



His Every Move (Stonewall Investigations: Midnight #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Elijah Grant is being watched.

And Detective Benji Morrison may be the only one who can save him.

When the popular adult content creator starts receiving disturbing messages and signs someone is tracking his every move, he turns to Stonewall Investigations for help. That brings him to Detective Benji Morrison—quiet, intense, and all too eager to take the case.

Benji claims he's there to protect Elijah. And he is.

But he's not telling the whole truth.

As the stalker's threats escalate, Elijah finds himself drawn to the man assigned to keep him safe. Their chemistry is electric, their connection immediate—but something about Benji feels familiar. Like this isn't the first time their paths have crossed.

And the closer they get, the more dangerous things become. Because as secrets unravel and obsession turns deadly, Elijah must decide: Is he falling for his protector... or trusting the wrong man with his life?

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Chapter 1

Benji Morrison

Gah damn, was today a long one.

First, the A train was delayed because of maintenance, making me thirty minutes late to the Stonewall offices.

Then, I sat down at my desk the moment an email dinged in. Apparently, my rent was about to go up by two hundred bucks.

To top it off, the guy I'd been talking to for the past few weeks completely ghosted me. The last thing he texted me was a mediocre dick pic before he completely stopped responding to my texts.

Yeah. Not great.

I leaned back in my office chair and spread my legs, sighing as I rubbed my hard bulge.

That was the last thing I'd been dealing with. I'd been horny all fucking day. My briefs were practically soaked through with precum. I had a difficult time focusing on any work. It was even harder, considering the fact that the cases currently cluttering my desk were some of the most benign and boring cases of my entire ten-year career.

Example number one: I had someone hire me to investigate their clearly cheating

husband.

The hickeys on his neck were enough of a dead giveaway, but the photos I took of him meeting up with his Grindr hookups made it clear as day.

Example number two: someone took me on to investigate a workers' comp case. Boring as fuck.

Example number three: a woman who reeked of cigarettes hired me to look for their lost dog, who they thought may have been stolen by a jealous ex. That one actually did take up my attention. I loved dogs and hated to think a family pet had been yanked from their home. I still had some work to do on that one, but the day was beginning to wind down, and my constantly throbbing cock was begging for some attention. Which was probably made more intense by the two beers I had snuck out from the fridge. They were mainly for events and overtime days, but I figured an early start to happy hour wouldn't hurt today.

The Stonewall offices were quiet, which was pretty unusual. I was the only detective that came in to work, and the front desk manager, Matthew, had already packed up and left early. He had developed a nasty cough and didn't want it to spread.

It was only me.

Me and my needy cock.

"Hello?"

No one answered. I was in the clear.

I opened my computer and typed in my favorite site: CamStar. I clicked over on the tab for men and was greeted by a screen full of just-as-horny guys jerking off live.

There were a couple I recognized, a few favorites, but the one I normally watched wasn't online.

EliGoldStroke. One of the hottest damn men I'd ever laid eyes on.

He knew how to work not only himself but the camera. He was constantly at the top of the rankings, raking in the most views and donations for the way he played with himself. He had short and curly brown hair, a scruffy beard, a beautiful body (if I had to guess, he was a swimmer at some point), light blue eyes, and a cock that was thick and pink and always leaking precum. His smile made him seem like one of the kindest people on the site. He had the power to turn that into an intense smolder that would burn through the computer screen the closer he got to coming.

And he was verbal, saying all the right things to get me off.

Basically, the guy was perfect.

But... he also wasn't online.

I closed out of the site. I wasn't in the mood for any of the other guys filling up the screen. My cock pulsed for Eli, so I decided to give it just what it needed. I opened my phone instead and went to my photos app. There, I tapped on a video I'd recorded just last week. It was an hours-long live stream of Eli. It started with him sitting in his desk chair, wearing a black hoodie and a pair of tight white briefs. I skipped forward a little to where the tips started flowing in and his cock started getting hard inside his underwear.

A lick of flame spread down my back. My balls tightened.

I loved bulges. Loved when Eli's briefs strained to keep his cock from bursting free. I watched him stroke himself through his underwear. He stood up and moved closer to

the camera so he could show off the growing dark stain of precum.

“Like that, boys?” Eli said. “Look at how wet I am for all of you.”

In my head, all I heard was “Look at how wet I get for you , Benji. Want to lick this up, Benji?”

I unzipped my jeans. My cock sprung free. I’d decided to go commando today. My cock dripped just as much as Eli’s did. I wondered how it would feel pressing our two wet heads together, rubbing my shaft against his.

Fuccck, I was already close to coming.

Eli sat back down on his chair. He was such a handsome guy. He’d likely just gotten a haircut, his curls styled just right. There was a glint in his eye that came through the camera. A passion that drew me in, almost as much as his girthy cock did.

I scrolled to the point in the video where a large tip flashed across the screen, the username NightOwl appearing underneath it.

“Thank you, Night,” Eli said as he slipped off his briefs.

He leaned back in his chair and spread his legs. I swallowed back a groan of pleasure as I stroked myself to the sight. I didn’t want to be too loud. Yes, the offices were empty today, but the front door was still technically open, and clients could very well walk in, seeking help.

I just couldn’t resist. I needed my daily dose of Eli.

Addictive personalities were nothing new to me. My entire family was riddled with them—Mom an alcoholic, dad a gambler, grandfather addicted to meth. And me?

Well, I had a couple of vices, but watching Eli was my biggest.

I'd stumbled on the website by accident sometime late in the night and started clicking through a few profiles until I landed on Eli. He had just finished coming—I missed the money shot—but I still didn't click away. I watched him clean himself up, first with his fingers and then with a plush white towel. He sat back in his chair, dick soft and still dripping, and started to talk to his viewers, updating us about his day and thanking everyone for the tips.

I jerked off and came as he was telling a story about the hot mechanic he flirted with down at the bodega.

Ever since then, I kept alerts on so that I could watch him whenever he went online, even if that meant sneaking off to the bathroom or switching from my podcast to his stream on my commute. I didn't even have to watch. If I was on a crowded subway train, then I'd start the stream and lock my phone, my commute made a hundred times better by the sound of his silky, soft voice and his chesty moans. He was verbal, always egging the chat on for more tips and requests, always vocalizing the pleasure he was getting from this.

He knew what he was doing. Probably why he was the most popular streamer on the website. Was I jealous that over a thousand other people watched him play with himself daily? Yeah, maybe a little bit. What was the alternative?

I thumbed my leaking cock at the same time as Eli did his. He brought his thumb up to his lips and tasted himself. I did the same. Salty, sweet.

But not Eli.

Fuck, though, was this guy hot. He stroked faster as someone dropped two hundred tokens. "Nice, sportsdaddy, you like me jerking off, don't you? Who else wants to

tip? Who wants to see me finger my tight hole?”

Sportsdaddy replied with a “fuck yeah.” Underneath his message appeared another.

Eli read the message and froze, one hand still on his cock. Those big, sexy puppy eyes narrowed. Appeared angry. He quickly leaned forward and deleted the message.

Odd. I didn’t remember that. I rewound the video and paused when the message appeared.

Nomad89: You’re perfect as always, Eli. I want to get you alone so bad. Wear you like my favorite suit. Never let you go.

“Alright,” Eli said, sounding a little shaken. That comment clearly threw him off. “Tip five hundred tokens if you want me to bend over for you.”

Another sum of golden coins flashed across the screen, NightOwl written underneath it.

“That’s right, Night, I knew you wouldn’t let me down. Thank you.” Eli smiled and winked at the camera.

He stood, his stiff cock hard as a fucking rock. His bedroom was dark, but he had pink lights that bordered the walls of his room. There was an interesting lamp shaped to look like a melting bouquet of light-filled flowers that he must have bought from some artist who enjoyed doing shrooms. He turned around and bent over in front of the camera and spread himself open for me.

Fuck, he had such a sexy pink hole. He ran a finger over it. I squeezed my cock, more precum leaking from the tip. I pictured myself spreading it all over his hole before I pushed in, earning a gasp of pleasure from him. That sexy little moan he always gave

whenever he fingered himself. Begging for more. For something bigger.

For my thick, hard— ding .

“Hello?”

I snatched the phone and exited out of the video and froze, dick still fully out.

“Hello? Anyone here?”

That voice...

My heart, already beating fast, sped up to about a thousand beats per minute. I stuffed my cock back into my pants and zipped them up. I tucked it against the waistband and stood, glancing down and checking to see if it was obvious that I'd been jerking off only seconds before.

No clear evidence. I took a breath, slipped my phone into my pocket.

Could it really be him?

I hurried to the door before he left.

“Hi, hello, sorry, our front desk guy left early today.”

He was just about to leave. He had his back to me, a baby pink baseball cap on his head. He turned and smiled and nearly knocked me right over.

It really was him, standing right here, in the flesh.

Eli. The cam boy. The object of my intense desire and obsession.

I somehow managed to keep my voice steady. “How can I help you?”

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Chapter 2

Elijah Grant

“No, you don’t get it, Zack. This person sounds batshit fucking crazy.”

I sat next to my best friend on one of the benches next to the Washington Square Arch. It was early evening, so the blazing hot summer heat from this afternoon was much more bearable. Even though it made the subways smell like one of the nine circles of hell and it had a detrimental effect on New Yorkers’ already short fuses, I had to say I loved the summer. Wearing shorts, hanging out at the park, longer days, bright green trees.

Everything about it made me happy.

“And you’ve already reported them to the website?”

“Yeah, man. They keep creating new accounts with different IP addresses. But all the accounts always start off with Nomad.”

“Do we know anyone that considers themselves a nomad ?” Zack asked, using air quotes and an eye roll. He’d been my best friend since high school—over twelve years now—and he’d known about my issues with this Nomad guy since they started. He knew about pretty much all my problems.

“You think it’s someone I know?” I asked. I leaned forward and rested my chin in my hands. A couple of pigeons hopped near my feet, pecking at the ground. I’d been

assuming that the aggressive troll was some faceless dude miles and miles away. Or at least, naively, I'd been hoping it was some dumb troll who lived states away from me. It hadn't crossed my mind that this person could be someone close to me.

Shit.

"I think it's someone who's definitely got it out for you. And from all the true crime shows I watch, it makes the most sense to start closest to the victim. Not that you're a victim, obviously."

"Damn, already offing me?"

Zack chuckled. He nudged me with his shoulder. The tattoo he'd gotten only a week ago was bright against his forearm, a watercolor hummingbird splashed with bold blues and vibrant greens and rosy pinks. "Just want you to be safe, that's all."

"I know... I mean, I have been thinking. There's that one performer on the platform, Damon, who is always messaging me about problems he's having and why he's jealous of how well I do. Which is, I dunno, weird. Like why tell me you're jealous of me?"

"Yeah, that's pretty weird. Have you ever met him in person?"

"Nah, I think he lives somewhere down south. Florida, I think."

"That's not too far from here... And what about Bryan? He still giving you trouble?"

"Ugh, yeah," I answered. Bryan Diaz was my neighbor and an annoying vulture of a human being. He somehow found out what I did for a living and decided it was his job to "cure" me of my sins and bring me over to the light. He would leave a countless number of religious pamphlets in my mailbox, would corner me in the

hallway any chance he got, and had recently resorted to leaving prayers written on sticky notes attached to my door. “But I think he’s just a harmless religious fanatic.”

“When have those three words ever gone together?”

I sighed and rubbed the bridge of my nose.

“Maybe you should take a few weeks off camming?” Zack suggested. “Just until things calm down?”

“I’ve thought of that. I have enough money saved up. But then I feel like I’m letting this person win. I don’t want that. I don’t want someone having that kind of control over me.”

“Right, but at what cost?”

“I know, I know. It’s not ideal. I’m making the most money I’ve ever made in my life. Is it exactly what I thought I’d be doing? Obviously, no. I thought I’d be acting and singing my gay ass across a Broadway stage. But I know I want to keep doing this, but I don’t know how to get rid of this person.”

Zack rubbed his shoulder. “What if you hire someone? Like protection?”

“I’m making money, but not bodyguard money. Especially not here in New York. Not if I want to keep living in an apartment with a washer and dryer.”

“True, true.”

“ But I am going to be hiring someone. A detective. Someone to look into this for me.”

Zack raised a brow at that. “That sounds... hot?”

I scoffed. “My life’s not a soap opera. I’m sure the detective is going to be some half-balding guy with Cheeto dust covering his fingers, at least with my luck. That or a boss-ass woman who I’d rather be best friends with than hook up with.”

“You never know, dude. It’s like in those romance novels I read all the time.”

“Damn, you’re bouncing from true crime to romance?”

“It’s dark romance.”

“Ah, gotcha.” I chuckled and glanced at my watch. “Speaking of detectives, this one agency I found closes in like thirty minutes. I think I want to drop in.”

“They close by?”

I nodded and stood. The pigeons near my feet bounced away on their hunt for my crumbs. A busker played with a deck of cards laid out on a table in front of him. He made a few of them disappear in his sleeve, a pair of young kids watching the magic show with wide eyes. “Yeah, I can walk it from here. Want to come with?”

Zack sighed and dropped his head back. “Nah, I’ve got to study. I have a midterm coming up.”

“What class?”

“Pharmacology,” Zack replied. He grabbed his book bag from between his legs and tossed it over his shoulder. I was pretty damn proud of my bestie. He’d been struggling with finding a purpose lately. He’d worked a dead-end job in retail ever since I knew him and always hated the idea of going back to school or pursuing

bigger opportunities. But something changed in him about two years ago. He enrolled in a couple of classes at a community college and applied to nursing school, getting accepted a few months ago. I could already sense there was a shift happening in him. He finally had direction, no longer staying inside his apartment, passing around bong hits with his roommates and chasing meaningless relationships with trashy guys. Instead, he spent his weekends at the library or studying with classmates.

It was an inspiring change to witness.

“Alright, I’ll hit you up after my meeting with the detective. Let you know how it went.”

“Sounds good. Stay safe, Eli.”

“I will.”

We walked toward the arch and separated, Zack heading for the subway station. I continued down the street, wondering if this was even worth it. Was I overreacting? This “Nomad” person was annoying—no doubt about that—but were they ultimately harmless? The threats sounded toothless to me.

But... well, what if it wasn’t? It was unsettling that this person kept coming back to my live streams. They were clearly dedicated to their cause, whatever cause that happened to be. And the messages were pretty benign at first, almost comical, but they’d progressively gotten more and more unhinged.

You deserve more than this.

I’ll find you and stop you myself.

You’ll regret ever coming on this website.

You're mine.

I didn't want to give up camming, either. I came from a rough childhood, with a lot of money insecurity. My mom, sister and I had bounced between shelters for most of my early life. I remember spending Christmas morning around a bunch of kids I'd only just met the night before. Volunteers came and dropped off donated gifts that were all snatched up in minutes, before I could get anything I actually wanted. My mom had saved a couple of dollars and taken me to the zoo that day.

We were back in the shelter that night. It wasn't until a year after that Christmas, when I was turning twelve, that my mom found us some permanent housing. She started getting us back on our feet, hustling hard every day. She started off cleaning office buildings before she realized she could handle more, that she wanted more, and so she started the process of opening up her own cleaning business. My sister and I definitely butted heads, but my mom and I were best friends, she was a superhero. An inspiration.

And even though she was gone, I still strived to make her proud of me.

The sun had crept behind a tall apartment building. I walked through the lengthy shadow, passing a bakery that must have gone viral online because people were fanning themselves as they waited to enter. Two younger girls walked out and took a moment with their colorful pastries to pose and take a picture for their social media. I had to admit that the bright pink croissant was fun to look at.

I wondered how good it tasted, though.

The Stonewall Investigations offices weren't much farther. I took a left down a quiet street and walked past a couple of brownstones before I reached the location on my maps.

It was a cute building, with dark green ivy crawling up the brick facade. There was a sign above the door that read Stonewall Investigations, a small rainbow sitting in between the words—a subtle sign that this agency was a safe space for all. One of my longtime viewers, NightOwl, had actually told me about this spot after I confided in them about what was happening with Nomad.

Not everyone online was out to get me, which was nice.

I climbed up the steps and opened the door. Inside, the lobby area was as cute as the exterior. There was a small desk where I assumed the receptionist should be. I checked the time again. According to the website, they should be open for another thirty minutes.

“Hello?”

There was a short hallway in front of me, the doors to the offices closed. I thought I could hear a soft shuffle behind one of the doors.

“Hello? Anyone here?”

Maybe I’d come back another time. I was about to leave when I heard a door open behind me, its hinges squealing and the wooden floor creaking as someone stepped out.

“Hi, hello, sorry, our front desk guy left early today.”

I turned around and laid eyes on one of the most handsome men I’d ever seen. I had been completely wrong. My expectations were wildly off the mark. This man was hot, with a scruffy dark beard, broody hazel eyes, thick brows, powerful shoulders, sexy forearms. And his smile, it caught me totally off guard. He had a softness to the edge of his attractiveness. Almost as if he didn’t even realize the power his appearance

could wield.

“How can I help you?”

Wow. This man was hot in a traditional way mixed with something edgier, sharper.

“Hi, I’m, uh, looking for Benji Morrison? I was recommended to him by a friend.”

“Pleasure to meet you...”

“Elijah. Eli.”

“Please to meet you, Eli. I’m Benji, the detective you’re looking for. How can I help you?”

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Chapter 3

Benji Morrison

He was here.

He was real. A living, breathing, smiling human being. Elijah wasn't just some fictional character locked up behind my computer screen. He didn't live miles and miles away, nor did he appear any different than the man I'd come to know over my time watching his streams.

My mouth went dry. Meeting new clients wasn't exactly a difficult part of my job, but that changed when I was meeting someone who I already intimately knew. I'd seen Elijah lying back with his legs spread, a hand massaging his full balls as he blew his load all over his sexy chest.

I couldn't say that about any of my other clients, that was for sure.

"Come," I managed to say. "Let's step into my office."

I turned and tried to compose myself, even though I could feel Eli's intense stare boring a hole through my back. There's no way he could possibly know I was a, well, fan of his. I just had to play it cool. I could do that.

"You can take a seat here." I pulled out the chair in front of my desk. Eli stepped into my office—into my space—and looked around, seemingly admiring it all while I secretly admired him.

I'd been working at Stonewall Investigations for a little over a year now, so I'd had plenty of time to add personal touches: a watercolor sunset painting I had picked up on a trip to Paris, a wooden sculpture of an eagle one of my clients had gifted me. A couple of books were neatly stacked next to my computer. A few nonfiction reads and two thrillers I was working my way through.

"Nice reads," Eli said as he sat. "I'm actually reading *The Missing Roommate*, too."

"How are you liking it?"

"Meh," he said with a shrug. "I think I already know who killed her."

"Same."

Eli grinned. Fuck me, did he have a sexy smile. "Say their names on three. One, two, three: Janice."

"Emily."

Eli blinked and laughed. Wow, was that sound beautiful. Almost as nice as the sounds he'd make when he was nearing an orgasm. "Emily? Really?" he asked.

"You don't think her writing up that fake email to cover for her roommate missing work was suspicious?"

"Oh yeah, that was sus as fuck. But, I don't know, Janice just seems sketchy. Then again, you're the detective, so you're probably right."

My turn to laugh. "I get some things wrong."

"Well, I'm almost to the end of the book, so I'm going to find out soon anyway. I

won't spoil it for you, though. Unless I'm right. Then I may shoot you an email."

You can spoil whatever you want, Eli.

"I'll make sure I send it to Spam," I replied with a wink.

He rewarded my sarcasm with another golden laugh.

Fuck. He was making me hard.

I squeezed my legs together under my desk, glad to have some cover. "So, what brings you in today?" I asked, my hands in a loose fist. He leaned back in the chair, taking in a deep breath. A tuft of soft brown hair stuck out from his cap. He wore that same pink hat in some of his streams.

Fuck. Was I being a creeper? This entire situation felt like fate, except fate had nothing to do with Elijah walking in through the Stonewall doors.

Still... fate did have a hand in me finding him. And it wasn't as if I snuck into his house, broke into his phone, and illegally stole all of his nudes. Eli put himself out there, to be watched by thousands of people online. I doubted that I was the first person to cross him in the real world while knowing what he did in the cyber one.

"Damn, I don't even know where to start."

You can start on your knees.

"Wherever feels the most natural," I answered. My cock throbbed against my thigh. I had to click into work mode, but his pouty pink lips were making that incredibly difficult.

Elijah started by telling me his profession (as if I didn't already know) and went into the issues he'd been having with a certain anonymous user. The messages from this "Nomad" person were definitely reasons to be concerned. They'd started off innocently enough until they began to sound more desperate, more rage-fueled.

"It gets worse," Elijah said as he put away his phone. "I haven't told anyone this. But there was a letter inside my mailbox. It was from Nomad. Handwritten, short, really fucking unsettling."

I cocked my head. "Did you bring it with you?"

"I only have photos. I've also gotten the police involved. They were going to test it for fingerprints, but, I dunno, something about the way the cops were talking to me made me feel like they weren't going to do much."

"Don't worry. I'll follow up with them and make sure I apply some pressure. I can guarantee you I won't slack on this."

"Thank you," Eli said, genuine gratitude in his voice. He handed me his phone. It had a cracked screen protector, with a soft black leather case, still warm from his hand. The letter he'd been sent looked like it had traveled by pigeon. It was wrinkled and stained with a corner ripped off.

The message was brief, written in a shaky script:

I need you to know how perfect you are. Would you be open to meeting face-to-face? Respond to my DMs. Please.

"When did you get this?"

Elijah chewed his bottom lip. It made my blood heat. His lips were plush, sinful, the

kind that could make a man snap like a branch in a storm.

Fucking hell. Focus.

“Three nights ago,” he finally said. His voice was a little tight, like he didn’t want to admit how much it bothered him. “I almost threw it out, but something about it... it just felt off, you know? Like this wasn’t just some random person. Like it was personal.”

It was personal. Whoever this Nomad guy was, he wasn’t some casual creeper hiding behind a keyboard. He had access—to Elijah’s real life, his real address. And that meant he wasn’t just some online stalker getting off to fantasies.

He was escalating.

I stared at the photo on Elijah’s screen, fingers twitching.

As polite as the words seemed, this letter basically read: I see you. I know where you live. You’re mine.

I exhaled slowly, forcing my focus back on the case. Not on the way he was licking his lips like he didn’t even realize he was doing it.

“You did the right thing keeping this,” I said, handing him back the phone. “The police might not take it seriously, but I do.”

Elijah looked at me, his big blue eyes scanning my face like he was trying to decide whether he trusted me or not.

“Do you think I’m actually in danger?” he asked, his voice quieter now, like he was waiting for me to confirm his worst fear.

I nodded. I wasn't someone to sugarcoat things. "Yes. I unfortunately do."

He inhaled sharply, rubbing a hand over his face. "Shit."

That one word cracked something in my chest. He was scared. And that did things to me. Dark, dangerous things. It made me want to snap my fingers and make this Nomad character appear in my office so that I could slam a fist against their jaw, all before the cops dragged them away to jail. No one deserved to live their life in fear for simply existing. The paranoia that this brought to Eli's life must have been exhausting.

"What do I do?" Eli asked.

"Well, we'll start with the basics," I said, leaning forward. "Security cameras. Alarm systems. Do you have any at your place?"

He shook his head. "I mean, my building has some security cameras, but nothing inside my apartment."

"Then that's priority number one. I'll help you set it up."

Elijah blinked. "You'd do that?"

I smirked and gave him a casual shrug. "It's part of the job."

It definitely wasn't. I could have easily recommended a service, sent him a list of local security companies, kept my distance. But the idea of someone else being the one to install those cameras, the idea of someone else having access to his space, his bedroom?—

No.

If anyone was going to be watching over him, it was going to be me.

I was already doing it, anyway.

Elijah hesitated for half a second before nodding. “Okay,” he said. “That would actually help a lot. I’m absolute shit at installing or building things.”

He chuckled, and his shoulders dropped slightly, some of the tension easing out of them. The fact that he already felt safer just being in this office, with me—fuck, that did something to me.

Something possessive.

I let the moment linger for a second before leaning back, tilting my head slightly. “Tell me more about Nomad,” I said. “You said the messages started innocent. What changed?”

Elijah shifted in his seat, rubbing his hands together. I wanted to get up, walk behind him, and rub his shoulders. Wanted to tell him to relax, that I’d take it from here. “I guess it was when I stopped responding to his messages,” he admitted. “At first, I tried to be polite, you know? Just a quick ‘thanks for the support’ or whatever. But then the messages started getting... weird.”

“How weird?”

He swallowed. “It started off as little things—him saying he could tell when I wasn’t enjoying myself on stream. That he knew when I was just performing and when I was really into it.”

My hands clenched under the desk.

“That’s already bad,” I said, keeping my voice neutral.

Elijah nodded. “Yeah, but then it got worse. He started talking like we were in a relationship, saying shit like, ‘You don’t have to fake it passion for me’ and ‘I know what you really need.’”

My jaw clenched.

“And then when you ignored him?” I asked, already figuring out the answer.

His gaze dropped. “That’s when the threats started,” Eli said.

My blood went cold.

“I don’t know why I let it go on for so long,” he admitted. “I should have blocked him the second things started getting weird.”

I exhaled slowly, forcing my body to unwind. “It’s not your fault, Elijah.”

He looked up at me, something hesitant in his aquamarine eyes.

“Yeah, but?—”

“No.” My voice was firm, cutting off whatever self-blame he was about to spill. “You didn’t do anything wrong. People like this? They don’t stop because you’re polite, and they don’t stop because you ignore them. They stop when they’re forced to.”

Elijah studied me for a long moment.

Then, slowly, his lips curled into something small, something real.

“Good,” he said, voice softer now. “Because I want him to stop.”

I nodded, my own smile sharp as a blade.

“Then let’s make that happen.”

“Thanks, Detective. ”

There was a tone to the way he said detective that made my toes curl.

Fuck. This job was going to be hard, for a hundred different reasons.

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Chapter 4

Elijah Grant

The bar was packed. It was a small spot in Hell's Kitchen with killer drink specials and some of the nicest bartenders in the entire city. Tonight was Latin night, which meant my favorite kind of music was guaranteed to be playing on repeat. I leaned against the bar and sipped on my Moscow mule, glancing toward the bathroom and wondering why my date was taking so long.

I'd had this night planned since the beginning of the week. I'd been looking forward to it, too. I already hooked up with this guy a couple of times, and we had some solid chemistry, so the next natural step in the gay dating ritual was to go grab drinks (after we had already jerked each other off, of course). He was a stand-up comedian and actually funny, which was a plus. I liked guys who could make me laugh.

Something new I figured out today was that I also liked men who happened to work as detectives...

Benji.

