drugging me with the love I'd come to expect.

The passionate fog he created inside my mind didn't register the words as I groaned, my full stomach and cock fighting each other. All thoughts of being too full to get naked right then disappeared at the kiss and the show of strength he was displaying at holding me for so long.

"Say yes," he begged, his mouth hot against mine.

"Yes," I replied automatically, clueless to what I was agreeing to when all I wanted was him to kiss me again and never stop.

When I felt the broad head of Denton's cock pushing against my slick hole, I blinked the room into focus and tried to figure out how I was naked and lying on... Denton's bed. I had no recollection of how we'd gotten from the front door to the bed and naked!

The delicious feeling coming from the cock pushing against the rim of my loosened ass sent a shudder of yearning through me, lodging in my balls that ached with the need to come. I groaned, relaxing as Denton came down over me, his arms straining as his hands hit the mattress and he hovered above me. His expression was etched with his desire and made it hard to chug in a breath.

He rolled his hips and sank the head of his cock into my ass. With how loose I was, it suggested he'd spent some time prepping me. Again, I couldn't get my brain to focus enough to consider when he'd done that. The clawing need to come was there, along with the burning stretch that his size caused, no matter how much he worked to loosen me.

He moaned, and I whimpered when he held still, my ass clutching at him, attempting to draw him deeper.

“More,” I begged. “I need to feel you everywhere... please... I missed you so much.” I cried out silently as he did what I asked. My heart stuttered when he thrust deep enough to hit my prostate, sending swirling tendrils of sensations around my balls and down my cock. It jerked and leaked against my belly as he slowly rolled, his hips sinking in until his pelvis was cradled against mine.

The desperation didn’t ease when he waited for me to adjust, I only wanted to impale myself on him and feel him lose all control as I did. “Wanna ride you,” I gasped out.

The request got met with a scorching kiss, then we were rolling, and he didn’t give me time to complain at the loss of his cock inside me. Because before I could utter a word, he was lowering me back down onto the throbbing shaft that opened me wide, sending me straight to my favorite place.

High from the burn, I rode it. Denton groaned anew, the sounds he made competing with my own as I chased the euphoric feeling that was coming my way. My cock, untouched, bounced and slapped off my belly as I held Denton’s gaze and rode him hard and fast.

“I’m gonna come,” I cried out as the first spurt of cum hit Denton’s golden skin, shining in the overhead lights.

My ass clasped his cock tighter as it thickened and cum filled me, as I writhed, losing the ability to do more than ride out the forceful spurts, making my cock bob and give Denton all it had to offer.

His skin was a mess of white streaks as I collapsed forward and barely missed beaming him as I landed with a thud on his chest, breathing hard. Sweat and cum sticking us together, but I didn’t care.

Denton's chest rose and fell in rapid succession as I chugged in greedy breaths, working on computing how we'd gotten from point a to point b so fast when my stomach could now tell me it wasn't happy with my antics when having a sex marathon on a full stomach wasn't a good idea.

"How'd we get here?" I asked through dry lips.

"In bed? Naked? Having sex?" Denton finally said when his labored breathing slowed down, that my head was no longer going up and down fast enough to make me dizzy.

"All the above?"

"I'm not sure if I should be flattered or insulted." He chuckled.

I rose, sighing at the effort it took when my arms trembled at the idea of holding me up. "Flattered?" I suggested, grinning widely.

"Flattered it is." He moved my arms so he could come up to kiss me, my heart kicked against my ribs at how happiness shone from him. His nose brushed the tip of mine before he lay back on the mattress. "So, when are you gonna pack?"

"Pack?" My brow wrinkled, as I tried to take the leap from what we'd been talking about to me packing.

If it was possible, the brightness of his happiness grew. "To move in. You said yes."

I groaned when the cock in my ass hadn't softened enough for me not to feel it when I jerked up to sit straddling his lap, staring at him wide eyed when my dazed thoughts ran back over what had happened in the doorway. "I did," I squealed, my ass grinding down as I moved to switch position, only to find myself flat on my back with Denton looming over me, looking... worried.

“You did,” he replied with hesitancy. “Have you changed your mind? I’ll get it if you have, I know I’ve gone about this relationship assbackwards, but I want you here with me. I wanna wake up and you are the first thing I see. I wanna go to sleep with you wrapped in my arms. I don’t wanna pressure you... I don’t—”

I pressed a fingertip to his lips and gave myself a second to acknowledge that he was offering me everything I wanted, and he was a fucking blessing I’d never expected. Then I recalled what Nese had said. “Cruising right into love, that’s what we did, and I never want it to end... ever.”

Expectation, it was the only way I could describe how he looked as he came down, our foreheads touching, our gazes locking together.

My heart beat wildly. “Just to be clear...” his nose rubbed against mine. “That’s a yes?”

“That’s a yes,” I giggled as he nuzzled at my lips, “but for right now you need to get off me, my stomach hasn’t decided if it likes me with all the food stuffed in there.”

Booming laughter shook his body as he rolled off me, but he brought me with him so I was once more on top of him, straddling his hips. I inhaled the scent of sex and Denton, giving my poor stomach something more to complain about as my cock perked right up.

Denton glanced down at my body, a slow grin sliding over his lips. “I’ve an idea of how to make your tummy feel better.” He paused and wagged his brows. “More exercise will help ease the full feeling.”

I couldn’t stop my laughter. “Is this paramedic advice?”

“Yep.” Looking smug, his hands slid up my thighs to my hips, getting me to slowly rock against the shaft that plumped under my ass cheeks.

I gave him my best solemn expression even as I wriggled my bottom. “I was always good at listening to medical advice.” I wriggled once more, making him catch his breath. “But I might need some instruction. Do you think you could help me?”

“For you,” he gasped as I squeezed my ass cheeks together. “Anything, love, anything at all.”