He'd made a mark on me in a very short amount of time. Maybe it was a savior complex that was beginning to brew inside me, but I couldn't help it. The man was not only handsome in a broody, intriguing kind of way, but he was also intelligent and kind. Stepping into his office instantly made me feel comforted. It was weird to explain but undeniable.

Kevin, my date, appeared from the bathroom, wiping his hands on the side of his jeans.

Interesting.

“Sorry about that,” he said, sitting on the stool next to me.

“No worries. I was going to order you something but didn’t know what to get.”

“I usually go with vodka pineapple.” He leaned over the bar and grabbed the attention of the closest bartender so he could order, and then he leaned back to me. “You know what they say about drinking pineapples.”

“No, I don’t,” I said, playing dumb.

“That it makes semen taste sweet.”

“Oh, hah, right.” I held down my internal cringe at his use of the word semen . Was this a date or a bio lecture? “So how was your day?” I asked. It was weird. I’d been to this guy’s apartment three times now, and yet I’d never really seen him wearing clothes. He looked good, but for some reason, he also looked a little frumpy. His long-sleeved shirt was wrinkled, and there was what appeared to be a small coffee stain on his light-washed jeans.

Also, they were skinny jeans, which... not great.

“It was alright. Had an argument at work, but things got resolved. I think. I don’t know. My manager hates my guts.”

“What do you do?”

“I work at a bookstore. I’m trying to be an author, so I thought this would be a good way to kind of work in that same world.”

“Is it?”

Kevin scoffed. “Fuck no. It’s just made me more jaded. I actually think I hate books now.” He shrugged and rubbed the back of his neck. A slight whiff of musky body odor drifted in my direction. While I was sometimes into a nice musk, I wasn’t exactly expecting it from a man I was supposed to be on a first date with. “How about you? What do you do?”

Annd there it was. The question I always dreaded. A question that had derailed quite a few first dates already.

Not everyone was against my chosen profession, although I had a sneaking suspicion that almost everyone was at least a little judgy about it. But there were a good number of men who were fine with how I made my money. Some were even more into me after they found out I was a cam model.

Others... not so much. I’d had guys just stand up and walk out, I’d had guys laugh at me, I’d had guys try and preach to me.

Which kind of guy was Kevin? I figured I was about to find out.

“I’m a freelancer,” I said. It helped soften the blow. Kevin cocked his head and must have assumed there was something else by my suggestive smirk.

“You own a photography business? An artist?”

“A cam boy,” I said. “I stream sexual content for money. And I’ve got a subscription site, too. Diversify and all that.”

Kevin blinked a couple of times. He smiled, taking a quick chug. Judging by how clear his drink was and the small head shake he did, it leaned more toward vodka than pineapple. “That’s, huh, that’s interesting.”

I couldn’t get a read on him. Did he seem uncomfortable? He shifted on the barstool so his leg moved farther away from mine.

Subtle.

Disappointing.

This wasn’t going well.

“Is that okay?” I asked.

Kevin gave a curt nod but kept his gaze focused directly ahead at the mirrored wall of liquor bottles. “I wasn’t expecting it. You seem so, I don’t know, put together. Respectable.”

That might as well have been a slap across the face. I arched a brow, setting my drink down before I was overcome with an urge to toss it on him. “I’m sorry, but what I do is respectable. I’m comfortable enough with my body to share it with others, and I do it in a way that people enjoy enough to pay me for. It’s a service. One I happily provide.”

“You’re an online hooker.”

“Seriously?” I rolled my eyes. “I’m a businessman, I’m a good fucking guy. I’m not an online hooker.”

“You sell your body online for all these rando neckbeards to jerk off to. You get paid,

but for how long is that really going to last? There's probably dozens of photos of your dick out online. How can I ever bring you around my family without thinking that they can do the same? What you do is not respectable. It's fucked-up."

Heat flared in my cheeks, flushing through my chest. The cramped bar began to feel even more uncomfortably packed. A lovey-dovey couple danced reggaeton right behind my stool, bumping their hips into me.

For a flash of a second, I pictured myself pushing Kevin off his stool and making him break his fall on that flat ass of his. He made an unreasonably hot swell of anger rise inside me.

I could be confrontational. My temper sometimes boiled over and got me into trouble. I wasn't a stranger to a fistfight.

But this guy? He wasn't worth it.

"Thank you," I said, taking out my wallet and pulling out a twenty. I lifted my drink, finished it off in two long gulps, and set the copper mug on top of the money. "For showing me your ass and not wasting my time."

"Sorry, I'm just being honest."

"No, you're being a fucking dickhead. And guess what? At the rate things are going, I can retire by the time I'm thirty-three. Which, if you even took a second longer to actually get to know me, you'd know I wouldn't even want to do. I have goals that go beyond making a shit-ton of money online. So go fuck yourself. Because I'm not doing it for you."

Kevin's jaw dropped. Good.

I snaked my way through the dense crowd. Fuck this.

I decided to go home and jerk off for some cash.

At least then I could guarantee myself a happy ending. Because Kevin sure as fuck wasn't giving it to me.

* * *

I got back to my place feeling like shit. That conversation with Kevin had left a sour taste in my mouth. Confidence was never really an issue for me. I had plenty of it, and when I didn't, then I'd fake it. Usually, that worked.

But something about this guy's reaction knocked the wind out of me.

Maybe it was because I'd actually been into him, and I certainly wasn't expecting the stabbing words or intense judgment. A lot of guys tended to hide their distaste for my career before they ghosted me altogether.

I wasn't sure which one I preferred.

"Hello?" I called as I opened the front door to my apartment.

I lived in a nice building close to the Financial District. It was rent stabilized, clean, safe, and—most importantly—was a block away from one of my favorite bodegas.

"Anyone home?"

No answer.

Francesca—or Fran the Gran as she liked to be called—didn't appear to be around,

her bedroom door left wide open, the lights off. She was my new roommate and a pretty interesting character. My last roommate had to break his lease and move suddenly after a death in the family. I considered breaking my own lease and just finding a place now that my income had hit a comfortable range, but the landlord begged me to stay for the last few months. He said they'd find someone to replace my old roommate, and Fran appeared a couple of days later.

She was generally pretty quiet and stuck to herself. She enjoyed watching Jeopardy! and often invited me to sit on the couch and watch with her. I told her that I worked from home but didn't go into too much detail. My bedroom was surprisingly soundproof for a New York apartment, helped by the sound-absorbing panels I'd ordered and attached to the walls. I often played music during my streams to cover any sounds that might make it to the living room.

I kicked off my shoes by the door and grabbed a cold beer from the fridge. Fuck it. It was Friday, and I wasn't about to let my entire night get ruined by a douchebag.

No matter how much his words secretly bothered me.

My bedroom was already set up to be camera ready. My bed was made, color-changing lights giving the black headboard a purple glow. There was a thriving fig tree potted next to the window that looked out onto the traffic-packed street. I closed the sheer white drapes and turned on my ring light. I had a special camera attached to my laptop that helped me stand out from the other streamers using their potato-quality webcams.

I took off my shorts, left my shirt and cap on, and got into bed, sitting back on the plush white pillow. I grabbed my laptop and opened up the website, taking a moment to check through my DMs.

Most of them were really hot. I had a lot of attractive followers; that wasn't up for

debate. Many messaged me with pictures of the messes I made them make or how hard or wet I got them. It was hot. I couldn't reply to all of them but tried to get most, working myself up in the process.

My dark blue briefs strained to hold down my bulge as I exited out of my messages and activated the live stream.

Followers were notified, and barely seconds later, my viewer number began to inch up. It started at five, grew to twenty, up to fifty, ballooning to two hundred.

“Hey, everyone, welcome in, welcome in.”

I rubbed myself through my briefs, spread my legs wider. Comments started to fill the small box in the corner of the screen. There were some usernames I recognized, others I didn't.

None of them belonged to Nomad, so that was a plus.

“Hope everyone's having a good night so far. I had a shit-ass date just now, so I figured I'd hop on since you all know how to make me feel good.”

GAPEACH89: Yes, we can make you feel good.

TRUCKERDUDE3: Looks like you're already starting to feel good.

ANONYMOUS982: Take thos off!

“No requests unless you tip,” I reminded the watchers. Tips began to ding onto the screen. I'd become conditioned to get hard at the sound. Like Pavlov's dog, except instead of hearing a bell and drooling, I heard a chime and started leaking.

“Thank you,” I said as I changed the goal meter. “If I get a thousand tokens, then these come off.”

I lowered my briefs just enough to show my dark tuft of pubic hair. More tips filled the screen. I smiled, rubbing my length, reading the comments, getting off on these random strangers getting off.

NIGHTOWL: You look so good. You’ve got me so fucking hard.

“Thanks, Night. I’m getting hard for you, too.”

I made my cock throb against the briefs. I knew NightOwl enjoyed seeing my bulge pulse. I’d chatted with him quite a bit. If there was one person who I considered myself close to in this sometimes sketchy online world, it was Night. He was a great tipper, sure, but he also was great at conversation. He’d paid for a few private shows that would end with us talking about some recent world event or a favorite book or a terrible movie. Random shit.

It was nice. Felt like he was a friend.

So much so that I had opened up to him about my problems with the Nomad account. He’d been the one who referred me to Stonewall Investigations, saying that he’d gone to one of their branches for help and really liked working with them.

After meeting Benji, I felt the same way.

I had to remember to thank him when I got the chance.

“We’re almost to the goal,” I said, slowly pulling my briefs down, holding the head of my cock but showing inches of shaft. The chat started to get more feral.

TRUCKERDUDE3: Oh fuck yeah.

NIGHTOWL: Damn, so sexy.

ANONYMOUS428: Yummy.

NOMAD21: You made a mistake.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose as a sudden chill slithered down my spine. I immediately blocked and reported this new account, deleting the message.

I made a mistake?

What did that mean... made a mistake how? By logging on?

Or were they referencing something else? My thoughts swirled, my dick deflated. It was vague enough to be incredibly ominous. Were they referencing something I did today? Meeting and walking out on Kevin? Going to Stonewall?

No... it had to be them just trying to act tough. There was no way they were that aware of my actions.

The mood had been shot. Even though there were over a thousand people in my stream and plenty of tips still rolling in, I felt like I just had to log off.

“Alright, guys, I’m going to?—”

A notification appeared across my screen.

NIGHTOWL Is Requesting a Private Show.

Huh.

Private shows were almost always worth it. It cost a pretty hefty amount to reserve my time and attention for just one person. But it wasn't even the money that I focused on.

It was the fact that it'd be with Night. I could give him a show worth the money he spent and then chill and talk to him. Maybe even get some advice or just turn my brain off for a little bit.

I clicked Accept and leaned back.

“Hey, Night.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:27 am

Chapter 5

Benji Morrison

I shouldn't have followed Eli when he left Stonewall.

It was wrong of me.

I crossed a line I wasn't sure I'd come back from.

I just couldn't help it.

Meeting him in person, it unchained something dark and twisted, something I tried to keep suppressed. My obsessive traits—present since I was a child—manifested into an overwhelming need to trail Elijah, to watch him from afar. It didn't help that he reminded me so much of Michael...

At first, I rationalized following him under the guise of protecting him. He'd come to me for help, and so I was going to make sure he received it. Someone was clearly out to get him. This way, I could keep an eye out for any red flags from the people around him and would be able to intervene if this "Nomad" character decided to act out in public.

But as I hung back, blending into the busy crowd as Eli led me to a nearby gay bar, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was me who Elijah needed protecting from.

No. No, I'm not a bad guy.

I just make bad decisions.

The bar itself appeared to be the size of a shoe closet. I knew I wouldn't be able to go inside without him spotting me. I instead went across the street to a boba tea shop with a clear view of the bar's exit. I ordered myself a drink (matcha milk tea with chewy boba) and sat at the window, pretending to be reading something on my phone but having a constant eye on the red door that marked the bar.

It didn't take long for him to walk out.

No... to storm out. Elijah was pissed. His brow was furrowed, and he squeezed his hands together as he stomped toward the subway entrance.

What the hell happened in there?

Who did I have to fuck up?

Who hurt him?

I had a choice. I could go into the bar and find out what happened, or I could risk trailing Elijah home. Rush hour was over, so the trains wouldn't be nearly as packed. Remaining undetected would be difficult. Then again, we weren't all that far from Stonewall. It wasn't completely out of the realm of possibility that we'd bump into each other on the way home.

But...

Fuck.

Forget it.

I tossed my empty cup in the trash and walked down the street. It was wrong. Creepy.

I just... I wanted to keep an eye on him. I turned on my heels and power walked toward the subway station, changing my mind. NYC subways weren't exactly known for their safety. What if he stood too close to the tracks and Nomad decided to give him a nudge from behind right as a train was speeding past? I could be there to stop him. I wouldn't be able to give him twenty-four-hour protection, but at least I could keep an eye on him for now.

I hurried down the subway steps, running around a tourist who was clearly lost and searching for directions on her phone. I tapped my card against the turnstile and walked down toward the platform, making sure to keep my head down.

He'd given me his address during our initial meeting, so I knew he'd be taking the L train home.

The first platform was relatively empty. Five people milled about, either scrolling on their phones or chatting. One guy was shouting random profanities and shaking his fist at some invisible foe.

None of them were Elijah.

I slowly walked toward the next platform. I froze and quickly pivoted behind a column when I spotted that pink cap Eli had been wearing. I leaned forward and stole a couple of glances in his direction.

He sat on the bench, up against the white tiled wall. He rested his forearms on his legs and focused on what appeared to be a social media feed. He double-tapped something, scrolled to the next, double-tapped that, scrolled to the next. No one around him appeared suspicious. There was someone wearing scrubs next to three businessmen chatting with each other.

He was safe, good.

He was also close, better.

His head twitched as he moved to look up, the hiss of air from an approaching train filling the station. I jerked behind the column.

There. My curiosity was quenched. My protective instinct satiated. I could go home now.

...

It wouldn't hurt for me to keep an eye on him until he got home.

The train screeched to a halt. The doors slid open, passengers flowing out before anyone stepped in. For being close to nine o'clock at night, the trains were surprisingly packed.

I stepped toward the wall, positioning myself behind Eli, still far enough that I had a chance of blending in with the crowd if he looked over his shoulder.

Would he fire me if he figured out I was following him? Would he even give me a chance to explain?

I watched Eli go into the train. I decided to get into the one behind his. It would give me a little more cover. I started toward it when I heard someone shout my name.

I froze, thinking I'd been caught.

"Benji, hey, man!" I turned to see Jace Holloway, another detective at Stonewall and one of my good friends, walking toward me. His boyfriend, Theo, was by his side.

The tattooed and broody guy had really brought out Jace's good side. I noticed he smiled much more often now that they were together. It was nice to see. I could tell Theo was a good influence on him, and that made me happy. I wasn't a social butterfly by any means, and any of the friends I had made in college were all spread out across the globe. So I was grateful when I bonded with Jace during a joint stakeout early during my time at Stonewall.

I glanced at the train. The doors were about to close.

"Where you headed?" Jace asked.

"Me? Home. It's been a long day."

"Ah, I was going to say you're more than welcome to come get drinks with Theo and me. We're heading to the Jade Room."

"That sounds tempting, but so does a hot shower and a bed."

Jace laughed at that. Theo looked over his shoulder. "Shit, you're going to miss the train."

I waved it off. I was a big believer in signs, and this felt like a billboard-sized one.

"I'll catch the next one," I said.

"Damn, sorry," Jace replied. He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Don't worry about it." I pulled out my headphones from the pocket of my jeans.

"I've got a new audiobook I've been meaning to listen to. Gives me more time."

"Alright, well, if you change your mind, you know where we'll be."

“Thanks, Jace.”

Jace clapped a hand on my shoulder and smiled. I said bye to the guys and moved closer to the tracks, popping in my headphones and trying to zone out but finding myself thinking back to those bright blue eyes.

* * *

I lived in a tiny one-bedroom apartment in Lower Manhattan. The “bedroom” was more like a walk-in closet, but I didn’t mind. It was an affordable place in the heart of the city, so I could compromise on the size. On the days I started to feel myself getting stir-crazy, I’d just walk down the stairs, out onto the street, and find something random to do. Go to a pop-up market, pick up last-minute tickets for a Broadway show, read a book in Central Park.

Nah, size didn’t bother me at all.

My loud neighbors, though, they did make things difficult for me.

I was sandwiched between a college student who apparently wanted a career as a DJ and thought everyone in the building needed to be graced with his mixes and a couple who argued as if it were their full-time jobs. It wouldn’t be odd to hear a door slam in the middle of the night or a shouting match break out over breakfast.

So I wasn’t surprised that they were going at it again. Angry shouts drifted into the hallway as I walked past their door, which happened to be open.

“No! Fuck you! I’m done!”

Yes, please, Samantha, be done with this deadbeat. You deserve better.

“Go, then! Take your stupid dog with you!”

What an asshole.

“Fine! Fuck you!”

“Fuck you!”

Fuck this entire situation.

I unlocked my door and was about to step in when Samantha stormed out into the hallway. She had a small pink suitcase with her, their older Jack Russell terrier being dragged behind her on a matching pink leash. Tears streaked down her face, her eyes puffy and red. My heart went out to her. But maybe this was the fresh start she needed.

“I’m so sorry,” she said as she spotted me, slamming her apartment door shut. “I’m sorry you had to hear any of that.”

“It’s okay,” I replied. I didn’t want to make her feel worse than she already did.

She looked down at the dog. Lucky was his name. I had walked him a couple of times in the past. He was friendly, cute, a little dopey.

I was going to miss him.

“I’m... fuck.” Samantha rubbed her face, moved a lock of light brown hair from her eyes. “Benji, I don’t know what to do. I... I don’t want to ask you this, but?—”

Shit. Where was this headed? Was she going to ask to crash in my place? I didn’t mind the small size, but having a practical stranger crammed in there with me would

likely drive me crazy.

“I’m leaving to my parents’ place.”

Oh, thank God.

“They live in Australia. And I don’t think I can take Lucky with me. Their landlord doesn’t allow animals, and that flight alone, he’s older... I... I can’t take Lucky to a shelter, either. I can’t see him like that. And I can’t leave him here with Greg. Fuck.”

Ah, so that’s where this was headed.

I looked down at the innocent dog. He sat patiently at his mom’s feet. He was a cute pup, with coarse white-and-brown fur and a short tail that seemed to be permanently wagging.

“Can you... can you take him for me? I don’t want to dump him on you. I understand if you can’t take care of him, but can you at least get him a good home?”

This was not how I expected my evening to go.

I weighed out my choices. Be an asshole and let her figure it out herself? Take Lucky and head to the shelter on my way to pick up some dinner?

Keep Lucky myself and give him the good home she was seeking for him?

I held out my hand. It was an easy decision to make. “I’ll take him.”

“Oh, thank you, Benji. You’re a lifesaver. Seriously. Thank you.” Samantha crouched down and showered Lucky in kisses. He lapped at her cheek, getting up on his hind paws as if he wanted to be carried. Samantha started to cry.

Fuck... this was fucked.

“Just let me know what shelter you take him to. Please make sure it’s a no-kill shelter. He’s older. He probably won’t be adopted for a little bit.” She stood back up, wiping at her cheeks and handing me the leash.

“Don’t worry,” I said, reassuring her. “I’ll keep him. You can visit whenever you come back. And I’ll send you updates. Pictures.”

Her jaw dropped. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “I’ve been looking for a buddy. And Lucky is a great dog. He always makes me smile whenever I see you walking him.”

She put a hand to her chest, more tears flowing down her face. “Oh, Benji, you seriously don’t know how much that means to me. Thank you.”

She glanced at the closed door to her apartment, her asshole of an ex-boyfriend likely standing behind the door and listening to all of this go down. “I should get going. I’ll order his food and some supplies. Hopefully, it gets here tomorrow.”

“No need. I can make a trip to the pet store.”

“It’s the least I can do,” Samantha said. She surprised me with a tight hug before she grabbed her suitcase and rolled it down the hallway toward the elevator. I could hear her sniffing. Lucky tugged toward her, trying to follow. I opened the door to my apartment and nudged him inside.

“Hi, buddy,” I said, closing the door and taking his leash off. Lucky looked at me with big brown eyes, head cocked as if he were trying to make sense of what just happened. I gave him some head scratches before I went to my tiny kitchen, grabbed

an old bowl, filled it with water, and set it down on the ground.

“Welcome home.”

Damn.

I couldn't help but feel bad for the little guy. He had no idea his entire life had been irrevocably changed. He looked up at me with those innocent brown eyes, his tail slowly wagging. I gave him another head scratch.

“Today's been a fucking day, huh?”

It had. I needed to de-stress... I needed a drink. I went to my freezer and pulled out the icy-cold bottle of vodka. I removed the orange cap and grabbed a cup. But before I poured anything, I took a shot directly from the bottle. Just to warm things up. Numb the stress, the second-guessing, the anxiety.

I poured a good amount into the glass and mixed it with Sprite. I gave it a twirl with a straw and took a sip.

Perfect.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I checked, thinking it could be Samantha, but instead, I was greeted with a notification telling me Eli was now online.

I went over to my couch and sat down. I had been wondering if Eli would stream tonight. He'd had quite a packed day.

There he was, wearing the same pink hat he'd worn when he'd come to see me only a few hours before. He got comfortable, lying back on his bed, rubbing his bulge. I shot a glance toward Lucky, who was sniffing around the living room. I unzipped my

jeans and pulled them off. I was ready to just chill and jerk off while I watched Eli do the same.

Before I could even get hard, a message from Nomad appeared in the chat. Eli instantly noticed, too. His entire demeanor shifted, his body going taut.

NOMAD: Fuck, I can't wait until I'm in that bedroom with you, watching you sleep, feeling your body heat against me. Damn.

My blood boiled.

“Alright, everyone, I think I'm going to call it early tonight.”

No, no. I didn't want the night to end, nor did I want Eli to feel like he was being watched by someone who wanted to hurt him.

I clicked on the “private show” button. My phone buzzed again; this time, it was my bank telling me I'd just spent one hundred dollars. I swiped out of the notification and returned my attention to the computer.

“Hey, Night, how are you?” Eli asked once the stream went private, his smile wide and bright as he casually pulled off his underwear.

Just us. Just Eli and me.

NIGHTOWL: I'm doing great. Especially now that you're on.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:27 am

Chapter 6

Elijah Grant

The private stream with NightOwl helped rescue my evening from turning into a complete fucking shit-fest. He was my cyber knight in shining armor. Even when he wasn't paying for a private show, he was a great tipper and a great conversationalist.

He was a good guy; I could sense that even through an anonymous profile. I made sure to put on a great show for him and then continued to chat with him until we both got tired.

It was nice. Much nicer than that terrible "date" I went on.

What a douchebag.

A judgmental and dickish asshole.

I woke up the next day and blocked Kevin from Grindr and from my phone. Not that I thought he was going to try to get in touch with me, but still, it made me feel better seeing his profile disappear off the face of the Earth.

"Morning, Eli," Fran said, greeting me as I shuffled out of my bedroom. She sat on the couch, cross-legged, her laptop propped open and a morning talk show playing on the television.

"Hey, Fran. What are you up to today?"

“Nothing, really. Just going to smoke a little, doomscroll, and maybe take a nap.”
Fran lifted her coffee mug in a faux cheer. “Busy day for me. You?”

“Have to do a grocery run and then meeting with a detective later.”

“Detective? Are you rehearsing for a role on Law & Order or something? I do love that show.”

That got a chuckle out of me. “No, this is for real. Remember how I told you I’ve been getting harassed online? I hired someone to help me figure out who it is. They sent me an email this morning saying they wanted to meet to go over the case a bit more.”

“Why are people online so damn batty? Sorry you’re going through this.”

“It’s okay. I’ve got a good feeling that it’ll get figured out soon. Besides, the detective’s pretty hot, so that’s a plus.”

“Perfect,” Fran said. She raised her mug in another cheers. “Silver lining and all that.”

“Yes, exactly.”

I brewed myself my own mug of coffee and joined Fran on the couch as I sipped it and doomscrolled along with her. We shared a couple of funny memes and talked crap about the celebrity who joined the talk show for one of the dumbest interviews we’d ever witnessed.

“Oh, check out this video,” I said, pausing my screen on a cat stepping on aluminum foil and launching itself into the sky. I couldn’t hold back the giggles as I passed the phone to Fran.

She pressed Play and immediately started to crack up.

“I love cat videos,” I said, watching her reaction. A ding made her perk up. Fran’s laughter suddenly ceased, her thin black brows creeping together. I cocked my head. That wasn’t the reaction I was looking for...

“Sorry, hon, I didn’t mean to read your texts, but something just came in. Something odd.”

“Really?”

I grabbed the phone and opened my text messages. At the very top was a message from a number I didn’t recognize. I tapped it and read it.

My blood froze to solid ice in my veins.

It was from Nomad.

NOMAD: Your skin, your bones, your heart, your cock. It will all be mine.

“What the fuck?” I locked my phone, feeling as though I were holding a loaded gun. My hands shook.

“Is that from the person who’s harassing you?”

“It has to be.”

“Sounds... that sounds terrible.”

I considered running to the bathroom before I threw up my coffee all over the couch. The apartment felt like it had dropped about a hundred degrees in temperature.

“I think... Fran, maybe you should start looking for a place to move to? I don’t want to put you at risk. This person already knows where I live. Now they know my phone number.”

“Absolutely not. I’ll buy an extra Taser, more mace. Whatever it takes. I’m a tough cookie. Promise.”

This didn’t feel right. I didn’t want to let this random asshole affect me this badly, but I couldn’t help it. I was scared. This was escalating. Once again. Taking it to an entirely different level.

Was I going to have to quit streaming? Lay low? What would I do to make money? I could maybe find some temp jobs or pick up a gig as a waiter, but that would take some time and wouldn’t earn me nearly as much as being a cam model.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I pulled up the detective’s number. He said it was his personal number so I’d be able to reach him whenever I wanted.

The phone barely rang before Benji answered. “Hello?”

“Hi, I just got another message. From Nomad.”

“Can you send it to me?”

“Yes, for sure. I was also wondering if I could meet with you in person today? Just to discuss the case some more. I know it’s a Saturday, but?—”

“Of course. The Stonewall offices are closed, but we can meet somewhere else. What’s a good location for you?”

“I kind of want to be somewhere outside. Meet at the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park?”

“Perfect. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

* * *

Benji sat on the edge of the fountain. It had been turned off today, likely to conserve water, but that didn’t take away from its beauty.

Or from his.

Fucking hell, Benji was hot. I had to admit to myself that suggesting this meeting wasn’t solely about discussing the case. He had a scruffiness to him that I found incredibly attractive. It was a well-kept scruff. His dark black beard was kept trimmed around his neck, giving it a sharpness that helped enhance that already masculine face. He had expressive hazel green eyes that popped against his dark features. And that wasn’t even mentioning his full lips and his long, thick lashes.

And those forearms. Fuck, those forearms.

I didn’t know what it was about a guy’s forearms that always got me going, but they did, and Benji’s were perfect.

His looks were so distracting that I almost didn’t notice the small dog sitting patiently between his legs.

I greeted Benji with an enthusiastic wave before I crouched down and said hello to

the dog with some head rubs. “Who’s this?”

“This is Lucky. He’s, uh, well, my new dog.”

“Really? You just adopted him?”

“You can say that. He sort of fell into my lap. But yeah, hope you don’t mind he crashes the meeting.”

Benji scratched behind Lucky’s ear, our fingers brushing together. I always loved theatrics and could be a little extra sometimes, but I wasn’t being extra when I described his fingers touching mine like a blast of lighting striking me down.

“He’s a cutie,” I said, running my fingers through his soft fur and trying to ignore the residual tingling sensations that rose from Benji’s touch. Lucky got on his hind legs and gave me some kisses. “Are you sure you didn’t get him just to impress me? Rented him for the day?”

Benji smirked, tilting his head slightly. “And if I said that was true?”

Oh... Okay. I wasn’t expecting him to play back.

I looked up at him, my fingers still trailing over Lucky’s soft coat. His eyes flickered with something playful, something dangerous. I swallowed, my pulse suddenly aware of just how close we were. How I was crouched in front of him, his legs spread. The wind shifted, carrying Benji’s scent toward me—something woodsy, sharp, a little intoxicating.

I huffed a laugh, standing up and dusting my jeans off. “Then I’d say you’re playing dirty, Detective.”

Benji leaned back on the fountain, one arm slung lazily over the stone edge. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Jesus. He had to know what he was doing. He had to feel the same pull I did—the unspoken thing crackling between us, charged like static before a storm.

I crossed my arms and cleared my throat, trying to keep my composure. “Well, I’d love to spend all afternoon talking about how you’re using innocent puppies to flirt with me, but I think we should get to business.”

His smirk faded slightly, the teasing glint in his eyes cooling into something sharper. “Right. The message.”

I pulled out my phone, unlocking it and scrolling to the text from Nomad. The words still made my skin crawl. I sat down next to him. There was a man creating long, trailing bubbles that popped in a wave of misty rainbows. He drew in a pretty large crowd, kids running as close as they could to the bubbles without popping them, a photographer trying to capture the perfect shot.

Benji took the phone from me, his jaw tightening as he read the message. The muscles in his forearm flexed, his grip on my phone tightening.

I shifted on my feet, rubbing my arms. “So, uh. This is not great, right? How the hell did they get my number?”

Benji’s eyes lifted to mine. His expression frightened me almost as badly as the text did. He looked worried. “It isn’t ideal, but it could also be a blessing in disguise. We have a number now. I might be able to use this. They’re getting impatient, so they could be making mistakes.”

Impatient.

The word settled in my gut like a stone dropped into a well.

Benji must have noticed the way my body tensed because his voice softened, just a little. “I meant it when I said I’d protect you.”

I swallowed hard, caught off guard by the weight behind his words. I didn’t often have people in my life who were so focused on protecting me. Use me, maybe. But protect me?

No, that was new.

“That’s a pretty big promise, Detective.”

He tilted his head. “I don’t make promises I can’t keep.”

Fuck.

I looked away, suddenly feeling too seen, like he was peeling me open without even trying.

Benji cleared his throat, shifting gears. “We need to get those cameras set up. I want to make sure you’re safe and protected. I think we should put one in your bedroom as well. Next to that flower lamp so it faces the?—”

Benji froze. I cocked my head. A curious sound escaped my mouth. “Um... how do you know about that?” I asked.

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Chapter 7

Benji Morrison

Fuuuuck.

I made a massive mistake. I caught myself the second the words left my mouth, but by then, it was too late. I couldn't turn back time, couldn't put the idiot fucking genie back into the idiot fucking bottle.

Eli cocked his head, a furrow appearing on his forehead as his brows dipped together.

“How do you know about that?” he asked.

Because I've been watching you for months.

Because I've developed an intense attraction for you.

Because you remind me of someone I lost and thought I'd never have back.

Because I'm fucked-up. I'm sorry.

My body buzzed. My muscles felt loose, my cheeks hot. Flushed not only because of my embarrassment but also because of the alcohol I drank only half an hour earlier.

I knew I shouldn't have taken those two vodka shots before I left my apartment to come here. Why did I need those? I saw the bottle on the counter, left there after the

night before, and figured I could loosen up a bit, even though we hadn't even crossed the lunch hour yet. I thought it wouldn't hurt. It wasn't like I planned on getting blackout drunk for the meeting. Just wanted something to help me relax a bit.

Fucking idiot.

I offered a smile, my brain working on overtime to push past the fog of pure vodka. I could lie to him. Dig my grave a little deeper. Maybe tell him it was a lucky guess? That he seemed like the kind of guy who'd have an artsy and cool sense of style.

"Well..."

He absent-mindedly scratched Lucky's head. The pup was completely oblivious to the blunder I had made. What a lucky—hah—little creature. All he had to worry about was being cute, getting fed, and going on nice walks. He didn't have an opportunity to stuff his paw directly in his mouth.

"I watched a little of your stream." I didn't want to lie to him. That wasn't the kind of man I was. Yes, some of my actions crossed a few blurry moral lines, I could own that, but I always believed that the truth had to come before anything else. I wanted Eli to trust me wholeheartedly.

I was hired to help him, after all.

His face cracked with surprise. "Oh... you have? Really?"

To my surprise, his cheeks turned a rosy pink color. Like he was embarrassed by the revelation. Huh. I was expecting a different kind of reaction.

"I have." I straightened up. Lucky lay down at my feet. "Can't say I wasn't tempted after I found out. But then, well, I figured I should research. Maybe keep an eye on

the chat in case that Nomad character appeared.”

He gave me a flirty little smirk. Fuck. The vodka burning through my veins made me want to lean in, to taste those lips on mine. His eyes, blue as a crystal clear lake, made me want to dive in headfirst. “So you were just there for the chat?”

“Well, it was hard to ignore everything else happening on the screen.”

“Hard, huh?”

That got a genuine laugh out of me. It helped me clear away the rush of anxiety that had flooded through me only minutes before. “Nice one.”

“Sorry, I had to.”

This was nice. This immediate and easy connection we were building between us. It felt like we had already known each other before ever meeting in person.

And in some ways, I guess we had.

Eli chewed his bottom lip, turning the edges pink around his perfectly white teeth. “Actually, is it weird that I’m kind of relieved you’ve watched my stream? There’s so much bullshit that comes along with me telling people about my career. So much judgment and stupid comments. It’s nice that you, you know, aren’t an asshole about it.”

“Of course not. People that judge you aren’t worth your time or energy. Chances are they’re projecting anyway. They’re probably doing something in their life that makes them feel bad about themselves, so they want to turn that around and make someone else feel the same. It’s fucked.”

“You’re so right.” Eli leaned back, the smile on his face bright enough to light up the night sky. His golden curls caught the sunlight, making him appear like some kind of Greek god.

I had to reel myself in. This wasn’t a date. I shouldn’t have been checking out my client and thinking about how damn kissable his lips were. This was a transactional relationship. Eli had come to me because I provided a service, full stop. I was letting my fantasies (and the vodka shots) drive my thoughts.

“Speaking of my stream, Nomad sent me a DM about an hour after that text. And, well, it wasn’t great. They sent me a message saying that I didn’t need to hire someone to find them, that it was a waste of time because we were destined to be together, no matter who’s hunting down who.”

Seeing the fear cross his expression filled me with a flash of red-hot anger, striking my protective instincts like a match against flint. “So they clearly know you’re seeking help, which is... concerning. That was fast. Did you tell anyone else you met with me?”

Eli shook his head. “Not really. I mean, I guess I told Fran—she’s my roommate—but she’s also sixty-one years old and the kindest soul walking this earth. I’m a hundred percent positive she has nothing to do with this.”

As sure as Eli sounded and as unlikely as it appeared, I still had to investigate every possibility. “Maybe she mentioned it to someone else? A neighbor? A mailman? Delivery guy?”

“I don’t know, I guess I can ask.”

“Did you write it down in a calendar somewhere? Maybe made a note on your phone?”

Eli shook his head and scoffed. “I’m not that organized with my life. Why?”

“Maybe this Nomad person has a digital tracker on you. They could have hacked into your accounts somehow. I want you to change all your passwords when you get home. Just in case.”

Eli frowned, his lips pursing slightly as he considered my suggestion. “Shit, you think?”

“It’s possible,” I said. “If they got your number, they could have gotten access to other things, too. I don’t want to freak you out, but I also don’t want to take chances here.”

He exhaled, running a hand through his shining golden hair. A silver bracelet matched the two silver rings he wore. “Shit. I’m hating the CSI vibes happening here.”

“I prefer Mindhunter,” I said.

“Of course you do,” Eli teased, crossing his arms. His gaze flickered over me like he was assessing something. “You totally give off ‘special agent with a dark past’ energy. And wasn’t it someone from Stonewall responsible for catching the Raven serial killer? You’re practically made for that show.”

That made me laugh, the tension loosening slightly. My eyes traced his face, lingering on his lips before I snapped myself back to reality. He didn’t just look like Michael; he acted like him, too. Spoke with his hands in the same manner, rolled his neck in the same way, had a similar crooked smirk.

Focus.

“Anyway,” I said, clearing my throat. “First thing—change your passwords. And maybe don’t log in to anything on public Wi-Fi for now.”

Eli nodded. “Yeah, okay. Good call, detective .” He tilted his head. Was he teasing me? “So, what’s next?” he asked. “Because this... this is really starting to scare me.”

“Well,” I said, keeping my voice even. I didn’t want to add fuel to the fire of fear he was already feeling. My job was to quench those flames, not feed them. “Next step is getting more information. We need to figure out if this guy has left any physical evidence anywhere. I’m waiting on the fingerprint results from the cops but I’ll also see if I can track down this phone number. And in the meantime, you need to be careful. No walking alone at night. No letting your guard down.”

“Thank you. For helping me with this.”

Was it wrong that him being so close to me was making me hard? Our legs were practically touching. I leaned forward, petting Lucky as an excuse to hide the bulge. I had made it past my fumble from earlier; I didn’t want to add another one by being too obvious with how badly I wanted him.

“No need to thank me.” I checked my watch. It was still early in the day. I could choose to head home, where I could spend my day combing through the internet, or I could spend more time with Eli and help him set up those cameras I mentioned. Both options seemed perfectly valid to me, but I preferred one much more than the other.

“So, want to head to the camera shop?”

Eli— God, that’s Michael’s smile —clapped his hands together and stood up.

“Let’s do it.”

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Chapter 8

Elijah Grant

I was falling for the detective.

Shit. Was that bad? Was there some morality clause I didn't know about when I hired him? Should I be running to the nearest church and asking for forgiveness?

Because I wouldn't mind getting down on my knees and begging.

Yeah, I was really attracted to him. And not just physically, but energy-wise, we clicked. I felt like we operated on similar wavelengths. I felt comfortable—safe—around him, which was wild, considering I'd only just met him.

Then again, I did have a track record of easily opening up to people.

When Benji suggested that we go to a nearby electronics shop so we could pick up a camera, I immediately jumped on the chance to spend more time with him.

“So are you originally from around here?” I asked as we walked through Central Park.

“I am. My parents met after my mom moved here from Colombia. My dad lived here all his life. They got pregnant with me on their second date.”

“They worked quick, huh?”

“Sure did.”

We crossed a busy jogging path, continuing on past a loud dog park. Lucky had his ears perked but didn't appear to want to join in on the chaos. I didn't blame him. I wasn't big on crazy crowds, either.

“What about you?” Benji asked.

“I'm from a small town in Iowa. Probably haven't even heard of it.”

“Try me.”

“Waverly?”

“No fucking way. Waverly, Iowa? Seriously?”

“You've heard of it?”

Benji cocked his head and shot me a playful smirk. “No, never.”

“Asshole,” I said. I playfully slapped his chest. It was literally a second's worth of contact, and yet I could still feel the muscular pecs underneath Benji's blue T-shirt.

So fucking hot. Jesus.

“What brought you out here?” Benji asked as we continued our walk. We were reaching the edge of the park, near the Upper West Side of the city.

“My hopes and dreams of becoming a Broadway actor .” I said the last bit with a dramatic flair. It helped ease the sting of my statement, something that felt more like a dumb fever dream than an actual goal.

Benji smiled as we came to a stop at a crosswalk. The electronics shop was another fifteen minutes away, so there was plenty of time for us to keep chatting. “I didn’t know you wanted to act. How’s that going?”

“It’s not. I pretty much gave up on it.” The sting in my chest expanded into a dull ache. “I had a few bad experiences with casting directors. Plus, I just wasn’t landing anything and was having a tough time paying the bills. I started camming and made more in a week than I’d ever made before, so I kind of shifted focus.”

Benji shook his head. He had one hand resting casually in the pocket of his black shorts and the other holding Lucky’s yellow leash. Both his veiny forearms had me in a trance as we walked, I was that damn into this man. I had a difficult time looking at him without trying to picture him naked. “What happened with the casting directors?”

“One said I couldn’t act my way out of a paper bag—which, okay. Uncalled for. And another one said I needed to rethink my entire career trajectory before it was too late. That one hit harder than the first insult. She sounded like she was actually warning me. So... I don’t know. I guess I listened.”

“Fuck them.”

“Huh?”

“Fuck ’em. No one has a crystal ball. No one should have that kind of power over you.”

“But these are the gatekeepers. They hold all the power.”

“If they keep trying to shut the door in your face, you just have to keep trying to kick it down. Eventually, you’ll get in.”

I chuckled at that. His optimism and hope was refreshing, but not strong enough to revive the spark. It still lingered but definitely wasn't as bright as it once was.

We crossed the street, Lucky walking between us with his tail wagging. "It just sucks, you know?"

"I can imagine. That kind of shit is brutal to hear. But I do think you should keep going. Maybe take some more classes, focus on what you know your weak spots are so that the next time you go into an audition, you're basically bulletproof."

"Maybe..." I chewed on my bottom lip. The sidewalk started to get crowded as we passed a busy restaurant, patrons waiting outside for a seat to open up. This pushed Benji and me closer together. My hand brushed against the back of his, and I was struck with another lightning bolt. "I guess I just lost the spark. Which does suck because acting was my first true love. I remember my mom buying me recorded tapes of big Broadway shows and promising me she'd take me and my sister to see a show. Unfortunately, she passed before she could ever take us."

"I'm so sorry," Benji said. There was genuine sadness there. I pursed my lips. Talking about my mom was never easy, no matter how many years separated me from her death. It always felt like it had happened the day before.

"It was aggressive lung cancer. Pretty much came out of nowhere. She had a cough one week, and then a month later, she was dead. It was... it was really fucking hard."

"Fuck, Eli."

"Yeah. Still doesn't even feel real. It's been five years now. I miss her every single day." I rubbed my earlobe, a habit of mine that developed shortly after I lost my mom. "How about you and your parents? Close to them?"

My question had two goals. First, I wanted to get off the topic of my own hardships. It made me feel like shit. Second, I wanted to get to know more about Benji. This meet-up was helping me get over the ever-present shitstorm that had been swirling around me these last couple of months. Gave me something else to focus on.

Benji let the silence settle between us, not uncomfortable but weighted. He exhaled, rolling his shoulders. “My father died when I was in high school, but my family was broken way before then. They both had struggles. Dad was a gambler, and Mom is an alcoholic.”

I glanced up at him, surprised.

“I don’t speak to my mother, not after a fight we had where she said I was her biggest regret,” Benji continued. “It was one of the only interventions I tried having for her.” His jaw flexed. “Didn’t work.”

“Oh no, Benji.” I swallowed, heart heavy. I never would have guessed someone this calm and put together had gone through such heavy struggles.

He gave a small shrug, but it was the kind of shrug that carried too much behind it. “It’s been a long time. But, yeah. That’s part of my story.”

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The noise of the city filled in the space—distant honking, the low hum of random conversations, Lucky’s little paws clicking on the pavement.

Then Benji smirked as we slowed to a stop. He nudged my elbow with his. “And now that we’ve successfully trauma-bonded, maybe we should get back to business.”

I huffed a laugh, the tension cracking like brittle ice. “Right. Let’s do it.”

He held the door open as we stepped into the electronics store. The smell of plastic and artificial air-conditioning washed over me, the overhead fluorescents making everything feel just a little too sharp. There was a mom and son checking out a large DSLR camera, the clerk standing in front of cluttered shelves of all different kinds of cameras and electronics.

“Alright,” Benji said, scanning the wall. “We need something discreet. Good quality, night vision if possible.” I let him walk ahead of me so I could check out the way his broad back filled out the blue T-shirt he wore.

Fuck.

Focus, Elijah.

We picked out a set of cameras—small, barely noticeable, but good-quality recording. Benji handled the purchase while I scrolled through my messages. No new ones from Nomad.

For now.

I hated that I was scared to even open my messages anymore. I used to find that to be the best part of the job. I loved connecting with people, talking and chatting and sexting. It was fulfilling for me. But now? I was nervous every time I logged on to any of my social media platforms, not just my adult ones. It sapped every ounce of fun I used to have from my job.

And now, I was at a camera store, about to set up hidden cameras inside my own home. All because this person wouldn’t leave me the fuck alone. The weight of the past few days started pressing down on me again. The threats. The messages. The not knowing, the anxiety, the fear.

I started to rub my earlobe, tugging it hard.

Benji must have noticed. “You need a distraction.”

I let out a dry laugh. “I need a lot of things. And yes, a distraction is one of them.”

He opened his mouth, then hesitated. “Well, how about spending the rest of the afternoon with me while I help you set these up?”

I glanced down at the bag in my hand. Installing these cameras likely wasn’t too difficult of a task. I was sure a few quick videos online could walk me through any steps that I didn’t quite understand.

But...

I cocked my head, examined his expression. Those full, pink lips that edged into a smirk. The strong brows that framed his broody dark eyes. That swoosh of black hair that nearly fell down onto his forehead, inviting someone to come along and fix it for him. He seemed so nonchalant. So easy about everything.

How could I say no to an opportunity for more of this?

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Chapter 9

Benji Morrison

Being inside of Eli's apartment felt equal parts right and wrong.

I'd been fantasizing about this since I started watching him. Wondered how the rest of his place looked. How he lived. Where he cooked breakfast, where he lounged during a lazy day, where he entertained friends and lovers.

It was pretty much just as I expected. Clean, modern, with some clear signs a gay guy lived there, considering the framed photo of a famous pop singer wearing only a jockstrap hanging in the living room. It smelled like fresh laundry, which let me know he was one of the rare few who could say they had a washer and dryer inside their NYC apartment. He mentioned his roommate, Fran, who was likely running errands or hanging out with her bingo club.

"Have you ever tried the drag queen bingo nights over at the Green Lounge?" Eli asked.

"I haven't. Sounds like a good time, though."

"Oh, it is. Every time someone wins, they have to get up and run around the bar while everyone else gets to toss their balled-up bingo sheets at them."

I laughed at that. "Have you ever won?"

“Twice. The running is fun, but the free drinks you get after are even better.”

Drinks... I could use a shot or two of vodka right now, just to take some of the edge off. Being so close to Eli, in his sphere, with no one else around, was making me surprisingly anxious. I didn't want to say the wrong thing or give the wrong impression. I had to toe a tightrope between being professional and being friendly without going overboard on either. I didn't want to be creepy, either, which almost failed after my earlier slipup.

“So where should we set up these cameras?” He opened the bag and took out the three cameras we'd bought, setting them on a clean black dining table. It was pushed close to a window that looked out to the busy street. It was cracked open, sounds of the city leaking in.

Good. That would cover the pounding sounds of my beating heart.

“One needs to be outside in the hallway. I think another should be in the living room but aimed toward your bedroom.”

“And you're sure we need these?” Eli asked. He was clearly nervous. I reached out, still spurred by the warm buzz of vodka in my veins, and rubbed his shoulder.

“I want to make sure no one's been able to get in here and go through your stuff while you're gone. This Nomad person has some kind of direct link into your schedule and plans. It's likely that the hole we need to patch is digital, but I just want to make sure it's not physical.”

Eli sighed. He leaned back on the table. Lucky had made himself at home by curling up on the blue-and-gray area rug near the front door. “I hate this so fucking much.”

“I know. It's not ideal.”

“Not at all... What about the third camera?”

I turned to face him. “It should go in your bedroom.”

That made him pause, his fingers tightening around the camera. “In my bedroom?”

“Someone’s watching you, Elijah. They know your schedule. They know things they shouldn’t know. We need to make sure they haven’t gotten inside while you’re not here.”

He swallowed. He didn’t like it. I could see that much in the way his lips pressed together, the way his fingers flexed like he wanted to argue but couldn’t quite find the words.

I didn’t give him time to second-guess it. Instead, I grabbed the last camera and walked into his room like I belonged there.

And fuck, it really felt like I did. Like I’d been here before.

Dark green sheets still slightly rumpled from sleep. A half-full glass of water on the nightstand. A book facedown on the mattress like he had fallen asleep reading it. Clothes draped over a chair and—fuck me—a bottle of lube sitting right there next to that damn lamp that almost gave me away.

I clenched my jaw, shoving down the rush of heat flooding my veins.

Eli lingered in the doorway, watching me with those sharp blue eyes. Assessing me. “And you really think this is needed, right?”

I turned, placing the camera on the shelf across from the bed. It would capture the entire room from here.

“I do. And it’ll only be temporary. I hope I can have this solved soon.” It smelled like him in here. Like that Tom Ford cologne sitting on the dresser. “Now we just have to download the app and have these cameras go live. Then you’ll be able to keep an eye on everything at all times.”

“Perfect. Thank you for this, Benji. Seriously.”

I pulled up the app on my phone and started to set it up, using my email and information before I even realized what I was doing.

It should have been on his phone. His information. His log-in. I glanced at him. He sat on the edge of his bed, biting his nails and rubbing at his earlobe. It was an interesting tic of his, one that never showed when he was streaming. He looked equal parts relaxed and nervous. It tore me up inside. I had fantasized about this exact moment—being alone with Eli in his bedroom—and I had envisioned him as being completely at ease. His body unraveling for me as I explored it with my fingers, my tongue.

That was just a fantasy, though. The reality was that I was inside his bedroom under the guise of work. We weren’t here to hook up, no matter how badly I wanted it. This shit was serious.

I deleted the account name and password I just created.

“Here, finish up registering these cameras. Then you can download the app on your phone and just log in.”

Eli grabbed my phone and typed in his info. He finished creating the account and closed out of the app. He grabbed his phone and installed it on his. He logged in and was greeted with three different camera feeds, one of them showing our backs. I turned and gave the camera a friendly wave. Eli chuckled.

“Don’t worry,” I assured him. “This won’t be for much longer. I’m going to figure out what’s happening.”

“I believe you. I trust you.”

I trust you.

He might as well have said he loved me. I didn’t want to let him down, didn’t want to break that trust. I was going to show him I had his back.

Fuck. I wanted to kiss him. Wanted to throw myself against him, press my body on his, let him feel how fucking hard he was making me.

“Alright,” I said, “I guess I should be heading out. I’ve got some work to do.”

Eli paused. Shit. Was he going to ask me to stay? Would it be okay if I did?

“Let me walk you out,” he said. He stood, the space between us closing. I smiled, even though I felt my heart drop.

It was fine. We’d had a great day, one I hadn’t even expected to have.

Maybe more of those were in store for us? Maybe this was only the beginning.

* * *

I was wasted.

I had started drinking the second I got home, mind a tangled mess of obsession and paranoia, my thoughts spinning with Eli, with Nomad, with every fucking thing I had to do, all the work that was ahead of me.

I had spent hours combing through forum posts, dredging up every last trace of Elijah's digital history, pulling archived footage, tracking down deleted accounts, following every thread that might lead me to the person threatening him.

Before I started taking the shots—scratch that, I was three deep before I even opened my laptop—I found a couple of accounts on different websites that might have been linked to the Nomad that was threatening and stalking Eli. One was a Reddit account that had the same exact username as one of the Nomad accounts. There were two posts: one was in a subreddit about Broadway shows, and the other was in a local subreddit about NYC coffee.

It was likely nothing. But could also very well be something . It seemed like a large coincidence that this person had a similar account name and also appeared to be located in the same city as Eli.

I leaned back in my chair. Lucky sat curled up on the couch. He seemed to be adjusting pretty well, even though I couldn't help but feel sad for the little guy. I grabbed my glass, full of rum with a splash of Coke, and swirled it before taking a gulp.

My world was beginning to blur. My anxiety, my worries, they all started to disappear. I knew it'd be momentary, but I still welcomed it. Let the numbness drape over me like a nice, warm, cozy blanket.

I stood up from the chair, nearly tipping it over by accident. I stretched, walked over to the window. It was dark out. I glanced at the clock. Damn. Already eleven. I hadn't realized how late it was getting.

Maybe it was time for me to stop working. I shut my laptop and shuffled to the kitchen, where I refilled my glass. I leaned against the counter, putting a hand inside my underwear.

I liked to work comfortably, so I had pretty much stripped down to my briefs once I got home. But even the briefs were starting to get annoying. I pulled those off, leaving them on the floor.

There. Better.

I took a chug of the drink and started to scroll through my phone. I wondered if he was online...

A quick check told me he wasn't. That didn't stop me from getting hard, though. Fuck. I'd been a leaking mess since I had said hello to him earlier today. He had no idea what kind of effect he had on me.

I wondered... did I have the same effect on him?

Maybe I didn't? Maybe I wasn't his type? Maybe I didn't even have a chance with him?

I took another heavy chug. Stroked myself. Got harder.

If he wasn't online, then I could just pull up one of his older streams. It didn't have the same kind of thrill as him being live did, but at least I'd get to see him jerk off.

Or maybe...

My finger hovered over the security camera app. I hadn't deleted it yet. It was still logged in to his account.

Had I done that on purpose? Installed it on my own phone before his? Couldn't tell. World was spinning a bit, thoughts were difficult to untangle.

I walked back to the couch. Lucky lifted his head, giving me a judgmental glare before dropping it again and closing his eyes.

“I know I shouldn’t do this, buddy.” I scratched his head before I leaned forward, phone in one hand and cock in the other. “It’s just for a second.”

I opened the security camera app.

Three boxes appeared on my screen. One showed an empty hallway, the other showed a dark living room, and the last one...

My breath caught, the view showing a slightly out-of-focus but intimate shot of Eli in his bedroom.

He wasn’t naked. He wasn’t performing. He was just there.

Wearing nothing but a loose pair of sweatpants and a tank top, sprawled across his bed, scrolling through his phone, completely unaware that I was watching him.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. This was wrong. So fucking wrong.

I swallowed, my pulse pounding as I shifted on the couch, my cock throbbing between my legs. It was more intimate like this. More forbidden. Like I had cracked open a hidden window into his world, into the pieces of him no one else got to see.

My hand drifted down, palm pressing against the ache between my legs, heat coiling low in my stomach.

I knew this was wrong. I knew I should stop.

But I didn’t.

I wrapped my fingers around my cock as I watched Eli stretch, his shirt riding up just enough to expose a sliver of golden skin. He was so peaceful. Completely in his element.

Fuck.

I stroked myself slowly, my breath coming in shallow pulls, my eyes locked onto the screen.

I was so fucking horny. And drunk. And wrong. This was so wrong.

But I wasn't doing it to hurt him. I was just a fucked-up man. Broken. Trying to heal something inside me that may never be fully fixed.

And right now, I was mainly trying to come.

“Fuck, Eli. I'm sorry.”

As if he could hear me. I continued to stroke myself, spitting in my palm and spreading it up and down my thick shaft. Eli chuckled to himself as he watched something on his phone. He put a hand under his shirt and rubbed his chest, showing more of his stomach.

So fucking hot.

So fucking wrong.

I needed to stop.

I had to come.

I needed another drink.

I jerked off harder, faster, leaning back and spreading my legs, cupping my balls.

The point of no return was near. I moaned, the coils in my gut tightening, my balls ready to empty my load all over the floor.

And then his phone rang.

I froze, fingers tightening around my cock.

Eli answered, voice slightly hoarse. “Hey, Zack, what’s up?”

I clenched my jaw, forcing my strokes to stay slow, controlled, even as my chest tightened with something sharp. This had crossed a line. I had to turn off the feeds and delete the app.

Zack was talking, voice muffled through the speakers.

My guilt started to cement into a nasty, toxic feeling in my chest. My cock—still rock hard and needy—couldn’t control me like this. I had to be a good guy. Had to turn off the feeds. Forget I ever even had access to these damn cameras.

“A party?” Eli asked. “A sex party? Okay, now you’ve got my attention.”

Just as I was about to delete the app, I froze.

What was he talking about?

“Invite only? Hold up.” Eli got up from his bed and sat on the edge. He reached for his laptop and set the phone down next to him, putting Zack on speaker. “What’s it

called again?”

“Midnight Manhattan,” Zack answered. “It’s supposed to be a masquerade theme. The only thing you’re allowed to wear is a mask.”

“Damn... sounds hot.”

“I’m telling you, it is. You need to go.”

“Are you going to be there?”

“Possibly. I may have a date that night, but if that falls through, then I’m going.”

Eli typed something onto his computer. I watched this all happen as if I were in the room myself. A horny little fly on the wall.

“Do you think it’s smart for me to go? You know, considering everything going on?” Eli asked.

No. No it’s absolutely not smart. Stay home, Eli. Stay the fuck home.

“I think it’s smart for you to blow off some steam. Besides, you’ll be safe there. It’s invite only, and there will be a lot of other guys there. No one’s going to try anything. I’ve been to these parties before. Everyone is super respectful, super hot, and super fucking horny.”

Eli looked up at the ceiling. He glanced directly at the camera. I flinched. Felt as if he could see straight through it.

“Fine, might as well. Only live once, right?”

“Exactly,” Zack said.

Fuck.

I closed out of the camera feeds. This wasn't good. Elijah shouldn't be going to this. Not alone, at least. No. He needed someone protecting him. Watching his back.

I swiped over into my internet browser and searched Midnight Manhattan.

I'll keep you safe, Eli.

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Chapter 10

Elijah Grant

The email with the official invite to Midnight Manhattan dinged into my phone as I waited in line for my coffee. It had the address attached, along with a dress code (mask only) and a code of conduct (consent, no one being blackout drunk, everyone had to be bathed, etc.). This wasn't my first time attending one of these exclusive kinds of sex parties, but it was the first time I'd go to one wearing a mask.

Sounded hot as fuck.

And damn did I need that kind of release.

"Thank you," I said as the barista handed me my caramel macchiato with a grunt-smile hybrid.

Had to love New York City hospitality.

I pocketed my phone and walked out toward Bryant Park. It was a nice day out, but admittedly wasn't as nice as the day before when I had spent it with Benji. That had been a very pleasant and much-needed surprise. He had a good sense of humor, interesting stories, and the sexiest fucking smile I'd ever seen. He also had that broody-detective thing going for him. An edge of "I've seen some shit" that made me want to learn more about him. I wanted to talk to him for hours about his childhood, his work, his likes and dislikes.

I also wanted to spend hours rolling around naked in the sheets with him. There were some men who I had instant chemistry with, and Benji was one of those men. From the second that I met him at Stonewall, I felt a spark in my core that didn't light up for just anyone.

Maybe I should have invited him to the party tonight...

It wasn't the first time the thought crossed my mind, but each time it did, I quickly crumpled it up and tossed it away. As hot as that would have been, I didn't want to push any boundaries he wouldn't have been comfortable with. He seemed to be just fine when I told him what I did for work, but that didn't mean he'd be okay with getting invited to a sex party.

Besides, we weren't even dating. There was nothing except a professional relationship between us.

Although... fuck, was that detective hot as sin.

I sighed and tried to forget about Benji.

Bryant Park was busy today. People lazily strolled through the green space tucked in between tall metallic skyscrapers. Kids laughed and chased pigeons as parents sat on benches and talked with their spouses. An extremely talented mime artist was drawing quite a crowd as she tried to escape from an invisible box.

I walked past, wondering how the hell I was supposed to break out of my own invisible constraints. It felt like the walls around me were getting closer and closer with every new message from Nomad. Like they were days away from throwing a bag over my head and dragging me to their secret lair.

A chill slithered down my back. I looked over my shoulder. It was a habit that had

developed only recently.

I didn't always feel this way. I liked to think of myself as a free-spirit. Anxiety and fear weren't typically emotions I'd dealt with growing up. I had an almost toxic sense of optimism. It helped me get through school, through my parents' divorce, being homeless, through a countless number of fights with my sister.

But the world continued to crush me. My mom's death was my biggest breaking point. The optimism drained out of me in one fell swoop. Then I couldn't crack into Broadway, no matter how many classes I took or auditions I went to or producers I networked with. Brutal rejection after brutal rejection started to make me feel like whatever little optimism and hope I had left was misplaced. A silly thing I had to outgrow. I started my cam career as a way to not just pay the bills but reclaim some of that "performance" energy I so fucking craved.

Then Nomad stepped onto the stage, and my inspirational play turned into a nightmarish horror film.

Anxiety and fear were no longer strangers to me. They were close acquaintances.

So tonight, I was determined to leave them at home. I had to let loose. Needed to just let go .

What better way to do that than go to an orgy?

* * *

Midnight Manhattan was being held in a penthouse near the Upper East Side. I climbed out of my Uber and looked up at the tall, stately building housing the old money of the city. Billionaires, celebrities, royalty. All of them were known to live in this neighborhood.

I wondered how many of them knew about the party going on tonight? Which of the stuffy old moneybags in this building were aware of all the anonymous cock-sucking and ass-fucking that was going on right above their heads?

Something about that made this even hotter.

I thanked my driver and went up to the doorman. He was dressed in all black, which matched with the black shorts and T-shirt I wore. My mask was inside my pocket. I decided I'd put it on in the elevator so that I didn't give away too much.

"Hi, sir, I'm here for the event going on in PH2."

"Of course. Do you have the entrance code?"

"Yes, it's starry night."

"Excellent. Right this way."

I followed him into the opulent lobby, walking across the shining marble floors and toward an elevator bay with golden elevator doors and a massive paint-blotched canvas that looked expensive as fuck. The doorman held a key card against the call pad, and the doors smoothly slid open. I stepped inside, the walls of the elevator covered in more black and white marble, and thanked the doorman as he hit the PH2 button. He gave me a suggestive wink as the door closed.

Huh. Maybe this party wasn't as secret to the residents as I thought.

I glanced at my reflection in the elevator door, making sure my hair was right and that I didn't have anything stuck in my teeth. I was proud of the way I looked and didn't stress too much about it. Maybe it helped that I was paid to be naked and jerk off in front of thousands of people online, but even before I had my cam career, I

always felt confident in my body. I wasn't a gym rat, and I wasn't a walking bean pole, either. The fact that I had been a competitive swimmer in college likely helped keep my body in check. I was the "guy next door" type, with a juicy ass, a toned and slightly sculpted stomach, some hair on my chest, and a thick, uncut, seven-inch cock.

Yeah, I didn't have much to feel bad about. Which made nights like these all the more fun.

Zack was right about the safety of the event, as well. I spoke with the organizer personally and told him about my situation with Nomad. He promised they'd be extra vigilant and would also provide undercover security as an extra layer of protection. If this were an open party or a bar, then I wouldn't have risked it.

The doors opened into a wide hallway. A man—naked except for a peacock feather mask that covered half his face—stood at the door. He smiled, extending a hand. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to shake that or the elephant trunk that he had swinging between his legs.

Oh, tonight is going to be fun.

I grinned, slipping my hand into his for a brief handshake. His grip was firm, his touch lingering, his eyes raking over me like he was already undressing me, which, considering the rules of this place, wouldn't take much effort.

"May I see your invite?"

I pulled out my phone and showed him the email. At least there were two security points to get into the party. They were taking it seriously, then.

"Welcome," he murmured, voice husky. "Enjoy yourself."

The doors opened, and I stepped inside.

The penthouse was massive, opulent in a way that could only belong to someone drowning in old money. Chandeliers dripped crystal light onto polished marble floors, red velvet furniture sprawled across the space, casting deep shadows in the dim, golden glow. The music was low and pulsating, some kind of bass-heavy electronic that seemed to hum beneath my skin.

And the people? The bodies?

It was a sensory overload.

Masked men, all of them completely bare except for the single piece of anonymity covering their faces, moved through the space like ghosts in a fever dream. Some stood near the bar, sipping wine and whiskey, watching, cupping their balls or lazily stroking. Others were already lost in the haze of pleasure—sprawled over couches, pressed against the walls. There were three different hallways leading deeper into the labyrinth of sex and pleasure and dick.

So much dick.

My mouth watered.

Moans and gasps intertwined with the music, filling the room with the raw, unfiltered sound of sex. A man with a black lace mask had his lips wrapped around someone's cock right there against the bar. Another was on his knees in the middle of the floor, thighs spread, back arching as he took a trip to Paris with one man in front of him and another railing him from behind. Sweat beaded on their rippling muscles as the top gave beastly grunts with every thrust.

I swallowed, my cock already thickening in my shorts.

Yeah. This was exactly what I needed.

I went first to a discreet area to the side of the entrance where cubbies were stacked. Two men undressed, already fondling each other, speaking in hushed tones. I slipped off my shirt and then shorts and put them in a cubby. I slipped my mask on. It was a half mask that was painted white and gave my nose a slightly beakish shape.

The cool air kissed my naked skin. I decided I'd go to the bar first for a little bit of a social lubricant. I wasn't shy at all, my cock already standing at half-mast as I walked across the dimly lit room. Leaning against the wall was a deliciously built man—thick around the chest and thighs, dark bush of pubes, a heavy cock, and sexy arms. He wore a leather mask that had dark black mesh across the eyes, giving him an extra layer of anonymity.

Fuck, he was hot.

I made a mental note to sidle over to him after I got my drink.

“What can I get you, stud?” the bartender asked. He was just as naked as the partygoers, with an unbelievable eight-pack that seemed to ripple as he moved.

“Vodka tonic, please.”

The bartender turned to grab the bottle of vodka, his ass looking like a ten-course meal. Damn, I wouldn't mind eating some good ass tonight. Get it nice and wet before I made it mine.

Benji's ass looked great the other day.

I told myself I wouldn't think of the detective tonight, but I couldn't help it. He'd dug under my skin, and I didn't want to dig him out. Not quite yet. I wanted to explore

whatever was there first.

Damn it. Maybe I should have invited him.

The bartender finished making my drink. I thanked him and took a sip, nearly getting knocked back from how strong it was. I shook my head and thanked him again before turning, scanning the room for that leather-masked man.

“Eli?”

My head swiveled to the left, from where my name had come.

Even though he was wearing a mask, I could instantly recognize the person underneath it.

“Zack?”

Chapter 11

Elijah Grant

“You made it.” I could recognize my best friend’s smile anywhere, even when half his face was covered by a tiger-striped mask. It flared out around the corners, giving him the appearance of having animal-like ears. Like every other guy at the party, he was also naked.

I’d seen Zack nude before. Hell, we’d even fooled around once or twice. It was pretty common with gay guys. We liked dick and had a good time playing with them, so it came naturally sometimes. With Zack, it had been fun, but after a particularly drunken night when Zack admitted he might have been developing more intense feelings for me, I decided to take a step back from hooking up with him. I loved him to death, but I couldn’t see myself with him in a romantic sense.

“I did. Guess that date fell through?” I asked him, taking a sip from my nuclear-powered drink.

“Yeah. Figured I should come check this out. Hot, huh?”

“Very,” I said, turning my attention out toward the open space, where one man jerked off two beefy, hairy guys on the couch.

Zack put an arm around my shoulders and playfully bumped into my side. I smiled and bumped him back. I could tell he was getting turned on. “Have you checked out the upstairs?” Zack asked.

I shook my head. “There’s an upstairs?”

“Yeah, through that hall. There’s more playrooms up there; some are private. One’s got a sex swing.”

“Damn, maybe I’ll do a lap and check it out.” I wanted to subtly separate from Zack. I didn’t want him to feel bad that I wasn’t looking to fuck around with him. It wasn’t like we had come to this thing together, but still, I was the kind of guy who cared about everyone’s feelings—sometimes more than my own.

“Cool, I’ll come with.”

There went my subtle exit. Did I just flat out tell him that I wanted some space tonight? Would that hurt his feelings?

“Zack, I…”

My breath hitched. I locked focus on that man with the black leather mask. He leaned against the wall, holding one leg up, his thick cock hanging like a tree trunk. Even though I couldn’t see his eyes, I could tell his attention was on me. He cocked his head, and his lips—such sexy fucking lips—slanted into half-a-grin. He swirled the drink in his hand and took a sip. I watched his throat bob up and down, his smile still aimed directly at me.

“Eli? Hello?”

“What? Sorry, got distracted.”

“Easy place for that to happen.”

“You said the rooms upstairs were private?” I asked.

“Mhmm. You can lock the doors.”

There was a brief pause. I had the impression that Zack wanted me to bring him to one of those rooms.

“I think there’s a guy across the room that’s been eyeing me. I’m gonna approach him.” There. That would surely make things more obvious.

“Which one is it?” Zack asked, scanning the horny crowd. “The one with that shitty red Party City mask?”

I chuckled. Zack was as snarky as he was oblivious. “No, the leather mask. He’s standing against the wall. Don’t look and make it obvious.” I chugged another burning gulp of mainly vodka and shook out my shoulders. “Alright, have fun tonight.” I leaned in and gave Zack a friendly kiss on the cheek. He offered me a smile and a wink before he turned and walked away, disappearing down the hall.

The man with the leather mask stood in the same position, except he cupped and gently massaged his balls now. His attention still felt focused on me. Or was I making that up? It was difficult to tell.

And also... did I recognize him? Why did he look a lot like the detective I was quickly becoming infatuated with?

They had the same build. Same jaw. And that smile...

No. It wasn’t him. Of course it wasn’t him. I just couldn’t shake Benji off my mind. If I looked hard enough, I’d probably find similarities between him and a brown paper bag.

The vodka was starting to have its effect on me. My muscles began to warm, to

loosen. My thoughts became cloudy, already frazzled by the number of hot, naked men there were around me. Grunts and moans and slurps and “oh fucks” filled the air.

Fuck it. Time to get some.

I finished my drink and set the empty glass on the bar. I walked across the room, the smooth wood floor cold under my bare feet. Maybe because my entire job was to be naked in front of people and get paid for it, I didn’t feel anywhere near self-conscious or weird about walking toward this handsome man with my dick swinging.

The man must have realized I was headed in his direction. He planted his foot on the ground, his thighs thick and juicy. Just how I liked my men.

Yeah, tonight was going to be a great time.

Parties like these were all about fucking around. A buffet of different cocks and asses to feast on. But I doubted I would have been disappointed if my entire night was spent with this guy. He just ticked my boxes, and I couldn’t even see the majority of his head.

Maybe I’d get a face reveal by the end of the night?

A man with long brown hair stepped directly in front of me and went for my leather-masked target. He draped himself on the guy, nuzzling into his neck and saying something that I couldn’t hear over the loud music.

Ahhh, fuck. I wasn’t fast enough.

Damn it.

I made a smooth turn to the right and left the two alone. Whatever. There were plenty

of other hot, mask-wearing men I could distract myself with.

I walked down the dimly lit hall into a room with floor-to-ceiling windows that had a spectacular view of Central Park.

It wasn't the landscape that the people in this room focused on, though.

There were two men on a mattress in the center of the room. They appeared to be putting on a show. One of the men, silver-haired with tribal tattoos crisscrossing his bicep and chest, was thrusting into a moaning blond bottom, his legs hitched up on the silver fox's shoulders, his toes curled and his hands fisted in the silky black sheets.

I looked over my shoulder, slightly hopeful that the leather-masked man had ditched his desperate-looking suitor and followed me instead.

Nope. No sign of him.

One of the men watching the show paused his strokes and smiled at me. He wore a velvet red mask that looked like it belonged on the set of a TV show about old British royalty.

He was hot, but... I don't know. He didn't give me the same spark I felt earlier.

The man in the red velvet mask stepped closer, his body language shifting from relaxed to something more predatory. His gaze raked over me, sharp beneath the dim golden light from the chandelier, his lips curving into something between a smirk and a sneer.

"You looking for a good time?" His voice was smooth, too smooth, like he was trying too hard to be seductive.

It didn't work on me. I wasn't into it.

I offered a polite but guarded smile. "I think I'm just browsing for now."

Red Velvet didn't move. Instead, he took another half step forward, closing the space between us, forcing me to tilt my chin up slightly to meet his eyes. I wasn't small by any means, but this guy had height and muscle on his side.

Unwanted pressure slithered into my chest.

"C'mon," he murmured. "You came here for a reason, didn't you?" His fingers brushed my hip, featherlight but unmistakable. His hard cock pressed against my soft one. "And from what I hear... you like to put on a good show."

A shiver crawled down my spine.

That—that wasn't something a stranger should know.

I froze, my brain scrambling to rationalize, to tell myself this guy had just heard about me here, that he was making an educated guess. That it didn't mean he knew who I was.

But my instincts screamed something different.

Nomad?

Was this him? Could he have somehow gotten in?

My pulse spiked, but I kept my face carefully neutral, calculating my next move.

I wasn't a coward. I had dealt with creeps before. It came with the territory of my

work, the nature of my online presence. I also wasn't scared of throwing a fist or two. I grew up under the idea that it was bad to back down. I didn't like allowing other people to have control over me or to talk shit about me. I came from a small town in Iowa where the straight bullies only responded to fists and insults.

But this? This was different.

This was too close. Too dangerous.

"How, uh, what do you mean?" I asked, already stumbling on my words.

"I spoke to someone earlier. A friend of yours. He pointed you out. Said to follow you on your CamStar account. You should thank him. Looks like he's a good manager."

Huh, so that's how he knew.

I chuckled, even though my hackles were still raised. This was uncomfortable. Zack making small talk with some random guy didn't give him the right to approach me so aggressively. "So? Want to put on a show with me?"

He reached out again. He grabbed my wrist, tried to pull my hand toward his dick.

I stepped back, putting deliberate distance between us. "I appreciate the offer," I said, keeping my tone even, "but I think I'll pass."

Red Velvet didn't budge. If anything, his smirk widened. "Don't be shy now. I'm just being friendly."

My stomach twisted. The room—once filled with nothing but erotic heat—felt smaller now, the air heavier, like it had been stripped of oxygen.

I scanned the room, searching for an escape, for anyone who might step in, but everyone else was too distracted—watching the couple on the mattress, engrossed in their own affairs.

Fuck.

I should have left when I had the chance.

I shouldn't have even?—

A shadow moved behind me.

Someone pressed close to my back, a solid, heat-radiating wall of muscle and silent power. I glanced over my shoulder.

The leather-masked man.

I melted backward. His scent—dark, masculine, familiar—coiled around me, sending a warm shiver down my spine.

A large, calloused hand came to rest firmly on my hip, not possessive but unmistakably claiming. He pulled me back. I allowed it, enjoying how his bare body fit so perfectly against mine.

My breath caught in my lungs. Any fear or panic I'd been experiencing vanished in thin air.

The shift in the vibe was immediate.

Red Velvet's smirk faltered. His posture changed, the casual arrogance slipping just slightly as he took in the figure now standing behind me.

My leather-masked hero didn't speak.

Didn't need to.

His presence alone was a warning, radiating dominance and control.

Red Velvet swallowed, flicking his gaze between us. His jaw tightened like he was considering whether or not to push his luck.

I almost wanted him to.

Something in me thrived off the contrast—the way I felt vulnerable and protected at the same time. It sent a sharp, heady thrill through my bloodstream, settling low in my stomach. My cock twitched, and from what I felt against my lower back, it wasn't just me who was getting turned on.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Red Velvet took a slow step back. "Didn't realize he was taken," he murmured, raising his hands like he was backing off.

He disappeared back into the crowd.

My shoulders loosened, but I still felt the weight of the man's presence behind me.

I exhaled, steadying myself before tilting my head to look at him.

"That was..." I swallowed, pulse still too fast. "Thanks."

He still didn't speak. His lips curled—that same cocky half smirk I'd noticed earlier—but he remained silent, watching me.

Something inexplicable coiled between us, something thick and pulsing and

undeniable.

It should have unnerved me. Instead, it just made me burn hotter.

I licked my lips, considering my next move.

He had rescued me.

Intervened when I needed him to.

The least I could do was pay him back.

And I knew exactly how I could do that. I turned so I was facing him, our cocks brushing together, sending delicious tendrils of pleasure through my body. I couldn't resist kissing him, instantly becoming addicted to his taste. "Come," I said, reaching for his hand. "Let's find somewhere a little more private."

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Chapter 12

Benji Morrison

My heart pounded against my chest. I felt like a live wire, every part of me on high alert. This was hotter than any fantasies or sex dreams my psyche could cook up.

Eli was pressed against me, completely naked. My cock pulsed against his smooth ass. My breaths came quickly. I wondered if he could feel just how fast my heart beat. Could he feel my pulse through my erection?

Did he know it was me who had come to save him?

No. I doubted that. He didn't appear to have recognized me. I chose this mask specifically for that reason. I wanted to remain anonymous. How would I have explained myself if he knew?

I hadn't even been planning on interacting with him. I knew I was crossing a big, bold line by following him to this party. I wanted to watch him from afar. Same as I'd do when he cammed. I had set that boundary for myself before I even laid eyes on him tonight.

That big, bold line vanished into thin air the moment I saw him.

How could I keep myself away from such a perfect man? His naked body was even more impressive in person. I wanted to kiss the divots of his hips, run my hands over his stomach, down past the trimmed crown of dark pubes, wanted to feel the weight

of his full balls and thick, uncircumcised dick in my hand.

So I kept an eye on him. Even when that long-haired twink was trying to drag me off somewhere more private. I excused myself and followed Eli, noticing him bristle when that man appeared to corner him. A protective rush of energy swept through me. I felt like a male lion, ready to roar and fight to the death to protect my object of affection.

At first, I was going to ignore that protective flair. This wasn't my place to intervene. Maybe Eli wanted him. Maybe he was here to just empty his nuts and move on? Who was I to stop him from doing that?

Then I heard Eli turn the red-velvet-masked man down, but the man clearly didn't take no for an answer.

That was enough to push me into action. I moved behind Eli, standing over him, placing a protective (and possessive) hand on his hip. The man's dark eyes looked us over, and he realized he was far out of his league. He gave a grunt and turned to watch the two men fucking in the center of the room. The sounds of their sex mixed with the heavy bass that filled the air, vibrating through my lungs.

Eli turned. He said thank you, his eyes finding mine even though mine were obscured by the mesh of the mask. My breath hitched. Our cocks rubbed together. We were both rock hard. I looked down, amazed at how sexy Eli was, how good his stiff dick looked next to mine.

Fuuuuuck. I'd been dreaming about this moment. Wanting it.

Craving it.

I should tell him who I really was. I should have lifted the mask and revealed myself

before things went any further.

But I couldn't think straight. Logic went out the window, barreling down toward Central Park. Pure lust made it difficult to differentiate right from wrong.

This was wrong. This felt right. This could be explained later.

Eli's hand locked with mine. He squeezed, pulled me forward, leaned up, and kissed me.

This was everything I'd ever wanted and more.

His tongue slid against mine, his lips making a perfect lock with mine. He tasted like heaven and sex and hell, all bundled together. A drug I needed more of. Something with the capability of making you addicted off the first hit.

I grabbed both his hips, rutting myself against him. I didn't give a fuck that we were in public, kissing and rubbing together in a room full of other men. They all disappeared the second Eli's lips touched mine. No one else mattered. The men could form a circle jerk around us and watch us fuck for all I cared.

There was something so primal about this. So fucking raw.

And he didn't even know it was me. The man who'd spent almost an entire day with him, laughing and joking, bonding over stupid shit. The same man he'd hired to help him find the identity of an obsessive stalker.

The same man who'd followed him to this party, who had watched him through cameras he had helped install.

A stab of guilt cut through my horny fog. I pulled away briefly, catching my breath.

Eli's lips glistened in the low, golden light. His cock twitched. A streak of warm, wet precum painted my groin. I couldn't hold back the growly moan that rose up from my throat.

He cocked his head. His smile slanted into a sultry smirk as his eyes raked across my face. For a brief moment, I saw a flash of recognition in his eyes.

Shit, shit, shit.

I should say something. Cut him off at the pass before he could say anything. That would lessen the blow of finding out my identity. I didn't have to mention anything about the cameras, as shitty as that'd be. I just had to say I was invited to the party by a friend. That's all. This was all pure coincidence.

Yeah. That would work. That's all I had to say.

So fucking say it.

"Come," Eli said, his hand back in mine. "Let's find somewhere a little more private."

Hmm. So maybe that wasn't recognition in his eyes. Maybe... I should keep the facade up. Just a little longer...

I didn't say a word as I allowed him to lead us out of the room. We entered the hallway, where one man was loudly deep-throating another.

Sex was all around us. Something about it felt freeing. Everyone here wanted the same thing: to have a great time with another person (or two or three). There was no judgment, no stress. Just boundless sexual energy amongst consenting and horny-as-fuck adults.

To top it all off, there was even an open bar. I was already four shots of vodka deep, not including the couple of shots I'd had before coming here, so my entire body was feeling loose. I considered stopping at the bar for another one, but Eli appeared to be on a mission, walking through the busy living room and into another hallway, up a curving flight of stairs, and down another, more narrow hall. Not a single word was exchanged between us. Body language appeared to be enough. My cock, still swollen and hard, swung between my legs with every step, same as Eli's.

God, how big was he? He was definitely bigger than me. I wondered if he liked to top? I tended to be verse but leaned top in my past relationships, but that perfect cock of his was seriously making me consider bending over and becoming a lifetime bottom. So long as he went slow, took his time with me, opened me up, and stretched me with his thick cock.

I gave myself a stroke, feeling like a pressure valve that was set to explode.

Fucking hell, I was dripping precum. That's how horny Eli was making me, literally fucking leaking as I walked, a string of it sticking to my thigh.

"In here," Eli said, tugging me into an empty bedroom. I hadn't even realized these were up here. The bedroom was gargantuan by New York standards. A full-size bed was in the center of the room, the walls covered in a deep blue wallpaper that almost had a velvet texture to it. I sat at the edge of the bed, the opulent green comforter sinking underneath me like a cloud.

I watched Eli, my heart thumping, my cock twitching. I grabbed the base in a loose fist. I wanted to speak, wanted to tell him how good his body looked in the soft light.

But I already teetered on a thin line of creeping him the fuck out if he found out who I was.

I didn't want that. I was here to protect him but also to play around with him, and he clearly wanted to do the same with me. I wasn't forcing anything, wasn't coercing him.

He shut the door and locked it behind him. He turned around, rested on the door, spreading his legs. He rubbed his muscular chest, twisted a nipple. His cock throbbed between his legs. He looked so sexy in that white mask as he ran a hand through his blond curls.

Fuck. He was putting on a show for me.

Just for me.

Holy shit, I could have cum right then and there.

"You know," he said, voice low and full of desire, "you caught my eye from pretty much the moment I walked in."

I offered a smile, stroked my cock. Body language was all it took to communicate on a night like this.

"I can't explain it, but damn, I felt a connection." He crossed the room, every step like striking flint against my core, the fire catching and spreading outward. I didn't think I'd ever been this turned on. My balls were tight, my cock a hard length of steel in my grip. "I hope you did, too."

I feel it, Eli. I do.

He stopped in front of me. The sounds of the music from downstairs drifted in through the threshold. The vibrations of the bass tickled at my feet. The air between us felt charged with something powerful, electric. I reached for him, cupping his face,

pulling him down for another kiss.

He climbed onto my lap and pushed me backward. I fell onto the bed, Eli's body weight encasing me. A delicious feeling.

I thrust upward, my tongue swirling with his, our cocks rubbing together. He moaned into the kiss as I squeezed his hips, pulling him harder onto me.

This was it. This was all I ever wanted.

Could I have been a little obsessed with Elijah? Yes, I could admit to that. But was obsession not just another flavor of passion? Of connection? Of love?

This wasn't dangerous; it wasn't wrong. Nothing that felt this good could truly be wrong.

No. Eli and me being together was simply right .

I reached between us and stroked. He was hot and hard in my grip.

I was right, too. He was bigger than me. Thick, long, pink. I felt like I had to taste it. My mouth watered at the thought.

I pulled his hips upward. He must have gotten the hint because he crawled higher up the bed. He brought his cock to my mouth, kneeling on either side of my head. This view, this angle, would forever be imprinted in my brain as one of the hottest fucking moments of my life.

Precum beaded on his tip. I lapped it up, the drug that was Elijah Grant officially being introduced into my system. I instantly had to have more. I opened my mouth and took him in, being rewarded with a moan of pure pleasure. I stretched my jaw as

Eli stuffed more of himself down my throat.

My nose was almost to his pubes before I needed air. He pulled back. I stroked his wet, glistening dick with one hand, admiring how beautiful it was. How perfect the head was, how he had two beauty marks dotting his shaft, how his balls were tight and so damn sexy. These were details I didn't really get to see online.

Fucking hell. Elijah was flawless. It took everything I had in me to not say it out loud.

I got back to sucking him off, bringing my wet fingers down between my legs and playing with my hole. This guy was doing something to me. He was turning me into a hungry bottom. My body ached to be filled by him. To take him down to his balls, feel him unloading inside me. It was an urge that nearly made me cry out for it. Give it all up, just so I could tell him to fuck me.

Instead, body language would have to do. I took Eli's cock out of my mouth with an audible pop. I buried my nose in his balls and took in a deep inhale as he jerked himself off, grinding down on my face. I licked his balls before I maneuvered myself out from under his legs.

"God, you're so sexy. What's your name?" he asked.

Still, I couldn't speak. What was I going to say? I could offer him a fake name, deepen my voice and hope that threw him off, but then that would be actively lying to him, and I didn't want to do that.

I flipped him onto his back instead.

"Oh," Eli said, smiling up at me, looking like a mask-wearing bandit moonlighting as a porn star. "No name, just dick. Got it."

I want to give you my name. Want to give you a whole lot of things, Eli.

I got onto his lap. He licked his lips as I came down for another kiss. That way, he could see how good he tasted. His cock pulsed underneath me, matching the way my hole twitched for him.

I reached behind and grabbed his cock. He was still slick and wet from my blowjob. But he was thick, and I was tight. I'd need a little more than that.

Thankfully, this was a sex party, and the host was very considerate. They had left a bottle of silicone lube on the nightstand. I leaned over and grabbed it, popping the cap opening and squirting a generous amount in my palm.

"You're hungry for this big dick, aren't you?" Eli said.

I nodded, reaching for his cock again, this time spreading the lube up and down. He shut his eyes and put his hands behind his head.

That's it. Relax. Let me use your body, and you use mine.

"Want to ride it, huh?"

"Mhmm."

I allowed myself that. A single sound of affirmation. I wanted this, bad. More than he could possibly know.

I guided him to my hole. He pushed up slowly, pushing inside me. My mouth dropped open as a soft burn flashed into a wave of pleasure. My cock throbbed as he stretched me open.

It was intense. I paused, acclimating to his girthy presence. He grinned up at me, his tongue running along those pearly white teeth. “That feel good? Want more?”

I gave him a nod.

Of course I wanted more. That was all I wanted. More of him. More, more, more, more.

He thrust upward. Hard. I gasped, leaned forward, arched my back. He found a rhythm and started to fuck me.

I couldn’t hold back the moan, the deep and chesty moan that dragged with it four words I should never have said.

“You’re so fucking big.”

Those four words were enough to make Eli freeze, the entirety of his cock still inside me. He dropped his hands from my hips, head tilted to the side, recognition settling into his deep blue gaze.

“Detective? Is that you?”

Fuck.

This wasn’t good.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:27 am

Chapter 13

Elijah Grant

There was no way the man currently sitting on my dick was actually Benji, the man I'd been daydreaming of since I met him. The chances of that being the case were slim to none. I was just so sprung, so obsessed with him, that I was looking for similarities in every man I interacted with.

That had to be the explanation. Even though...

He sounded just like Benji. And his build was also extremely similar, and... he wasn't saying anything. He was frozen on top of me, my cock still warm inside his tight ass.

Holy fucking shit.

"Benji?"

He dropped his head. He sat down fully on my lap, encasing my entire length in his velvet heat. I closed my eyes, the momentary blast of pleasure overriding any other shred of logic or thoughts left in my brain.

When I opened my eyes again, the man—no, Benji —was removing his mask.

My jaw dropped. Shock mingled with the ecstasy still flooding through my system. Was this some kind of weird fever dream? Was I going to wake up in a puddle of

sticky cum covering my bedsheets? Because this felt like way too big of a coincidence to even be real.

“You caught me.”

“Holy... seriously? How?”

Benji moved to get up from my lap, but I gripped his hips. His eyes, the same hazel eyes that had swept me away during our first meeting at Stonewall, searched mine with a curious gaze. “You don’t have to get off if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t.”

“Good, because I don’t want you to, either,” I said.

He licked his lips, sat back down. A moan slipped from my lips. This was beyond weird, and something about it was sending up some flags on the field. Not necessarily red flags, but certainly yellow ones. The smart thing to do would be to separate myself from Benji and wait for an explanation. But when did any man in the midst of getting his dick wet decide on doing what was smart over what was pleasurable?

Rarely ever.

“I was going to tell you,” Benji answered. He slowly rutted his hips, grinding his ass down on me. I shut my eyes again. He felt silky soft, his tight hole gripping my cock as he gently rocked back and forth. “When I saw you arrive, I knew I wanted to talk to you. I was nervous, though. Something about creating a connection outside of this party with you made things a little complicated.”

“I didn’t realize you were even into parties like these.”

“I am,” Benji answered, continuing to rock back and forth on my lap. His cock was as stiff as mine. He leaked precum onto my belly. The guy looked like he was cosplaying as a broken faucet.

I loved it. Loved playing with precum, loved when my own dick dripped. I thumbed his wet slit and brought it up to my lips, smiling as I sucked.

“It’s just... odd,” I said.

His brows scrunched together. “This? I can stop.”

“No. It’s odd how I haven’t been able to get you out of my head, and here you are. Almost like I manifested this.”

“Maybe you did,” Benji said. He leaned down and slowly went for my lips with his.

This was odd. This encounter. It felt written down by fate, but was there something more here at play? Was I missing something? My paranoia flared. It was a constantly burning fire inside the back of my psyche, fed stronger by being stalked. I was extra wary of everyone and everything lately.

So why wasn’t I all that wary of this?

Benji’s tongue parted my lips, and I was instantly reminded of why I wasn’t wary.

Because I wanted this. Fuck it. I wanted Benji. Bad.

Beyond that, I had also hired him to figure out who was behind Nomad. He had entered my life to literally protect me. How could I not trust him?

“God,” I hissed out when we broke our kiss. “Your ass feels like heaven.”

“And your cock is taking me straight there.”

“Yeah? You like it?”

Benji chewed his bottom lip, turning the thick pink skin a pale white. The room was lit by a single floor lamp next to the door to a private balcony, the bright city casting its light even when we were this high up.

“I’m so fucking glad you’re here,” I said.

“Really?” Benji asked, voice husky, raw. “I thought you’d be busy before I could even get near you.”

Something about that statement struck out at me, but Benji’s ass tightened around my dick, and all thoughts were forgotten.

“I don’t usually treat my clients like this, by the way,” Benji added.

“So I’m special?” I teased.

“I think so.”

I smiled up at him and started to fuck him harder. He squatted above me and let me slam into him. “Oh fuck, Eli! Fuck yeah, fuck my hole. Holy fuuuu?—”

I rubbed his legs, the dark hair soft under my palms. He was such a beautiful fucking man. He had a dark bush of pubic hair that trailed up to a well-maintained patch on his belly, up toward another dark patch over his chest. He had a strong chest and strong arms but also didn’t count his carbs or spend hours working out abs, which I loved.

He was my type to a T.

I slowed my thrusts, pulling my cock to the edge, feeling him grip at the head. I let out a deep breath. He had me so close.

“Where do you want me to come?” I asked. Part of being invited to Masked Manhattan was submitting a recent STI test and being okay with unprotected sex.

Still, I wanted to be polite.

“You can come inside me. Give me your load, baby.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhmm,” Benji said, his tone tinged in something close to desperation. He was pleading for my cum. Holy shit, could this man get any hotter?

“Ride me, Benji. Milk this load out of me.”

He dropped his head back and rubbed his pebbled nipples. I lay back and let him ride me, let him use my dick like a toy. I hadn’t been exaggerating when I said his ass felt like heaven. It was nearly overwhelming how good it felt. I enjoyed topping a little more than I enjoyed bottoming, but I didn’t think I’d ever fucked someone and had it feel this good.

“Bounce on it,” I urged. I started to match his grunts, wishing this moment would never end but knowing that it was extremely close to the finish line.

I wasn’t going to last much longer. Not with this stud fucking me the way he was.

Benji started to speed up. He was getting close, too. I could tell by the way his balls

tightened, how he started to jerk himself off, how the grunts and groans turned animalistic.

“Do it,” I said. “Cover me in cum.”

“You want it?”

“Yes. Do it, fuck yeah.”

Benji didn't appear to need any more encouragement. He let out a chesty grunt and stilled on top of me as he came. The first shot smacked my chin, the sticky, hot cum dripping down. I smiled as more hit my chest, then my belly. His entire body convulsed, his hole gripping my cock. I gave one more thrust and fell over the edge.

“Holy fuck,” I exclaimed as I emptied inside him. The orgasm felt strong enough to crack the crust of the Earth. I wasn't sure if I had astral projected for a moment, floating above my own body and watching me melt back into the mattress.

“Goddamn,” Benji said, slowly pulling himself off me before we collapsed onto the bed. The music from the party still thumped through the walls. I stared up at the ceiling. Questions started to filter into focus.

What were the actual chances of us meeting like this?

Why hadn't he just introduced himself from the start?

Was I making a mistake by being here?

Damn. Post-nut clarity was a real bitch.

“Benji... Fuck, that was good.” I didn't have it in me to ask anything probing. Not

right now. I just wanted to bask in the soft glow of the room and the warm sensations flowing through every muscle in my body.

“Glad I bumped into you tonight.”

“Same,” I repeated.

...

“Have you been to these parties before?” I asked. Slightly probing but nothing too intense. I didn’t have to be interrogating the guy because I had an ever-present cloud of paranoia hanging over me.

“This one’s my first one.”

“Think it’ll be your last?”

“Not if I can have this much fun every time. You?”

I tilted my head. We rested on the same pillow, our faces only inches apart. We’d been one single entity only minutes before, and yet, somehow, this felt more intimate than anything we’d done all night. I could see details in his face I hadn’t even noticed before.

A birthmark next to his left eye.

A tiny scar on his right cheek.

“Same. Maybe we can plan to meet next time.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

“There’s nothing against that in your Stonewall Investigations rule book, is there? No fucking around with your clients?”

Benji gave a hearty laugh. I shifted so that I could rest a leg on his. I liked it when there was no distance between us. “I’ll have to reread it, but no, I don’t think there is.”

“Okay, good... Detective. ” I made sure to sound as campy as I could with that one. He rolled his eyes and laughed again, the sound as addicting as his sex was.

“I’m going to need you to stop that.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll have to kiss you to stop you from saying it.”

“Really? Damn. Det?—”

His lips crashed against mine. I chuckled into the kiss, leaning against him, wrapping myself around him.

Feeling safe with him.

“I was going to say Det?—”

“No you weren’t,” Benji said, kissing me again. He leaned back. His eyes raked over my face. Almost like a painter studying a subject he was about to shift onto a canvas.

“I will say, though, as your detective , I’m not entirely happy you’re at a masked party. I’m glad I’m here to at least keep an eye out for you.”

I swallowed a lump. “You’re right. It was mainly all the stress I’ve been under. My judgment’s been pretty fucked. I should have just told you from the start. You could have come as my bodyguard.”

“It’s okay,” Benji said. He had a hand resting on the back of my head. His thumb traced soft circles through my hair. He had an aura about him that put me completely at ease. “Do you want to go back down to the main floors?”

I shook my head. Didn’t even take me a second to think about. Staying here for a little while longer sounded much more preferable than anything else this party could offer me.

“You look so sexy in your mask,” Benji said, smirking.

“Shit, I forgot I even had this thing on.”

“You look like a hung superhero.”

“You can call me Iron Dick.”

That got a belly laugh from Benji. “That’s a good one.”

“Are you into comic books at all?” I asked once the laughter between us died down.

“I used to read them a lot as a kid. Now, I just watch the movies. My attention span is shit. Makes stakeouts difficult for me.”

“Are stakeouts real? I always thought those were just TV things.”

Benji chuckled, his eyes searching mine again. For what? Or did he just have an intense kind of stare?

“Stakeouts are very real. Sometimes it’s the best way to figure things out. Especially if you’re working a cheating spouse case. Pictures of them leaving their ex’s house or their hookup’s apartment with their shirt untucked or hair all messed up usually do the trick.”

“Take me with you next time. I can keep you entertained.”

“No, I think you’d keep me distracted. There’s a difference.”

“Isss there?” I said playfully, cupping his balls in my hand and gently massaging them.

“Yes, yes there is.”

The banter between us was easy, fun, light. While the atmosphere was still charged with sexual energy, the moment itself felt almost like... a romantic first date.

It wasn’t much longer before I was back between his legs, pushing my cock against his dripping wet hole, any kind of warning signal or yellow flag fading away.

All that was left behind was a blissful night with Benji, all my problems momentarily forgotten.

Just what I needed.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:27 am

Chapter 14

Benji Morrison

The kisses woke me up. Wet and plentiful, covering the side of my face.

“Eli, damn, some—Lucky.”

My morning wood instantly deflated as I opened my eyes and realized I was alone in my bed with my new furry roommate. Yesterday was a drunken blur. A dream. It felt real, but there was no way I had spent the entire night with Elijah. It was probably some vodka-fueled fantasy that my horny brain had cooked up to try and satiate the constant throb between my legs.

My cock wasn't the only thing throbbing this morning. My head gave a couple of angry pulses as I rolled over and reached for the water bottle on my nightstand. I nearly tipped it over but caught it last minute, my hand closing around something else with the bottle.

A mask. A leather mask.

From last night.

Holy fuck.

It wasn't a dream. It had actually happened. And if I had any actual doubts then, my sore hole refuted them.

Not only had he fucked me, but he also realized who I was.

Fuck.

I uncapped the bottle and took a heavy chug of the cool water. Last night, as great as it was, could have easily turned out real fucking bad. I had to lie to him, and I really didn't enjoy that. But what else was I supposed to do? Tell him that I let my darker urges take control and ended up watching him through his security cameras before meeting up with him at the party? He'd rightfully think I was a massive creep and likely cut all ties with me. Probably go straight to the cops.

There'd be no explaining myself. He wouldn't understand the kind of shit I went through that twisted me up inside. I worked hard to fix myself, but that work was endless. Unforgiving. Every time I'd take a step forward—whether it was through therapy or medication or daily meditation or whatever else was on the menu of wellness that month—I'd find myself taking a full leap backward. Sometimes, it'd be through letting my bad habits take control; other times, it'd be sinking back into the bottle. Most of the time, it was a mix of all of it.

I felt broken. Drifting through life without an anchor. Unable to really plant my feet and grow. It was like I was stunted. Like my life had been put on freeze, starting from the day Michael was shot.

Finding Elijah, meeting him, being with him. It was like a kick start to my paused life. I enjoyed getting to know him, learning about him, strolling through Central Park with him, and yes, watching him. He made me excited, not just sexually but in every way fathomable. I enjoyed him so much because he allowed me to shed some of the shit I'd been through, feel like I could start new again.

And I almost fucked it all up last night.

I rubbed my face and fell back onto my pillow with a groan. The bedroom continued to spin. Lucky must have sensed I needed some support because he stopped the licking and cuddled up against my side in a tight ball of fluff. “Good boy,” I said, scratching his head.

After about thirty minutes and drinking the entire bottle of water, my hangover finally began to subside. I dragged myself out of bed and threw on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. I clipped Lucky’s leash to his black leather collar and headed out to walk him.

Stepping into the sunshine made me wince, but five minutes of walking down my busy NYC street was enough to start bringing life back into my body. Lucky stopped at nearly every corner and marked it. He found one section of the sidewalk that must have had the entire neighborhood’s message board written in dog piss because he honed in and started to sniff like his life depended on it.

I leaned on a scaffolding post and let him explore. My thoughts drifted back to Eli, to last night.

Having him inside me, underneath me, kissing me, touching me.

Jesus fuck , I needed to have him again.

But I had to do it the right way next time. I needed to send him a text, invite him out to drinks or something. Some silly little veil of manners before we lifted that veil and got down to the carnal, raw truth of why we were meeting.

I wonder if he’s online.

I doubted it. He was probably still sleeping, or maybe he was off on a lunch date. That idea made my skin prickle. I took out my phone, Lucky still focused on his

doggy status updates. I lowered the brightness so my screen wouldn't be immediately readable by anyone walking by, and then I went to CamStar.

He wasn't on the front page, which meant he likely wasn't online. He usually ranked up in the top three streamers minutes after he started his stream. I searched his username, just in case.

Nothing.

Lucky started to tug at the leash. He must have been done. I locked my phone and walked us back to the apartment. It was a Saturday, so calling it a day already sounded tempting. I could nurse the remnants of my hangover with a beer and just chill on the couch, maybe catch up on a show or something. I needed to relax after the sexual marathon my body had run hours earlier.

But I was still buzzing. I didn't want to sit back and relax. Especially since I had work to do anyway. My profession wasn't a nine-to-five desk job that let me clock out and forget about it. Some cases were easier to set to the side on my days off—the worker's comps, the cheating spouses—but some of them took up much more of my attention.

Eli's case being one of those.

I wanted to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible. I jumped in the shower, freshened up, changed into a clean pair of jeans and a black T-shirt, and I left Lucky with some extra treats inside of a treat ball I ordered for him. He happily gnawed on it as I left the apartment.

I could work from home, but I decided going into Stonewall would help me really lock in. I enjoyed hanging out at the offices. I got along with the other detectives, and I found my personal space to be relaxing and peaceful. I didn't even have to take any

trains or cabs to get there.

I walked down the street, scrolling through my phone but avoiding the urge to check the cam site again. Not like I was going to dive into an alley and jerk off if he were online. Instead, I checked to see what was trending—maybe there was an incoming meteor I didn't know about or a political shitstorm I could get angry over.

The first story made me pause.

The Raven is sentenced to the death penalty.

Damn, there it was. That serial killer had kept nearly the entirety of NYC on their toes. He had a twisted way of leaving his mark on his victims and was discovered by one of Stonewall's own. I still remembered the day Jace called me to tell me it was over, that the Raven had been caught. I knew how hard he had worked on the case, and it made me happy to know that there was finally a resolution. It would give some peace to the victims' families as well.

All in all, it was a win.

I was still reading the article by the time I got to the Stonewall offices. I was digging for the keys in my pocket when a hand on my shoulder made me jump.

“Oh, sorry, man.”

It was Jace Holloway, the very detective who I'd been thinking about on the way here.

“I called your name, but guess you didn't hear me.”

“Hah, funny. I was just reading about how the Raven was sentenced today. Sneaking

up behind me wasn't the best timing."

Jace laughed at that and rubbed the back of his neck. "Shit, yeah, sorry."

"Congratulations, by the way. If it wasn't for you, this guy would still be loose."

Jace's gaze flicked downward. He cracked his knuckles. I thought the weight of the case would have been lifted with the news, but maybe I was wrong? "Everything okay?" I asked as we stepped into the office.

"Yeah, yeah. It was just a crazy case. I think I'm still dealing with some of the fallout. I've had nightmares about it."

"You were abducted by him—of course you'd have nightmares. That scars people. Our job isn't easy at all."

"It does feel good to know that no one else is going to get hurt."

"Exactly. Just have to focus on that. You saved lives, man."

Jace offered a tight-lipped smile. It hurt me to see. I considered Jace one of my closer friends, and I hadn't even realized how much he was still affected by the case. I'd been so focused on everything else (Eli, Eli, Eli) that I missed signs that my friend was hurting. "Come over later this week. We can hang out, play some video games, and drink some beers. Just unplug."

"That sounds good," Jace said, his grin widening a bit.

"Theo's obviously invited, too."

Jace headed to his office. "Text me when."

“Sounds good,” I said, giving an affirmative knock on the wall before I opened my office and stepped inside.

I cracked my knuckles and sunk into work mode.

Today, I started with digging into Eli’s neighbor and landlord, Brian, who had verbally confronted Eli about his job after someone complained about loud music coming from his apartment. It had turned out to be his roommate, Fran, who was apparently hard of hearing, but Eli fell on the sword and said it was his music, but it had nothing to do with the stream. Brian took it upon himself to try and convert Eli right there on the spot, talking about scriptures and getting saved.

Eli had asked how Brian found out he was a cam model, but Brian wouldn’t answer, which I found suspicious. Was he hiding the fact that he knew about Eli because he was secretly a big fan of his? Big enough to stalk and obsess over him? I had a background check run on him, and the results were in my inbox.

I opened them up to find... not much. The guy was pretty clean. There was a petty theft charge dating back fifteen years ago after he got caught shoplifting something, but other than that, he didn’t have much of a record. No restraining orders, no crimes, no unpaid parking tickets.

Still didn’t make him innocent, though.

I closed out of the background check and resorted to the next best source of information on a person: social media.

Thankfully for me, Brian had a pretty extensive and public online footprint. None of his accounts were private, and they all had plenty of posts to sift through. There were photographs of him and his wife—oop, no, make that ex-wife. Pictures with his new girlfriend, who I had mistakenly assumed was his daughter, were pinned to the top of

the page. There were a couple of terribly designed graphics that depicted different bible verses sprinkled throughout his grid. His bio said, “God comes first.”

He also had a lot of travel photos, showing different plates of mouthwatering food—Spanish tapas, colorful sushi, sweet desserts—with impressive vistas behind them. He cheered next to the Eiffel Tower, he smiled with his girlfriend on a safari with a herd of gazelle behind them, he gave a thumbs-up to the camera as he snorkeled above a vibrant bed of pink and yellow coral reefs.

He was a traveler. Someone who could very well consider themselves to be a nomad.

I spent the next few hours digging through Brian’s digital history. He certainly liked to travel, but that wasn’t a strong enough link for me to follow. Yes, he lived close enough to Eli to know his whereabouts and keep an eye on him. He was also the landlord, which meant he had the keys to slip inside Eli’s apartment and snoop around while he wasn’t there. He had the means to do it, but why would he be escalating things? Was he maybe trying to push Eli out of the apartment? Was he trying to scare him away so that the sinful cam model wouldn’t be right next door to him?

Or was he so far up the church’s ass that he wanted Eli up his? His repressed sexuality could have easily turned malignant. Could have metastasized into something toxic, dark, monstrous.

I sighed, leaned back in my chair. My stomach grumbled. I considered shutting off my computer and finding somewhere to get lunch, maybe a beer or two just to loosen me up.

My phone rang. I didn’t recognize the number and was very much ready to tell off the random telemarketer on the call.

“Hello?”

“Hi, hi, is this Detective Benji? You’re working a case for Elijah Grant, correct?”

“I am, who’s this?”

“This is Zack. His best friend. And I think I have some information for you.”

Huh. Well, guess lunch would have to wait.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:27 am

Chapter 15

Benji Morrison

Zack wanted to meet at a cozy coffee shop in Brooklyn. He was already waiting for me at a table flanked by two large green ferns. He stood up and immediately waved me over.

“Benji, hey there.”

He wore a pair of clean blue scrubs, a golden necklace shining from around his neck. A book bag rested at the foot of his chair, which he almost kicked over when he was sitting back down. He had a frantic energy to him, completely opposite to the calm and collected nature of his best friend.

Opposites attract, I guess.

“Thanks for meeting with me on such short notice,” he said, sipping from his coffee cup. “I was going to get you something but didn’t know your order.”

“It’s fine, I’m not a big coffee guy.”

“Really? Damn, I need an IV drip of pure caffeine. It’s the only thing getting me through nursing school. Well, that and Adderall.” He gave a chuckle. I noticed the dark circles under his eyes, proving his point.

“I’ll try not to keep you for long, then.”

“Don’t even worry about it. I’m just here to help in any way I can.”

“I appreciate it, and I’m sure so does Eli.” I leaned back in the wicker chair. The coffee shop was busy but not overly so. The walls were cluttered—in an artful way—with paintings made by local artists. All kinds of media were represented. Oil, sketches, watercolor, acrylic. A bright orange cat sat on a shelf, sunning and slowly twitching its long tail. “How long have you two known each other?”

“Pfft, I’m not even sure. Feels like forever now. We’ve been best friends for a while. We were both raised in the same small town. When he said he wanted to leave, I realized I wanted the same thing. We left together, both of us getting accepted into NYU.”

I nodded, absorbing every little detail. Being a detective sometimes meant sifting through the mundane before finding the piece of the puzzle that made everything click into place. “So you’ve been in his orbit since before this thing with Nomad started?”

“I sure have.” He shook his head, looked out the window. “So fucked-up. I hate that he’s going through this. He’s one of the best people I know. I’m just scared for him.”

“I’m going to make sure nothing happens to him. You said you had some information?”

“I do. I was going to tell Eli first, but I figured, why scare him? I got your information after he mentioned hiring you and decided to just reach out directly to you. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course.” I leaned back in my seat. The remnants of the hangover echoed through my skull with a dull throb. I figured after this meeting, I could stop at a bar and have a drink or two. Hair of the dog really did help fight off any aches and pains from the

night before.

“Okay, so I don’t know how much he’s told you—probably everything—but there’s this other performer. His name is Damon, and I think he should be suspect number one.”

I already had Damon on my list of people to look into, although my focus had been on Brian. “Really? Why?”

“Because I’ve talked to him. He’s a sick guy.”

“You have his contact information?”

“I do. I actually, well, used to be a fan of his. Don’t tell that to Eli, obviously. But I would watch Damon. Gift him sometimes. Chat with him. And even with me, he started becoming obsessed. Then when I wouldn’t donate to him because I just didn’t have money, he’d get upset. He’d message me saying that I must be giving it all to Eli. That everyone on the site was obsessed with Eli.”

“When was this?”

“The messages?” Zack chewed the inside of his cheek. “I want to say like three months ago?”

“Do you still have them?”

He pursed his lips. Dropped his head. “I don’t think so. I deleted my account, and I think that deletes the messages. I can check, though.”

“Yeah, find out if you can still access the messages. That’d be helpful.” Although I didn’t have the exact paper trail, Zack’s words were enough to set off multiple alarm

bells. “Is Damon local?”

“That’s the other weird thing. So when I first started to watch him, he was located in Miami. Then, about a month later, he was streaming from a new bedroom. I asked him where he moved to once, and he said New York.”

The alarm bells grew louder. “Did he explain why he made the move?”

“He did. He said he wanted to be closer to his family.”

“Do you know if he’s ever spoken directly to Eli?”

“He has. And I’m not sure how he found out, but he knows that he and I are good friends. He brought it up once. Said that I’d be better off dropping him. That Eli would just end up breaking my heart.”

“Breaking your heart? Odd.”

“Yeah... really weird. I think he must think that everyone has the same twisted feelings for Eli that he does.”

“What’s his username?”

“It’s DBater89.”

How had I never seen this Damon character? I wasn’t about to tell Zack, but he wasn’t the only one who liked to visit that cam site. Then again, I never browsed through the other guys. I’d only click directly on Eli’s page and ignore all the rest. I wondered if the website archived any footage. If I had Damon’s username, then maybe I could get them to send me some recordings. I wanted to see this guy’s demeanor, see if there were some digital bread crumbs left behind.

“Is all your communication with Damon done through the website, or did you guys ever take it to your phones?”

Zack sighed. He grabbed his coffee cup in both hands and took a sip. “I knew I probably shouldn’t have, but yes, I gave him my number. Well, not really my number—I gave him a burner number. There’s an app I have that makes fake numbers for you. I downloaded it specifically to talk to him.”

“Do you have those messages?”

“I do, actually.”

“Can I see them?”

His cheeks flushed a bright strawberry pink. “I need to go through them and clean it up a bit. Honestly, it’s mostly just a lot of dick pics.”

I waved off his concern. “No judgment here. Those pictures may actually be helpful. Not that I’m in the field of collecting dick pics, but let’s say he took one of them near a window which allows me to see the building next door to help and locate him. Or maybe he caught something else in the background that could help.”

“Hmm, true. I guess I’m just always so focused on the dick I forget there’s more to the picture.”

That got a laugh out of me. “Trust me, I get it.”

He cocked his head, smiled. He was a good guy. I could see why he and Eli clicked so well. Made me glad that Eli had someone who cared about him in his corner. This world could be ruthless and bloodthirsty. Going at it alone made things so much more difficult, but having a good friend by your side was like donning an invisible layer of

plot armor. Felt like nothing could touch you.

I envied that. Growing up, I had felt very isolated. I was bullied relentlessly as a kid for a lisp that I grew out of and for body hair that sprouted earlier than other boys. So not only did I have to deal with bullshit at school and around the playground, but I also had to deal with it when I got home, and my mom was finishing off a handle of vodka before dinner while my dad was gambling away all our money at the casino, only to get home later and fight loud enough that the police were called to our house.

Escaping to a friend's house—to Michael's house—was the only thing that had helped me keep my sanity.

Zack glanced at his watch. He sighed and stretched his arms over his head, a fresh-looking hummingbird tattoo on his forearm catching my eye. "Nice tattoo. Where'd you get it done? I'm thinking of getting one myself."

"Thanks. It was at a place called Garden of Adam Tattoos."

"I have to look them up. I'm thinking of getting one on my thigh. Not sure what I want yet."

"If you go, ask for Gina Luna. She's the artist that did mine. Fucking incredible line work." Zack reached for his book bag. "I didn't realize how quick time was passing. I've got to meet up with a study group soon."

"Go for it," I said. "I think you've given me a good amount to chew on so far."

"I just hope I can help somehow."

"I think what you've given me already has. Keep being a good friend to Eli, that's what he needs now."

“I will. And keep being a great detective.” Zack gave me a wink before standing up.

“Send me the messages when you get a chance,” I reminded him as I also stood.

“I will.” Zack shook my hand and took me into a hug before he left, winding around the busy tables and out into the even busier streets.

I walked over to the counter and checked out the menu. A coffee sounded good. So did a matcha. But a vodka tonic sounded even better. It’d help cure the headache and help me think a little clearer. Just one.

I left the coffee shop and looked around. There were bars galore here in Brooklyn, but I wanted to go to one closer to home. I walked Lucky before I left, so he should be good for a while, but I still wanted to be close so I could just walk home after my drink.

I went toward the subway station, heading down the steps, past the cluster of tourists trying to figure out how to pay the fare with their phones.

“You can just tap it,” I said to them. “Like this.”

The apparent matriarch of the group thanked me as if I had given her the answer to life itself. She herded her brood through the turnstiles, the dad busy with an important-sounding phone call.

I got to the platform just as my train screeched to a halt. I picked a relatively empty train car and sat down on the hard orange seat. Zack had given me some solid information about this Damon character. Now, I just needed those messages so I could figure out if there were any other leads tucked away inside the horny sexts. The train sped through the underground tunnels of the concrete jungle. I started to search for Damon’s online presence, using the screen name Zack had given me as a

jumping-off point.

His adult-oriented pages ranked first. I decided not to click them since the old lady sitting next to me had wandering eyes and would likely pass out if I opened up the wrong video. I clicked on a blog link instead, the same username being used to post what appeared to be benign product recommendations.

The train stopped at a station. The momentum pushed the older woman against me. She mumbled an apology and stood to exit.

Eli lived only a couple blocks away from here. My stop wasn't for another six or so minutes...

I followed the woman out and up the stairs, exiting the station.

The sounds of the city enveloped me—cars honking, people chatting, a baby screeching. I walked down the street, past a busy bakery, the smell of fresh baked cookies drifting out of the dark blue door.

I walked as if on autopilot mode. My feet carried me past a corner store, turning, walking down a quieter street, toward Eli's apartment building.

I rationalized it by considering this part of the investigation. I wanted to circle the building, make sure there weren't any areas someone could easily break in through. Eli's apartment windows looked out to the street, so I could also possibly get a glance inside. I had already deleted the security camera app, so I wasn't tempted to open that.

...

Fucking hell, what was I thinking? What if he was getting home and spotted me

staking out his place? There were already too many “coincidences” between us. I just wanted to keep him safe, to keep an eye on him, but I didn’t want to scare him in the process.

This... this obsession was growing inside me like a malignant tumor, shifting from cell to cell. It was a hostile takeover of my entire body and mind. The seed had already been planted months ago when I first started watching Eli online, and that seed experienced explosive growth the moment Eli’s dick pushed inside me.

I stopped at a crosswalk. His building was just ahead. I was going to turn around and walk home when my phone vibrated in my pocket. It was a text from Eli.

ELI: Are you busy?

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Chapter 16

Elijah Grant

Benji and I stood in line, waiting to be let into the theater. I had won these tickets through a lottery earlier today. My first instinct was to ask Zack if he wanted to come with, but when he told me he couldn't make it because of school, I figured I should probably cancel. I didn't love the idea of going by myself. I enjoyed having company with me, especially now that I was dealing with a stalker. The thought of venturing out on my lonesome wasn't exactly empowering or exciting; it was the complete opposite.

But then there was Mr. Handsome and Masked Detective, who had given me one of the best nights of my goddamn life. I wondered if maybe inviting him to a Broadway show was a little too forward, too romantic. We'd spent the night fucking at a masked orgy, after all. Would he think it was weird of me to invite him?

I decided to find out.

I said "fuck it" and sent him a text. I tried to manage my expectations. Didn't want to get too excited, even though my dick didn't appear to get the same memo. Maybe it was a mistake inviting him just for the simple fact that I'd have a permanent erection around him. And the last thing I needed was for my dick to fall off because it was hard longer than four hours.

So to help with that, I jerked off before meeting Benji, hoping that would help satiate some of the lust he stirred up in me.

Spoiler alert: it didn't. I was currently standing in line with a half chub in my jeans, my briefs feeling extra tight.

Who could blame me? Benji looked so fucking hot. He was dressed casually in a white T-shirt with the sleeves rolled, a pair of dark jeans, and clean white sneakers, and a golden bracelet topped off the look. What made him even hotter, though, was what he had underneath his clothes: a thick cock, a juicy ass, full balls, a furry chest, and a sexy stomach.

Annnnd fuck. I was fully hard now. I stuffed a hand in my pocket and made sure to hold it down before I was stopped by security for trying to smuggle in a loaded weapon.

"Thanks again for the invite. I've been meaning to come see this show since it opened."

"I'm glad you could come. I thought you might have been tired of me after spending the entire night together."

"Are you kidding? I doubt I could ever get enough of you."

I chuckled at that, trying to play it cool, even though my insides turned into mush.

"So I take it that means you had fun?"

"I did, if you couldn't tell after the third time I turned you into a sticky mess."

"Good. Definitely a night to remember."

"We should have some more of those," Benji suggested, almost nonchalantly. I swallowed and nodded. Something caught in my chest, a flicker of flame sticking to my ribs as if they were made of dry tinder. I was only just getting to know Benji, but

there was no denying the giddy sensations and intense attraction that arose when he was around.

Benji was a grounding force. A sexy one. I liked that. I wanted to explore that and him.

We reached the front of the line and were checked by security before being allowed into the luxurious lobby. Classic chandeliers hung from golden coffered ceilings. Thick red velvet draped the walls behind the concession stand. We went there first and ordered two glasses of wine.

“Well, there goes my down payment on a house,” I joked, lifting my extremely expensive glass of wine and clinking it against Benji’s.

“At least they fill the glass.”

“Ah, so you’re a glass-half-full kind of guy.”

“I am, I am.” Benji smiled as we walked through the buzzing crowd and into the theater. An usher pointed us to our seats—front and center orchestra, giving us a great and up-close view of the entire stage.

“Do you come to see shows often?” Benji asked as we took our seats.

“I went through a phase when that’s all I ever did. I’d show up for rush tickets and try to buy them cheap that same day. Didn’t matter if it was a show I’d seen a hundred times already. Then I got pretty beat up trying to pursue Broadway myself that I started almost resenting it. This is the first time I’ve been back in months.”

“Really? Wow. Well, rejection is just redirection. Maybe you had to be turned away from all the other roles because the role that’s about to make you is coming up.” He

reached over and casually placed his hand on my leg, gently squeezing.

“That’s... really nice. Thank you. I don’t think I’ve been able to see it that way.”

He put it so simply. It cut through all the negative emotions, the self-sabotaging, the boo-hooing.

Rejection is redirection.

The royal blue curtains rose, and the lights dimmed in the theater as the show officially began. It started with a campy singing number that had the main actor swinging from a giant disco ball. It was an entertaining way to start the show. I would have appreciated it more if Benji’s hand wasn’t resting on my leg, his fingers awfully close to my crotch. I stretched my legs and readjusted myself in the seat, and his hand magically landed directly between my legs.

He started to rub. My cock throbbed at the attention. I glanced to my left, but the man sitting next to me was completely engrossed in the show.

Benji squeezed. Pleasure made my toes curl inside my sneakers. The stage and the actors and the entire theater started to disappear. All that was left was Benji’s hand on my stiff dick, slowly rubbing it through my jeans.

He leaned toward me and whispered, “This okay?”

“Mhmm,” I responded, making my cock push up against his palm.

I swallowed, keeping my eyes on the performance but my attention focused on my cock. I placed my hands on top of his, holding the playbill, giving Benji a little more cover. I didn’t want someone getting up to use the bathroom and spotting the way Benji’s hand was massaging my cock through my jeans. I bit my lip, trying to keep

my breathing even, but fuck, he knew what he was doing. His fingers traced slow, teasing circles over my length, pressing just hard enough to make me ache for more.

On stage, the cast launched into a big ensemble number, but my focus was completely shot. Every nerve in my body was trained on the way Benji's palm cupped me, squeezed me, the slow stroke of his fingers edging me to full-blown desperation.

I glanced at him. He wasn't even pretending to watch the show anymore—his gaze was locked on me, lips slightly parted, expression smug as hell.

Fucking tease.

I shifted in my seat, gripping his wrist to still him before I lost all control and started grinding up into his hand like some desperate cock-hungry whore. "Intermission," I whispered, my voice tight with need. "We're finding a bathroom."

I had enough theater decorum for that, at least.

Benji smirked. "I like the way you think."

The second the house lights came up for intermission, I grabbed his hand and tugged him into the aisle. People were already stretching, standing, chatting. No one paid us any attention as we slipped toward the back of the theater and out into the lobby.

I led him toward the restrooms, my pulse hammering, cock already straining against my jeans. The men's room was busy, but I spotted a single-occupancy stall toward the end. I yanked Benji inside and locked the door. The walls of the stall went all the way to the floor, so we didn't have to worry about getting called out.

He barely had time to lean back against the wall before I was on my knees, fumbling

with his belt, popping the button of his jeans, yanking the zipper down. “Fuck,” Benji breathed, his hands pressing into my hair as I shoved his jeans down just enough to free his cock.

Thick. Hard. Heavy.

My mouth watered at the sight of it, the flushed tip already glistening with precum.

I licked my lips, then ran my tongue along the underside of his shaft, slow and deliberate, savoring the way his cock twitched under my touch. Benji let out a low groan, his fingers tightening in my hair. His scent flooded through me. Manly, musky. Made me even more hungry for his taste.

“Eli,” he rasped. “You’re fucking perfect.”

I hummed against him before parting my lips and sinking down, taking him deep, letting the thick heat of him stretch my mouth. His taste flooded my tongue—salty, intoxicating.

I started slow, hollowing my cheeks as I bobbed my head, savoring the weight of him on my tongue, the warmth of his cock in my mouth. He cursed under his breath, his hips jerking slightly as I took him deeper, inch by inch, until the tip nudged the back of my throat.

The door rattled slightly as he braced himself against it, breathing heavily. “Jesus, Eli.”

I moaned around his cock, the vibration making his hips buck. He barely caught himself from outright fucking my mouth, his fingers flexing against my scalp, torn between letting me work him at my own pace and giving in to the obvious need clawing through him.

I flicked my tongue along the slit, tasting his precum, and then took him deeper, sucking hard as I relaxed my throat. His thighs tensed. His breath hitched.

“God, you’re gonna make me?—”

I sucked harder.

Benji choked on a groan, his body going taut as his cock throbbed against my tongue. He came with a sharp exhale, spilling hot and thick down my throat. I swallowed greedily, sucking him through it until he finally tugged me off with a shaky breath.

“Fuck, Eli.” He laughed, still breathless. I got back up to my feet and kissed him, knowing he could taste himself. He broke from the kiss with a chesty moan, his hands cupping the sides of my face. “That was?—”

The sound of a sudden commotion outside cut him off.

The loud chatter of the crowd had shifted—people were murmuring now, voices laced with confusion. Then, without warning, a bright white light started flashing through the bathroom.

I looked to Benji. “What the fuck?” My stomach dropped. That wasn’t normal.

I wiped my lips as Benji adjusted his jeans. We barely had time to compose ourselves before a voice came over the loudspeaker:

“Ladies and gentlemen, we need to ask everyone to remain calm. Authorities are investigating a situation. Please stay in your seats.”

Shit.

Talk about a mood killer.

Benji's whole demeanor changed in an instant, his usual easy confidence sharpened into something deadly serious. His eyes flickered to mine, questioning. The spicy moment we'd just shared quickly became overshadowed by a sinking feeling of dread in my gut.

"We need to go back out there," he murmured, already pushing the door open.

The moment we stepped into the main lobby, the tension was thick. People were huddled in groups, glancing around, whispering. Then I saw them—police officers moving in from the main entrance.

Benji went still.

"What the fuck is going on?" I whispered. I scanned the crowd when I locked eyes with someone I recognized. My entire body went numb. I immediately turned around and leaned into Benji's side. "Turn to your left. Guy with the red hat," I said, squeezing his hand. "I think that's Damon."

I could feel Benji go even more tense.

And then I heard someone say it—low, urgent, barely above a whisper.

Bomb threat.

A sharp chill raced through my spine. The entire theater suddenly felt too small, the walls too close. My breath hitched.

Could this be... was it because of me?

Benji's grip found my wrist, firm, grounding. "Stay with me," he murmured. His eyes locked onto the nearest exit. Calculating.

People were starting to stir. Nervous energy crackled through the crowd. A few had already pulled out their phones; some appeared to be recording the situation.

"Ladies and gentlemen," an officer stepped forward and shouted over the growing chaos. "We need to begin an orderly evacuation. Please move toward the nearest exit. Do not run. Do not push."

But the second the word "evacuation" left his mouth, panic erupted.

Someone bolted for the door. Others started shoving forward, voices rising in frantic urgency.

I grabbed onto Benji's arm, my pulse hammering. "What do we do?"

He was already moving, his grip tightening on my wrist as he led me toward the side exit, fast but controlled. His entire body thrummed with focus.

"We get the fuck out," he said, his voice clipped. "Now."

The crowd was growing more chaotic, tension hitting a breaking point. The officers tried to keep order, but the panic had already taken root.

My heart pounded.

Benji's fingers squeezed mine.

And then?—

A loud, piercing alarm blared through the theater.

The evacuation turned into a stampede.

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Chapter 17

Benji Morrison

My only goal was to keep Elijah safe. To get us both out of the theater and as far away from the threat as possible. But when the crowd burst into a run, that job became much, much more difficult. Someone knocked against me. Another ran between Elijah and me, breaking my hold on his hand. He reached out to grab it again but was pushed to the side, away from the exit.

The cops were trying to regain the peace, but it was a lost cause. Everyone was terrified that they were moments away from being blown to bits.

Fear tried to sink its gnarled claws into my chest, but I fought it off. Had to keep my mind clear.

Had to protect Eli.

I shouldered someone out of the way and pushed toward the wall where Elijah was plastered. He couldn't fight the flow of panicked people.

"Benji!"

"Everyone remain calm!"

"I'm coming," I shouted, almost reaching him just as the lights flickered before shutting completely off. Emergency lights flared white, casting a ghostly glare on the

scared expressions. The alarm continued to blare, every ring feeling like a hammer against my skull, trying to knock me out.

“Come on,” I said, reaching Eli and grabbing his hand again. We began to move with the flow of evacuees instead of against. Every second counted. This was likely a false alarm, but there was no need for us to find out. Elijah’s hand squeezed mine so tight I was sure I’d be getting some type of hairline fracture before he let it go.

The first breath of fresh air tasted like heaven, even with the sewer grate pumping out steam only a few feet away from us. The flow of people split in different directions down Broadway. I yanked us to the left and toward the bright lights that marked Times Square.

Elijah looked over his shoulder as we hurried down the street. Even people who weren’t in the theater were beginning to run with the crowd, sensing that something was wrong. Police sirens echoed between the skyscrapers as a bomb squad squeezed through the congested streets, pushing cabs and delivery trucks nearly onto the sidewalk.

Times Square—normally chaotic even on a good day—was packed to the brim with frightened and confused people, a mix of tourists trying to get selfies in front of the massive screens, other people shouting to run and to get out of the way, and knock-off Disney characters in dirty masks asking for money. Spider-Man lifted up his mask, looked at the large group of police trying to regain control, and said, “Fuck this shit,” before running past us.

“This way,” I said, breaking away from the scared flock of people. “We can take the train to my place.”

“Hold on,” Eli said, his hand squeezing mine. “I don’t think I can get on a train right now. Or any enclosed space.”

“That’s fine. Totally fine. We can walk it.”

“Sorry.”

“For what?” I asked.

“Well, one for making you walk, two for making you come to the theater, and three... I can’t help but think this had something to do with Nomad.”

That had been a thought that crossed my mind, too, but I didn’t want to say anything before getting confirmation. The last thing I wanted was for Elijah to think any of this was his fault. “Let’s just focus on getting home and getting safe. We can figure out the rest later.”

Eli let out a heavy sigh. My heart cracked for him. The protective lion inside of me roared to life. If I could get my hands on this Nomad person, I’d wrap them around their neck and squeeze tight until the light leaked from their eyes and the last of their breaths squeaked out of their throat. It was infuriating in ways I hadn’t experienced before. Never once in my seven years of being a detective had I been this personally invested in a case. I knew the logical thing would be to take a step back. Put some distance between me and Elijah so I could think clearly and work more efficiently.

But that was the last thing I wanted.

We walked in silence for a few more blocks, Elijah likely processing the events. I kept my attention on our surroundings, making sure no one had followed us from the theater. There hadn’t been any sounds of an explosion, so I had to assume that it was a false alarm.

We reached my apartment building after about twenty minutes of walking. “How are you feeling?” I asked as we reached my front door.

“Better after getting fresh air.” He offered me a weak but genuine smile. His lips were glossy from the lip balm he’d applied minutes earlier.

Fuck. I wanted to lean in and kiss him. Would that have crossed a line? How odd, this human experience of ours. This man had been balls-deep inside me, fucking me senseless and filling me up with multiple loads, and yet here I was, wondering if he’d be freaked-out if I kissed him.

Fuck it.

I made a choice. Maybe it wasn’t the smartest, but it was the one I wanted to make. I leaned in and kissed him. Short and quick and full of flavor. Strawberry, to be exact.

When we broke apart, I half expected him to look confused, but instead, that genuine smile of his only grew wider. He licked his lips, gaze turned up to lock with mine. “What was that for?” he asked.

“I couldn’t resist. Sorry. Blame it on the adrenaline.”

“Adrenaline, huh? If that’s the case, then damn, I’m an adrenaline junkie.”

I laughed, the sound almost foreign after everything that happened tonight. I opened the door and let Lucky run out, tail wagging and claws clicking against the floor. We got his leash on and took him for a quick walk around the block. We were standing on a corner talking about random bullshit when Eli surprised me by initiating another kiss, going up on his tiptoes and pressing his lips against mine with a soft moan.

“Sorry,” he said, wiping his lips with a thumb. “Adrenaline.”

“I wonder what the evolutionary purpose of that is.”

“Huh?”

“Why adrenaline makes people horny. Were the cavemen running from saber-toothed tigers and then being like, ‘We made it out alive, let’s fuck’?”

“Probably. That’s what I’d do, anyway. Celebrate life and release some endorphins. Why not?”

“True, true,” I said, my thoughts shifting into caveman territory. We’d basically just survived our own saber-toothed tiger attack, so did that mean it was time for us to fuck like rabbits? My cock twitched at the thought, even though Eli had just swallowed my load not that long ago.

Ugga, ugga.

Back in my place, I went straight for the fridge. Eli was still in the living room, so I quickly pulled out the vodka bottle, uncapped it, took a chug, shook it off, took another shot, and then recapped the bottle.

There, that’d help take some of the edge off.

I put the vodka back in the freezer and grabbed a wine bottle instead. A little classier. I uncorked it and filled two glasses. Some of it sloshed out of the glass, splashing on the counter. I wiped it clean before I walked back out to the living room, finding Eli sitting cross-legged on the floor with Lucky curled up in his lap.

“You two look comfortable,” I said, setting Eli’s glass of wine down on the coffee table in front of him.

“He’s such a cuddle bug.”

“He’s a good pup.” I sat down at the edge of the couch. Eli lifted his glass and clinked it against mine. “Cheers to...”

“To another unforgettable night,” Eli finished, sarcastic and smiling.

I tried not to think about how momentous this was.

Elijah Grant, the man I’d been fixated on through a computer screen for months on end, was currently sitting on my floor, breathing my air, comfortable in my space.

Weird how life worked.

“We’ve had quite a few unforgettable nights already, huh?”

Eli let out a huff. “Feels like we’ve lived lifetimes together now.”

“Sure has.”

“I was so happy about tonight, too. Excited. I hadn’t been to the theater in so fucking long. And I couldn’t even finish the show. Ugh, it was so good, too.”

“It was. Had me cracking up. Intermission also wasn’t bad,” I said, nudging him with my knee. He shot me a smirk.

“I agree. Can’t tell what I liked more, if I’m being honest, intermission or the show itself.”

“We’ll just have to go back and finish it,” I said. “That way, you have more to base your judgment on.”

Eli laughed at that, scratching Lucky’s head. “Thanks for coming with, by the way. I

know it was last minute. I'm just used to always going with someone to things. It would usually be my sister. She loved Broadway, but, well, yeah."

"I'll gladly join you on anything. Besides, I don't think you should be alone these days."

He dropped his gaze to the wineglass in his hand. "Yeah... you're right."

"You mentioned your sister. You two close?"

"Pfft, hell no. We used to be. She used to be my best friend. Older than me by only a year, so we were pretty much always together."

"What happened?"

"A man happened. She started dating this crazy, controlling douchebag. My sister—she always had the biggest heart—but she also had terrible judgment in character and would always end up with the worst kind of people. She fell in with this guy, a gang leader, and she completely changed. And—forget it, it's too fucked-up to even say." There was a tightness in his voice that made my heart crack.

Why was his life so full of people who wanted to hurt him?

It made me unreasonably angry.

"What happened?" I asked.

"It was the first time meeting him. At a Christmas Eve party. My parents were cooking the pig, the eggnog was flowing, the Christmas songs were blasting. It was great. Until he realized I was gay, that's when shit hit the fan. He started telling my sister to 'get the fag out before he did it himself.' And he was clearly carrying a

concealed gun because his hand would float over his hip when he said that.”

My fists clenched. Red filtered through my vision. “Seriously? What did your sister do?”

“She tried to get him to shut up at first. I could tell she was uncomfortable. But he wouldn’t stop. And then my mom was getting scared. I was about to leave, but my sister and her boyfriend left first. I haven’t talked to her since. It’s been almost seven years now.” He swirled his wine and chugged a heavy gulp.

“Fuck,” I said. “Toxic masculinity is a fucking plague.”

“It really is. What was he so scared of? That he’d catch the gay by talking to me? That I’d suddenly snap and lunge for his dick with my mouth? Like... what the fuck?”

“I think it comes from a deep unhappiness and an insecurity. They see someone like you living their fully authentic life, and they become reminded about all the shit they’re suppressing, all the joy they’re missing out on, just to play that typical ‘masculine’ role.” I shook my head, the anger still bubbling inside me. “Either that, or he’s a closet case and was upset he was fantasizing about being with you and not your sister.”

“We do look kind of similar.”

I laughed at that, although there was an obvious gloom in the air now.

“How ‘bout you? I want to know more about your family situation. I know you had difficulties with your parents...” Eli asked. He gently nudged Lucky off his lap and moved to sit on the couch directly next to me. The cushion sunk and pushed my leg against his.

Hah. My family situation. “Difficulties, that’s funny. It’s a fucking shitshow.”

“Really? Damn, sorry.”

I wasn’t entirely used to talking about my parents like this. My close friends, the few that I had, all knew about my family life, and it was never discussed with any of the random guys I’d dated over the years. None of them ever wanted to get that deep.

So bringing it up with Elijah felt odd but also rewarding. Like I was giving him a piece of me in the same way he had just done. “My dad basically lost everything we owned with his gambling. We moved into my grandma’s two-bedroom apartment in Jersey. I slept on the shittiest pull-out bed in the living room from when I was eight to about fifteen. I think my back is permanently fucked because of it.” Memories of those days flashed into my mind like footage from a grainy video recording. Details weren’t easy to make out, but general scenes were.

My mom and grandmother getting into a shouting match on my birthday. A wine bottle shattering. My mom’s hand bleeding buckets onto the floor. More shouting.

My dad turning his anger out on me after he had a terrible night on the poker table, smacking me repeatedly with a sandal until I was black and blue because I was a wild teenager who had the audacity to ask him if I could hang out with a friend.

My best friend at the time, Michael, taking me into his home. He was my knight in shining armor, my first true support, and my first-ever obsession. I started to excel in school, gained weight, didn’t smell like shit all the time because I had a washer and dryer that actually worked. I remembered how his father being a detective was what pushed me into my career.

Michael... He was someone I couldn’t talk about. What had happened to us, to him—it still hurt far too much. Like saying his name would sink a serrated knife

straight down my throat.

“Now my dad’s dead and my mom is who the fuck knows where

Elijah’s expression softened. “Shit. I’m sorry, Benji.”

I took a slow sip of my wine, using the moment to gather myself. “Don’t be. He made his bed. It’s not like we ever had a great relationship to begin with.” I let out a humorless chuckle. “Pretty sure the last words he ever said to me were something along the lines of ‘you’re a fucking disgrace’ before he lost everything in one last, desperate gamble.”

Eli exhaled, tilting his head as he studied me. “That’s really fucked-up.”

“Yeah, well. It is what it is.” I kept my voice light, but I could feel the old weight pressing against my ribs. My dad had been a piece of shit, plain and simple. I didn’t miss him. Didn’t mourn him.

At least, that’s what I told myself.

“And the last time I tried reaching out to my mom, she told me to fuck off, so...”

Elijah frowned, his thumb tracing the rim of his wineglass. “People are so fucking cruel.”

“Yeah.” I let out a slow breath, forcing myself to shake off the dark memories. “But, hey, it worked out in the end. I got out, made my own life.”

Elijah smiled, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. “You’re a good guy, Benji.”

I scoffed, taking a sip of wine. “Debatable.”

“No, really.” His voice softened. “The fact that you turned all that shit into something good? That you’re out here helping people, protecting them?” His gaze flickered over me, lingering for a moment too long. “I don’t think you give yourself enough credit.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. So I just took another sip of wine.

We lapsed into silence, comfortable and unforced. Elijah shifted on the couch, stretching his legs and leaning against me. His warmth bled through my shirt, and before I could think too much about it, I slung my arm over the back of the couch, letting him tuck himself against my side.

It was so fucking easy.

Too easy.

“So,” Eli said. “Do you think you’d come see another show with me sometime?”

I chuckled at that. As if there was somewhere I wouldn’t go with this man. “Of course. Do you have any you want to see?”

“I’ve been really excited about One Last Stop. And It Devours looks good too. That one has crazy practical effects.”

“Let’s do both then,” I said as I tried not to focus on the intense heat that radiated out from the spot where Eli’s hand rested against my leg. “Although I think I may have to wear a chastity belt so we could focus on the show.”

Eli’s laughter sent soft vibrations through my chest. “How about a cock cage?”

I arched a brow. “Are you into those?”

“Nah, I don’t think I’d try it on myself. I like playing with my dick too much.”

“Ok good because I like playing with your dick, too.”

His fingers idly trailed over my thigh, barely grazing, teasing. My body responded immediately, heat curling low in my stomach.

Fuck, he knew exactly what he was doing.

“What’s the kinkiest thing you’ve ever done?” Eli asked.

“I think the masked parties. Then probably getting jerked off in the middle of a crowded theatre.” My blood started to simmer. “You?”

“I’m surprisingly pretty vanilla. I did try puppy play once. That was fun.”

“Were you the pup?”

“One night yes, one night no. It was... interesting. And hot.”

“I bet,” I said, already getting hard. I turned slightly, my nose brushing against his temple, breathing him in. “Anything you do is hot.”

Elijah smirked, eyes flicking up to mine. “Oh really?”

His fingers slid higher, dragging over my inner thigh, inching toward my already half-hard cock.

I exhaled sharply, shifting my hips, spreading my legs just enough to encourage him.

“Careful, Eli.”

“Or what?” His smirk deepened, his voice a low, teasing hum. “You’ll punish me, Detective?”

A growl rumbled in my throat. “You really wanna find out?”

His hand pressed between my legs, palming my growing bulge. “Yeah,” he whispered. “I really do.”

I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him in, crushing our mouths together. He tasted like heaven. The kiss was sweet and needed relief after the chaos of tonight. He moaned into the kiss, his fingers tightening over my cock, rubbing slow, firm circles over my jeans.

Fuck, I needed him. Needed to have him against me, feel his naked body on mine.

I pushed him back against the couch, my mouth trailing down his throat, nipping at the sensitive skin. His breath hitched, his hips thrusting up into me. He was already as hard as I was.

“You like that?” I murmured against his jaw.

He nodded, eyes filled with lust. “Yeah.”

I grinned, slipping my hand under his shirt, my fingers trailing up his stomach. “Good. ’Cause I’m just getting started.”

I dipped my head, about to mouth over his nipple?—

His phone vibrated against the coffee table.

Elijah groaned. “Fuck, ignore it.”

But the screen lit up again. Another buzz. Then another.

Three rapid messages.

I frowned. Not normal.

Elijah sighed, reaching for the phone. “Better not be Zack asking me if I’m still alive.”

I leaned back, still hovering over him as he swiped open the message. The second his eyes skimmed the screen, his entire body went rigid. A sharp chill prickled down my spine.

“What?” I asked. “What is it?”

Elijah swallowed hard, voice barely above a whisper. “It’s from an unknown number.”

I sat up straighter. “What does it say?”

Elijah hesitated, his grip tightening around the phone. Then, slowly, he turned the screen toward me.

UNKNOWN: Did you enjoy the show? I thought the ending was explosive.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:27 am

Chapter 18

Elijah Grant

My stomach twisted into a tight knot. I sucked in a deep breath to try and fight the wave of nausea that crashed over me as I read the text message.

The bomb threat was because of me. Nomad had known I'd be at the theater and must have called it in. I was the cause behind tonight's chaos and fear.

Me.

Holy shit.

"Bathroom?" I asked as I shot up to my feet.

"First door on your left," Benji answered me with clear concern written all over his face.

I bolted in the direction he pointed me to. I barreled into the bathroom, yanked open the toilet, dropped to my knees with a crack against the bathroom floor, and threw up everything in my stomach. Tears slid down my cheeks. The porcelain was cold and smooth against my hands. I heard footsteps behind me and considered closing the door, but Benji stepped inside before I could.

"I'm good," I said, clearly sounding

He crouched down next to me and started to rub my back. It was equal parts comforting and embarrassing.

“Sorry,” I said, wiping my mouth with the back of my forearm. I avoided Benji’s gaze as I stood and moved to the sink. “Mind if I borrow some mouthwash?”

“Not at all,” he said. He leaned against the doorframe, head turned down toward his feet. “And please don’t feel guilty about any of this. This is far, far , out of your control.”

“Is it, though? I’ve been such an irresponsible fuck. I put everyone—including you—in danger at that theater tonight. I should have known better. I thought...”

I thought since I was with you, I’d be safe.

“You can’t lock yourself up in your bedroom and stop living your life because of this sicko.”

“I just feel so fucking helpless. And scared. And so fucked. This person basically has a tracker on me, and I have no idea—Damon. Damon was at the theater... I think it was him, at least. The flashing lights kind of threw me off.”

“Damon is that other performer, correct?”

“Yeah, he’s usually on cam whenever I’m on. I don’t pay attention to the rankings or anything, but I know he does. He’s messaged me before about how jealous he is that I always pull in the most viewers.”

I turned to face Benji. He had his arms crossed as he chewed on his bottom lip. “What do you say we pour another glass of wine and put on our investigative caps tonight? Would that help?”

“You mean work together?” I asked, a flicker of hope breaking through the cloud of fear and nausea that still clung to me.

“Yeah,” Benji said softly. “Let’s figure out who this asshole really is. We’ll put all the clues together and get a clearer picture. You don’t have to do this alone, Eli.”

My heart jerked. I knew he meant that. He wasn’t just saying it to be comforting or polite. Benji genuinely wanted to help me. It made my chest feel too tight, and I realized it wasn’t fear or anxiety. It was the warm, overwhelming feeling of being cared for.

“Okay.” I nodded, my voice steadier now. “Let’s open that wine and get to work, Detective.”

Benji’s lips curved into a faint smile. “I like the sound of that.”

We exited the bathroom and went back into the living room. He poured us each a fresh glass of wine, and we settled onto the couch, Lucky curled up on the soft rug beneath our feet. I took a long sip of my drink, letting the alcohol settle in my system and chase away the lingering dread. It was a tasty pinot grigio, crisp and slightly fruity. It mingled with the mint left over from the mouthwash.

“So,” Benji said, propping his laptop on his knees. “Let’s start with what we know. You think Damon might have been at the theater tonight?”

I nodded. “I can’t be sure, but I swear I saw him. He was in the crowd, and then he disappeared when everything went to shit.”

“Has he ever threatened you before? Or crossed any serious lines?”

“No direct threats,” I said, chewing on my lip. “But he’s made it pretty clear he

resents me. He'll send these passive-aggressive messages or leave comments on my streams like 'Some of us have to work twice as hard for half the attention.' Stuff like that. I always just ignored it."

Benji's fingers flew across the keyboard as he pulled up Damon's social media profiles and linked accounts. "I've already dug around for info about him, but it never hurts to search again... Looks like he's pretty active in a few performer forums."

I leaned closer, our shoulders pressing together as I skimmed through the posts. "Yeah. This is one of the main places we all network and talk business things. I've seen him on here a lot."

Benji clicked on one thread that Damon had started. The subject line read: When Some People Get All the Luck. It was a long, bitter rant about how "certain cam boys" were only successful because they got lucky or sold out. The responses were all telling him that his turn would come, that he just had to put in the work to attract viewers, that he couldn't compare himself to others.

"Jesus," I muttered. "He was really spiraling, huh?"

Benji scrolled down to a comment from Damon: It makes me sick. Some people don't deserve the success they get. I'd do anything to take them down a level.

"Could be nothing," Benji said, frowning. "But that's a hell of a lot of anger."

"I don't know," I whispered. "I've got this bad feeling like he's involved somehow. But there's something else I can't shake..."

"What is it?"

I rubbed my hands over my face, trying to piece together the thoughts swirling in my

head. “He’s angry, but he doesn’t seem like the type who’d actually do something this extreme. I think there’s more going on here. Someone else pulling the strings, maybe?”

Benji nodded slowly. “Let’s check his other posts. If he’s working with someone, maybe there’s a clue.”

We spent the next hour combing through Damon’s online presence, looking for patterns, connections, any name that stood out. My eyelids grew heavy, and the wine made my body feel warm and loose. Despite the fear still clinging to my chest, I felt safe here.

Protected.

Benji was the most solid, grounding presence I’d ever had. I leaned against him, resting my head on his shoulder as he used a website I’d never heard of to scrub the internet, looking for Damon’s presence. His arm slid around me, holding me close. It was comforting. Natural. Like we’d done this a thousand times before.

“Is there anyone else besides Damon and Nomad that interacts with you frequently online?” Benji asked.

“There is one person. NightOwl. But he’s never given me any signs that he wanted to hurt me. The complete opposite, actually—he’s been one of my biggest supporters. I basically consider him a friend. He books a lot of private shows, and we just chat with each other. Hell, he even pointed me toward Stonewall Investigations when I told him about my problems.”

“Really?” Benji asked with a curious grunt.

“Yeah. I know it’s not smart to really foster connections online right now, but I do

think he's genuine."

"Interesting."

"If you go to my profile and search his username, you'll see he's one of my top gifters, too."

Benji closed out of the website he was on and opened up another window. He pulled up my profile and typed in my name. NightOwl appeared on my wall of fame. Before he clicked on the username, he lifted his arms and stretched. It nearly knocked over his laptop, but I managed to grab it before it fell to the floor.

"Nice save," Benji said.

"I can say the same thing about you," I replied, winking at him. Part of me was still on high alert from the bomb threat, but there was another side of me that buzzed with a powerful electric current. It seemed to originate from where Benji's knee rested against mine. I cuddled against him, enjoying how solid and real he felt. My dick gave a twitch against my thigh as I thought about what else we could do on this couch aside from cuddle.

Except my exhaustion overpowered any other needs and urges my body may have had. I closed my eyes, breathing in his scent—something clean and woodsy that made me feel like everything might actually be okay.

"Thanks, Benji."

"For what?" His lips brushed against my hair.

"For being here. For keeping me safe. For making me feel like I'm not losing my mind."

“You’re not. You’re strong as hell, Eli. And I’m going to find out whoever this asshole is and make sure you don’t have to live your life in fear anymore..”

I sighed, letting myself melt into him, the warmth of his body lulling me into a peaceful haze. My heart pounded as I turned my head, brushing my lips against his throat.

“You don’t mind me staying the night?” I whispered.

Benji’s fingers tightened on my waist. “Of course not.”

Next, it was my turn to yawn. I stretched out my legs and rattled my entire body.

“Here, let’s lay down for a little bit.”

Benji moved his laptop onto the coffee table, and we shifted, lying down on the couch together. It was a big enough couch to comfortably fit us both. He cradled me in his arms, and I pressed my face against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

It was in that moment that I started to realize something: this wasn’t just about protection. This was different. Deeper.

Something I’d never felt before.

“You’re safe with me,” he whispered. “I’ve got you.”

I closed my eyes, letting his words wash over me, letting the warmth of his body pull me deeper into the comfort I’d been craving for so long.

I was safe.

And for the first time in weeks, even after everything that happened tonight, I finally believed it.

Chapter 19

Benji Morrison

The gym Eli took me to today was one of those fancy places with celebrities casually walking between machines, warm towels that were spritzed with eucalyptus, and personal trainers that looked like Greek gods. I didn't care much for all the glitz and the glam in a place where everyone should be sweaty and messy, but I could also see the appeal.

"Want to start with some cardio?" Eli asked. He looked like a damn snack today in tiny blue shorts and a black tank top, his hair having been freshly cut so that the blond curls were perfectly trimmed and styled.

"Sounds good to me," I said and followed Eli to the treadmills.

It had been a couple of weeks since the incident on Broadway. Maybe Nomad felt like they'd gone too far because they were lying low ever since the bomb threat. Eli hadn't had any more weird DMs or sketchy letters in his mailbox. Even then, I still told him to be more careful in the coming weeks. I wasn't sure if this silence was a precursor to good news or bad.

One of the things I asked Eli was to never go anywhere alone. It didn't matter if it was me with him or Zack or even his roommate, Fran. I just wanted someone around him as often as humanely possible. There was safety in numbers, and I didn't want Eli taking any unnecessary risks.

Something else that had changed since the bomb threat? Eli had been spending more and more nights at my place. It wasn't every night, but it was enough for me to take notice and leave me with a smile every time we went to bed together.

I loved those nights. The circumstances under which they happened weren't ideal—obviously—but fuck, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't happy with the way things were going.

Eli just... he had it all. He was funny, he was hot, he was passionate, he was intelligent, he was kind. Time flew by whenever he was around. Yes, a lot of that time was spent naked, our bodies doing most of the talking, but even when we weren't fucking, I found myself happier than I'd been in a long, long time.

It was almost frightening. The connection formed itself practically overnight. The last time I felt this drawn to someone was... well, it was Michael.

I uncapped my bottle and took a chug of the ice-cold water. Eli finished stretching and hopped onto the treadmill next to mine. They were pushed up against a window that looked out on the busy Fifth Avenue. Rain streaked down the glass as people huddled together under umbrellas and tossed on their hoods.

“What do you think about the gym? Like it?” Eli asked as he adjusted his settings on the treadmill.

“I do. I'm not used to working out in a place that offers complimentary massages after your workout.”

Eli laughed, flashing that megawatt grin that wrecked me every damn time. “Yeah, my membership is kind of a splurge, but I spend so much time here. Gotta stay fit.”

I raised a brow, keeping my tone light. “You trying to impress someone?”

He shot me a sideways look. “Maybe.”

I shook my head, chuckling. Fucking tease.

We settled into a steady pace, side by side. Neither of us was pushing ourselves today so we could keep the conversation flowing without being short of breath.

“What part of Jersey did you live in?” Eli asked.

“Paramus for a little bit until we moved in with my grandma in Newark. I was always out of the house by then, biking up and down the street with my best friend, Michael.”

“Sounds like a great way to get into some trouble.”

“Eh, we were pretty good kids. Only got in trouble for trespassing once, and it’s because Michael wanted to show me this cool tree house he found. Except it was in someone’s private yard. The homeowner came out wearing just underwear and holding a shotgun.”

“Holy shit. Jersey doesn’t play.”

“No, no they don’t,” I said, laughing. The memories of those days were warm and tinged with rose-colored gold. My life hadn’t been easy by any stretch of the imagination. I was a rebellious teen struggling in school and dealing with problems at home that could crack even the most stable of foundations. But hanging out with Michael helped me forget all of that. Our silly adventures were enough to lift me out of the pit of despair and depression my life had become.

Only for me to be tossed right back in once I lost him.

“Are you and your friend still close?”

Eli’s question was innocent enough, but I still nearly tripped over myself and went flying off the treadmill. “He passed when we were in our senior year of high school.”

And I was there to witness it all.

Holding Michael as he took his last, rattling, bloody breath... fuck. I braced myself on the sides of the treadmill. The rain kicked up, a flash of lightning reflecting off the windows of the building across the street.

“I’m so sorry,” Eli said. I sucked in a deep breath. My jaw clenched tight. So tight that I was scared I was seconds away from chipping a tooth. I forced myself to relax, stretching and massaging my jaw. Eli must have sensed it was a heavy topic for me because he didn’t dig any further.

Good.

Not that I wasn’t comfortable enough to talk to him about it. I just... I physically couldn’t speak about it. There was an invisible boulder lodged in my throat. It blocked the words from ever forming.

“Come,” Eli said, turning his machine off and slowing to a complete stop. “Let’s go work out some arms. Sound good?”

“Perfect.” I stopped my treadmill, grabbed my towel and water bottle, and followed Eli toward the weight room. The entire gym had the same vibes of a five-star resort. Expensive pale wood paneling, modern strips of bright lighting, accents of black and deep greens blended together to enhance the clean aesthetic. Everyone here looked like they were models or at least trying to break into the industry.

Yeah, it was no wonder this place cost three hundred dollars a month.

We found a pair of benches in the weight room that were unoccupied. As I was looking for dumbbells to work out with, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I grabbed it, my chest tightening when I saw the email header.

Background Check Results – Damon Reyes

Fuck.

I stopped next to the bench as Eli slid weights onto the bar, swiping to open the email. I'd requested this weeks ago, but I'd had the wrong last name initially, which had delayed the results.

The words practically leapt off the screen and smacked me across the face.

Restraining orders. Two of them.

Aggravated assault. Two charges.

A recent eviction.

No kind of education beyond a GED.

I clenched my jaw, scanning the details. Both restraining orders were from former partners of his—one cam boy, one dancer. Both had accused him of stalking, threats, and attempted assault.

“What is it?” Eli asked, towel draped around his neck as he wiped off his forehead.

“I got Damon’s background check back.”

“Can I see?”

My initial instinct was to say ‘yes’ to any kind of ask or demand Eli made. I’d drop to my knees and kiss his bare feet if he asked. But I didn’t see the need to freak him out. It was my job to hunt this Nomad down, and I felt like I was getting close to it. That’s all Eli had to know.

“I don’t want to give you more reasons to get spooked. Just know this puts me one step closer to figuring out who’s behind Nomad.”

Eli licked his lips. He looked skeptical, a small divot appearing between his blond brows. His forehead beaded with sweat, a drop of it sliding down the side of his face. “You not telling me is already making me spooked.”

“Just trust me.”

“I do trust you,” Eli said, cocking his head. The crystal blue eyes swam with questions. “Detective.”

He had said the word teasingly, and I gave him a playful roll of my eyes, although deep down, I was beginning to grow quite fond of the way he’d call me detective . It was becoming a pet name that also triggered a certain chain of reactions that started somewhere in my chest and ended down between my thighs.

“Go,” I said with a nod to the bench. “Finish up your set so I can jump in.” I mainly wanted him to stop thinking about Damon, but I also wanted to wrap up this gym session early. Maybe I could go and confront Damon before the day was over.

“Can you spot me?”

“Of course,” I said. Eli lay down on the bench and grabbed onto the bar, lining his

hands up and bracing his chest. The weight room in the gym wasn't as busy as the cardio section. There were four other people working out, all of them focused on their own routines.

Eli looked up at me. His devilish smirk was about a hundred degrees hotter from this angle. "Ready?" he asked.

"When you are."

With a grunt, he pushed the bar up and started to do his bench presses. I moved forward, my crotch only a couple of inches away from his face.

Damn... if this were a private gym, all I had to do was lower my shorts and my cock would be right at sucking level.

I ghosted my fingers underneath the bar in case he needed help getting it back up. Eli had it, though. He made it seem effortless, pumping up and down until he finished his set, his breathy grunts striking a match inside my core.

"Nice job. My turn," I said, swapping places with him. Eli took my spot and stood above me. It wasn't until I finished up my set that I realized there was something else besides his hands helping carry the weight of the bar.

Eli's bulge pressed against the steel rod. He wasn't at full mast, but he was definitely turned on by watching me work out.

Fucking hell.

My blood turned to liquid fire, scorching through my veins, hot and passionate.

I sat up on the bench, swallowed hard, glancing around the gym. "Eli?—"

My next thoughts were wrong. So fucking wrong. I should have kept my dick in my shorts, used the brain in my skull to make decisions. Except that brain was slightly altered by the two shots of vodka I downed before meeting Eli for the gym.

I figured it'd help loosen the muscles.

It also helped loosen the inhibitions.

“Does this place have showers?” I asked.

He gave a nod. “Private stalls. Big ones.”

His fingers brushed my shoulder, just enough to make my cock throb in my gym shorts.

Fuck.

This was wrong.

I should have been more focused on the fact that Damon was a dangerous piece of shit. That I had work to do. That we were in a public space. That I was falling hard for this man who had no idea about the lengths I took to make a moment like this even happen.

What would he do if he knew?

What would I do if he left because of it?

Would he...?

Eli smirked, tossing his towel over his shoulder, giving me a look that was pure

fucking sin. “The locker room’s this way.”

I was already off of the bench, following him.

The locker room was empty except for a guy blow-drying his hair by the sinks, oblivious to us as we quickly changed out of our clothes and wrapped warm towels around us. Eli, the tease that he was, took a little extra time wrapping his towel around his waist, letting me drool over his stiffening cock.

“You’re bad,” I said in a whisper as we slipped into the row of private showers. Eli pulled me into the farthest stall, locking the door behind us. We hooked our towels on the hanger before turning the water on.

“Quiet, Detective,” he whispered, pressing me against the cool tile.

His hands were already cupping my full balls, his lips ghosting over my jaw before he started to drop to his knees.

I let out a breath and gripped his arms, holding him up. “I’m hungry for your dick.” I swapped us around so that his back was against the onyx black tiles. His cock jutted out from between his legs, water dripping down his shaft, over his well-trimmed bush. It was a body I’d studied whenever I watched him online, memorizing the divots in his hips, the birthmarks around his chest, the tiny moon-shaped scar around his abdomen.

He grinned as I lowered myself down to the ground. The smooth black tiles were cold against my knees, but I didn’t care. I gripped Eli in a tight fist and slowly stroked, admiring how thick he was and how hard he felt. He licked his lips, eyes rolling back to his skull.

I wrapped my lips around him, sucking him deep in one smooth motion. Heat pooled

in my gut. His taste crashed over me, dragging me deep into his warm, inviting waters.

Fuck.

I may not have been sure of much in my life, but one thing I was sure of?

This man was going to be the death of me.

Chapter 20

Elijah Grant

Public play was pretty hot to me. Not really a surprise when I made a living off masturbating online for hundreds of people watching me. I was a horny guy, and I liked to have my fun, even if there were a few people just on the other side of the shower walls. The risk of getting caught made encounters like these exponentially more fun.

“Look at how hard you are,” Benji said over the sound of the shower. He knelt in front of me, holding my thick dick in both his hands, admiring it as if he’d just dug up a chunk of solid gold.

I gave him a hungry grin and pushed forward, urging him to take me into his mouth. I thought I was good with my lips, but Benji’s blowjobs were on an entirely different level. The way he swirled his tongue and swallowed me down to the base sent me directly past “Go” and straight to jail.

He licked the tip, sending a shudder down my spine, straight to my toes. He had one hand between his legs, casually stroking his hard cock. The view from up here was mesmerizing. I loved looking down to see him holding me in one hand and himself in the other. His balls hung heavy and low, ready to be drained onto the shower floor.

Yeah, I fucking loved being gay. I loved getting off with another man— especially one this hot, with absolutely explosive chemistry.

That was the silver lining to this whole “being stalked” bullshit I was dealing with. Yes, my anxiety was at an all-time high, but gah damn did I enjoy spending all my time with this steamy detective and having him protect me with that huge hammer he carried around with him in his pants.

“Suck it, baby.” I pushed my cock down Benji’s hungry throat, my hands pushing on the back of his head. I shut my eyes and relaxed against the shower wall. Every sliver of tension in my body evaporated as Benji deep-throated me, warm water from the shower falling on my side. Someone walked past our stall, sandals slapping against the floor. I heard the shower next to ours turn on.

My cock throbbed in Benji’s mouth. I looked down and locked eyes with the devilishly handsome detective, his mouth full of dick.

“That’s it,” I said, keeping my voice low. I started to thrust, fucking into his mouth. He jerked himself off faster. His lips were wrapped around my shaft, moving up and down, his tongue swirling and sliding. He didn’t hold back, using one hand to cup my tightening balls as he blew me.

He pulled off for air, leaving my body already craving for more. I helped him back onto his feet and crushed my mouth against his, wanting to taste myself on his tongue.

Salty, sweet, manly.

Our cocks rubbed together as the kiss deepened. A blazing hot inferno roared through me. I reached around and grabbed his ass in my hands, kneading his muscles, spreading him open. He groaned against my mouth as I trailed a finger over his hole. “I need you inside me,” he said, pushing back on my finger.

“Yeah? Show me,” I said, pressing down against his hole.

He licked his lips, relaxed his body, dropped his head back as my finger slid inside. I leaned in and kissed his neck, licking at the sensitive skin as I fingered him. His cock throbbed against mine.

Pleasure fried every circuit in my brain. All thoughts and logic slipped down the drain, replaced by a singular thing: dick.

Dick, dick, dick.

I needed to sink my dick inside him, had to feel his body stretching around mine. My finger wasn't enough. I had to fuck him.

"Turn around," I said, sliding my finger out of him. He smiled at me as he turned. I grabbed his hips and swapped places with him so that he faced the wall of the shower. He braced himself against the black tiles and arched his back, pushing his ass back.

"Fuck, you're so fucking sexy," I said, admiring the curves of his huge, hairy ass. I reached under and massaged his balls. "Your balls feel so full."

"Empty them out for me," he said. I wasn't sure if we were being too loud, but I didn't care. Let the guy next to us get a show.

"Let me get a taste of you first." I slowly dropped to my knees, rubbing Benji's thighs and ass before I spread his cheeks. His hole looked delicious. I leaned in and licked him, up and down, burying my face in his ass. His entire body quivered as my tongue worked him. Feeling him react to me like this drove me absolutely fucking wild. I half expected him to completely melt and slip down the drain.

"Fuck yeah," he said, pushing back onto my face. "That's it. Fuck yes, tongue my hole."

His wish was my command. I ate his ass like it was my last meal on this earth. I wanted his hole nice and warmed up, ready to take my cock without any pain. Being a good top was definitely a skill not everyone possessed.

Thankfully, for Benji, I possessed it.

I got back up, my knees popping loudly as I straightened my legs. My cock jutted out in the air, throbbing, aching to be buried inside Benji.

“Ready for me?” I asked, grabbing his hips and lining myself up with his hole.

He glanced over his shoulder, flames crackling in his dark eyes. “Yes, give it to me.”

I spit on my cock, rubbing it up and down my shaft. The stream of water from the showerhead was hitting my back now. Benji wiggled his ass, thick and juicy. I pushed forward, the head of my cock slipping inside him without too much resistance.

He sucked in a breath and bit down on a knuckle. I leaned forward and nipped at his earlobe. “That good?”

“Mhmm,” he said, arching his back even more, allowing me better access. I leaned back and watched my cock disappear in Benji’s ass. The intense heat that wrapped around me was enough to turn me into a pile of ash. I shut my eyes and stilled, relishing in the sensation of his tight walls gripping my cock.

“Fuck, Benji, you’re so goddamn tight.”

“And you’re so big.”

“Perfect combo.”

Benji pushed himself back, taking me all the way down to my balls. I groaned and rutted my hips. “It’s like we were made for each other,” Benji said, bracing himself on the wall with his forearm and using his free hand to jerk off.

“I have to agree,” I said. And I really did agree. I couldn’t explain it, but Benji truly did feel like he had fallen into my life by a generous dealing from the hand of fate. It was like the universe knew I was in for some difficult times, so she sent Benji along to soften the blows. I felt connected to this man in ways I hadn’t felt connected to anyone before.

And I wanted to show him just how connected to him I wanted to be.

I pulled back before thrusting forward again. Water splashed against me as I started to pick up the pace, fucking Benji harder and harder. The music and sounds of the shower were likely loud enough to cover the sound of skin slapping against skin, but if it wasn’t, then, well... I didn’t really care. I just wanted to keep fucking Benji, keep feeling this immense pleasure, keep giving him the same.

“Fuck, Benji, baby, fuuuuck , I’m so close,” I said in what could barely be described as a whisper.

“Me too.”

“You want it? Want me to come inside you?”

“Yes, Eli, please. Fill me up, please, Eli.”

The pleading was enough to push me over the edge. I plummeted into a world where only bliss existed. I rocked my hips forward and buried myself inside him. My entire body convulsed as I emptied my balls, giving him everything he had asked for. He gasped underneath me, his body twitching as his own orgasm shot through him.

We stayed as one for a few moments, catching our breaths. I embraced him, holding him tight, smiling against his neck as my cock softened inside him. “That was intense. Insane. I’m, like, holy shit. I can’t even speak.”

“My ass is that good, huh?” Benji asked.

I slowly (and sadly) pulled out of him. Benji turned around to face me. He placed a hand on my flushed chest, rubbing his thumb around my still-sensitive nipple. A shiver spread through my body, my cock continuing to drip.

“Your ass is fucking heaven,” I said. “But so is the rest of your body. You’re so... perfect. Shit, sorry, that’s weird, isn’t it?”

“Not at all. I’m just surprised you think that. I never really considered my body as perfect.”

“Well, it is,” I said, holding his hips and pulling him against me for a kiss. “Detective.”

He chuckled against my lips. “Should we get clean? Before we get kicked out.”

“Yeah, I think we should.” I kissed him again, then one more time. I couldn’t get enough of him. “Turn around. I’ll scrub your back.”

“You sure you’re not just telling me that so you can fuck me again?”

“Don’t give me any ideas,” I said.

* * *

“Well, don’t you look like a pig in shit,” Fran said as I walked to the kitchen for a

glass of water. She surprised me. I thought she had been off running errands.

“Huh?”

“Pig. Shit. Happy... or is it mud? I don’t know. You just look like you won the lotto.” She arched a thin eyebrow. “Did you? Because I have a Venmo account now. I had to make one for bingo club. Apparently, Cheyanne stopped using cash years ago. Something about being allergic to the paper, which I think is bullshit.”

“Who’s Cheyanne?”

“She’s the one who buys us all the drinks. Anyway, I had no idea sending—and receiving —money was so easy. Who woulda thunk?”

I chuckled at that. “Welcome to the future.” I spread my hands across the air and looked up at the ceiling.

“Love it here.” Fran went back to reading whatever she had on her phone before looking back up. “Oh! Before I forget, I don’t want you to see the footage later and be surprised, but I had to go into your room earlier. I was looking for the remote. Thought you might have taken it by accident.”

“Did I?”

“Nope,” she said with a laugh. “It was in my room the entire time.”

“And you’re calling me the remote thief. Wow.”

“Sorry, sorry. I need to be taking my vitamins. This brain of mine is getting flimsy.”

“And by vitamins?”

“I mean weed. Yes. Nature’s green boost.”

I smiled at her and started toward my room. “Let me know if you want to smoke and watch some silly movies later. I’m just going to go online for a bit, and then I’ll be free.”

Fran gave me a nod and a thumbs-up. I went to my room and closed the door. I could hear her do the same, likely going to her room for a nap. I wasn’t sure if she did that out of respect for me or if it was just a coincidence. She’d often disappear whenever I streamed, even though I made sure to not be loud or obvious in any way.

...Maybe she was sneaking off to watch me?

That made me chuckle. What a gag it would have been if she was actually Nomad. Now, that would have been a complete and utter shock.

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Chapter 21

Benji Morrison

Benji

“Come on, Lucky, I’ve got some business to handle today.”

Lucky glanced up at me with a sassy side-eye before going back to leisurely sniffing at the suspicious-looking stain on the concrete. I gently tugged him away and continued on our morning walk around the city block.

It was a perk I found that came with owning a dog. You were forced to go outside for at least two short intervals a day. Vitamin D and a change of scenery were welcome when the alternative was staying locked up inside, fighting the urge to kick lunch off with two shots and a jerk-off session to some of Eli’s old clips.

Fucking hell.

Eli.

He’d streaked into my life like a comet slamming into the surface of the Earth. I wasn’t entirely sure I’d survive the impact, but one that I was certainly sure of?

I was falling for Eli. Hard.

I wasn’t supposed to fall for him. I was supposed to protect him. But somewhere

between the fear and the fire, I lost control.

That news may not have been extremely surprising, considering I had been admiring him ever since I came across his online profile, but I hadn't actually thought I'd meet with him in person. That idea had felt like such a fantasy. Such an impossibility. Eli was someone inside my laptop who liked to show off and play with himself for hundreds of others to watch. Sure, I had made a connection with him through my NightOwl account, but he didn't know that was me.

I didn't think... I mean, I hoped , but I didn't think I'd actually get a chance to meet him in person. To kiss him, touch him, fuck him.

Now that I had done all those things, it was simply game over.

Eli was all I wanted from the moment I woke up to the second my head hit the pillow. I'd text him randomly throughout the day under the guise of checking in. I'd work out with him, have lunch and dinner with him, watch stupid shit on YouTube with him.

And most nights since the Broadway incident, I'd sleep with him. I wasn't sure what I enjoyed more: the fuck sessions or the cuddle sessions. Feeling him twitch and stir in his sleep or feeling him pulse and spasm as he came inside me.

Both sensations were heavenly. I didn't ever want to give it up.

Except we weren't even anything official. And beyond that, there was still the thorny guilt that implanted itself in my chest and reverberated through me with every heartbeat.

I'd watched him. Chatted with him. Sent him directly to my doorstep before he had any idea of who I even was.

Was that fucked-up? Maybe... but I never posed a threat to him. My actions never had any malicious intent behind them. I was just... lost. I'd been lost. I've been frantically beating my legs under the surface of a seemingly calm ocean since I was a kid, trying to stay afloat. I was getting tired. So fucking tired.

But Eli—he was my life raft. He helped me feel like I wasn't struggling to simply take in a breath. Everything around him was easy, whether we were in a dark and sex-charged party or taking a stroll through a busy Central Park. It was like I'd known him my entire life.

But... fuck. I have to tell him about NightOwl.

My phone buzzed with a text from Jace, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Hey man, me and Theo are thinking of having lunch at Ray's Garden. Want to meet us?

The invite was certainly tempting. I could use a distraction. Some day drinking at a nice restaurant with good friends sounded great.

And then, another notification appeared on my phone.

Eli was online. He'd just started to stream.

Ah damn, I've got some plans today. Sorry. Let me know where you guys are at in a couple of hours.

I knew the better, more productive thing to do would be to just join Jace and Theo, but my cock held the reins in this situation, and it was currently getting harder and harder to ignore.

I took Lucky back upstairs, grateful to be home where I could peel off the shorts that had started to feel annoyingly tight around my crotch. I dropped them at the entrance, leaving me naked from the waist down. It felt liberating, my cock swinging freely as I walked toward the kitchen. A quick peek at my reflection in the microwave made me smirk—I was already getting hard. I shook my head. Eli really had me fucked-up in all the best ways.

I cupped my balls, wishing Eli's face was nuzzled up underneath them. He had spent the morning doing exactly that, licking and sucking me awake. I wanted to spend the entire day with him, but he told me he had to take the afternoon to "cock in," as he jokingly put it.

I initially went for a water bottle, but when I opened my fridge and saw the half bottle of vodka sitting there, looking lonely as hell, I decided that the water could wait. I uncapped the bottle and took a swig. The vodka burned on its way down. I used to be more affected by the sensation, but now, I barely even blinked.

The warmth spread instantly, relaxing the tightness in my chest. I put the handle of vodka back and grabbed a cold beer from the fridge. I cracked it open and took a long sip before wandering over to the couch. Just a topper. Something to help me enjoy this jerk-off session even more.

My laptop sat on the coffee table, screen still on. I nudged the mouse, waking it up. My notes on Damon were open from earlier this morning. Ever since Eli thought he saw Damon at the theater, I'd shifted nearly all my attention to him. The neighbor and landlord had become less likely suspects, their behaviors less alarming compared to Damon's escalating red flags.

Still, I hadn't found anything concrete yet—nothing linking him explicitly to Nomad.

I clicked away from the notes and went to my web browser, where I typed in

“CamStar.” Surprisingly, Damon’s profile flashed with a live tag toward the very top of the page. He had a “Sponsored” tag on his picture, which meant he was spending money to boost his placement.

Hmm. Maybe observing him in action would give me something useful, some kind of lead. I clicked over to his stream. Damon was lounging in a tight pair of briefs, running a hand down his torso and flexing for the camera. His room appeared messy, closet doors thrown open, wrinkled clothes sitting in an overflowing hamper, socks and underwear littered about the carpet. His chat was pretty dead, too.

Nothing else really jumped out as unusual, but the cold glare in Damon’s eyes gave me an uneasy feeling.

Someone sent a hundred-token tip, making my speakers sound with the jingles of falling coins. “Thanks, KillahJim, I can finally take these off.” He tugged off his underwear, his semi-hard dick flopping out. He started to stroke, but a message dinged on his phone. He reached over, read it, and instantly looked pissed.

“Fuck this,” he said before reaching forward and typing something, the furious clacks of the keyboard coming in louder than the music he’d been playing. I wondered what had triggered him and was about to type out a message before his screen went black.

Offline.

Shit. That wasn’t too informative. I hoped the background report I was waiting on would give me some more information. I navigated back to the homepage, clicking away from Damon’s page.

And there he was—Elijah, live, sitting at the top of the ranks.

My pulse quickened. Eli was lying on his bed, fully naked, gently stroking his cock.

He bit his lower lip, eyes half-lidded, completely lost in the pleasure of his own touch. I stared, my breath catching as heat flooded through me, settling heavy and hard between my legs. My hand drifted downward, wrapping around my cock, now rigid and throbbing. Fuck.

His chat was blowing up with people sending him tokens and telling him how hot he was, what they wanted him to do to them. I jerked off faster, turned on by the fact that I'd just had Eli in my arms this morning. I knew exactly how his cock tasted, how his lips felt, how his love was a drug. I didn't feel a lick of jealousy. Possessiveness? Possibly. I wanted to make him mine and only mine, but I was okay with others watching him. Like art being appreciated in a museum. Except I was the only one who got to take this art home, to study and memorize every stroke of the brush and speckle of paint.

And yet, as horny as this made me, I still had a job to do.

I kept an eye on the comments, on alert for any from Nomad. It seemed to just be regular comments from thirsty viewers. Nothing major.

I took another deep chug of beer, setting the near-empty bottle aside. Eli pumped his cock harder now, arching slightly, his smooth skin flushed pink. God, I wished my mouth was there, tasting the precum dripping from his tip, my tongue tracing the veins along his shaft.

My breath grew ragged as I stroked myself, hips beginning to thrust up into my palm. Pleasure surged through me like wildfire, hot and unstoppable. My chest tightened, breath hitching in my throat. Fuck, Eli was beautiful, erotic, irresistible.

Perfection.

That's when I saw it. A comment from Nomad.

NOMAD79: You can't keep ignoring me. I'm closer to you than you think, Eli. I will have you.

Shit. Eli saw the comment at the same time I did. He stopped his strokes, his expression blanching. I fucking hated this. He went from a moment of pure pleasure to one laced with dread in the span of seconds.

I leaned forward and clicked on the button requesting a private show. Eli appeared to consider it for a moment. He was likely about to log off altogether, but he accepted my invite instead. The screen went black to denote a private show was about to begin. Moments later, it was just me and Eli. A small timer kept track in the bottom of the video. I had fifteen minutes on the clock.

“Sorry about the vibe shift, Night. I'm sure you saw that comment from Nomad...”

NightOwl: I did. Sorry that fucker is still bothering you.

“Yeah, it's not great.” Eli leaned back in bed and spread his legs. He was soft now, which I found just as attractive as when he was rock hard. He rubbed his chest. “But I've got someone helping me out. I don't think I ever told you, but I went to that Stonewall Investigations place you suggested. Thanks. I found a detective and a possible boyfriend.”

I nearly fell off my couch in shock.

He was talking to me about me. And he could see us together. Holy shit.

NightOwl: Nice. I'm happy for you. You deserve it.

I decided to try and play it cool. Simple.

But... fuck. Guilt began to mount inside my gut. This was wrong on a hundred different levels. How much longer could I keep this up? I could just log off, never go back in this account again, pretend like NightOwl just never existed.

“Yeah, for a while, I didn’t think I was going to find someone. But he’s really special. Like, special enough for me to be bringing him up right now. Which is not what you’re paying for.” He palmed at his balls, getting himself hard again.

My cursor hovered over the X. I should have just closed out of the window. Gone on with my day. Eli would still get paid for the private show and hopefully log off so Nomad couldn’t harass him.

Guilt twisted sharply like a stab between the ribs. What the fuck was I doing? Eli had no idea who NightOwl really was—he had no idea it was me. He trusted me, spent time with me, fucked me, confided in me.

My heart sank, desire mingling with nausea. This was wrong.

I needed to tell him. Couldn’t overthink things. Just had to do it. Come clean.

About everything.

NightOwl: Eli, I don’t know how else to do this. It’s going to be a shock, but I need to come clean. This is Benji.

Eli read the message. Then read it again. Then again. He arched his brow, cocked his head. He scratched at the back of his neck. “That’s... what? This isn’t funny. How do you know the guy’s name is Benji? I never said it.”

Shit, shit, shit. I wanted to shout through the screen, “It’s me! I’m sorry!” I also wanted to erase the message. I shouldn’t have sent it. I couldn’t really think too

clearly. Maybe this would have been better news to break in person. What the fuck was I thinking?

I finished what was left of the beer.

“Seriously, what the fuck is going on?” Eli was getting pissed. I’d seen his temper flare on a few occasions and could tell that this was one of those occasions. The tips of his ears were turning fire-truck red, his brows furrowing together.

I knew one way I could put this to bed. I grabbed my phone and sent Eli a text.

NightOwl really is me. I’m sorry for just telling you now.

I watched Eli reach for his phone and read the text message. He dropped the phone and looked directly into the camera.

“Benji... what the fuck? Come to my house right now. We need to talk.”

The screen switched to black as Eli slammed his laptop shut.

Chapter 22

Elijah Grant

Benji sat across from me at my dining table.

No, not Benji. NightOwl.

I couldn't believe it. Didn't know what to feel. Whiplash, mostly. There was no denying the fact that I was developing some strong feelings for this man, yet I didn't even know who he really was. He betrayed my trust. Infiltrated my life before I even knew who he was, and then he kept that a secret.

"Fucking hell," I let out with a whoosh of air. "Really, Benji?"

He dropped his head, looked down at his hands. Such sexy fucking hands. Damn it. Why did he have to turn out to be a liar? We could be having some of the best sex of my damn life right now, and instead, I was just focused on wrapping my head around this.

"I couldn't keep it from you any longer." He sounded remorseful, but my guard was about ten miles high right now. He'd need a very tall ladder to scale over it. "I should have told you right from the start. I'm sorry."

I dropped my head in my hands, rubbed at the bridge of my nose. "With everything going on in my life, I really needed someone who I could fully trust. I thought that was you."

“It is me,” he said. “I never lied to you. I just...”

“Lying by omission is still lying.”

He shut his eyes. His beard was growing in, scruffy and dark around his jaw. I was always such a sucker for the rugged look.

Not today. No. I had to stay strong. Benji betrayed my trust. I had to let him know how much that hurt me. “With everything going on, you still led me to believe that we had no previous connections before I went to Stonewall looking for help. But you manipulated me into meeting you. Instead of just saying it outright—‘hey, I’m a detective, I can help out.’ Why?”

Benji shook his head and managed to meet my gaze. I tried not to crack under the sad stare he gave me. “I wasn’t thinking. I was just... just not thinking.” He sighed, and I was instantly hit with the sharp scent of tequila. I knew Benji drank occasionally—he was never shy about offering me a shot or a glass of wine—but had he gotten drunk before meeting with me?

“Are you drunk right now?”

His eyebrows pulled together as he vigorously shook his head. “No, no. Absolutely not. No, I had a drink just to kill the nerves, but that’s it.”

I searched his face, looking over the landmarks and features I had found so entertaining trying to memorize only a day before. Now, I was searching for clues, hunting down more signs that he was lying to me. I didn’t want to believe it, but I had to keep my eyes open and make sure I wasn’t making any naive mistakes. “It smells like you had more than just one drink.”

“It was two.”

An unreasonably hot burst of anger flared through my chest.

“Two drinks? You had two drinks just to talk to me? Am I that fucking intimidating, or are you just always drunk when you’re confessing your lies?” The venom was out before I could reel it back in. I’d always been a hothead, but that side of me had never come out around Benji.

First time for everything.

“Eli, come on, it wasn’t?—”

“Wasn’t what? Wasn’t planned? Wasn’t intentional? Because from where I’m at, Benji, it looks pretty fucking intentional.” I stood abruptly, my chair scraping harshly against the wooden floor. My heart pounded, pulsing an angry rhythm in my chest. The walls of my apartment started to feel tight, like they were slowly inching toward me.

He exhaled slowly, eyes shadowed with a guilt I desperately wished I could ignore. “It wasn’t like that. I didn’t mean for it to happen this way. I was just... lost. I saw you, and I wanted to protect you.”

“Protect me?” My voice rose, edged with disbelief and sarcasm. “By stalking me online, chatting me up anonymously, pretending we’d never interacted before? By manipulating the situation until I landed right on your doorstep needing help?”

He didn’t have a response to that. Another thought hit me like a bullet to the head. “The masquerade party. Did you know I was going to be there?”

The silence between us was as heavy and thick as freshly dried cement. He answered me with a single nod.

The anger blossomed into something twisted, nasty. It clouded my vision and obliterated my thoughts. “How fucking dare you. How did you know I would be there? Who told you?”

“I didn’t...” Benji slumped in the seat. I felt like I was watching a man disintegrate right in front of my eyes. He was breaking down. Part of me hated myself for wielding the hammer, and the other part of me wanted to keep smashing it down, getting to the real truth of the matter.

“How?” I pressed.

“The cameras we installed... they were still logged in on my phone. You were talking to Zack.”

My eyes went wide. He might as well have grabbed a kitchen knife and sunk it down into my heart. I took a few steps back, my entire world spinning wildly on its axis.

“Jesus Christ, Benji, you watched me through the fucking cameras in my apartment! What the fuck ? Seriously, what the fuck ?”

“It was once,” he admitted, his voice tight. “Only once. It was just a few minutes—I swear, Eli.”

His confession twisted in my gut, sharp and acidic. My mind instantly flashed to the masquerade. To how intimately he knew me before he ever touched me in that crowded room.

Benji’s gaze dropped to his lap, his fingers clenching into fists. “I needed to make sure you were safe,” he finally said, his voice rough. “I didn’t mean for it to become?—”

“Become what? Real? Emotional? Did you not mean to trick me into actually fucking caring about you? Because congrats, Detective, mission fucking accomplished.”

My chest burned as if I'd been tossed out of a moving vehicle and slammed across the pavement. The betrayal sliced through me deeper than I ever expected. Every laugh, every conversation, every kiss, and every shared moment of intimacy now felt tainted. Poisoned. Manufactured. Benji had manipulated this entire situation. The relationship I thought we had been developing was all smoke and fucking mirrors.

My stomach lurched, tying itself into a tight knot.

“I fucked up,” Benji whispered. “I’m sorry, Eli. I’m so fucking sorry.”

His apologies meant nothing. They couldn’t fix the broken shards of trust scattered in my chest. My hands trembled, fists shaking at my sides as I stood there, trying to hold on to my rage rather than surrendering to the overwhelming hurt. I had a habit of losing myself to the sea of red before logic could take hold.

I wanted to shout at him. Curse him out. Make him feel the pain he’d caused me in this moment. Anger like I’d never felt before colored my vision a crimson red. I had to work to keep my breathing even. “With everything going on in my life, how could you? You’re almost as bad as Nomad.”

He winced at that, as if I had physically reached out and decked him across the jaw.

Good. Feel it, Benji. Hurt like how you made me hurt.

“I can’t make excuses for my behavior. But there... there are reasons.”

“And I don’t need to hear them.” Was I being cruel? Possibly. But that veil of crimson red grew more vibrant with every passing moment. As if I could see the

capillaries in my eyes pulsing every time my heart beat. “You were my safe place, Benji. I had really started to feel like you were my—” one. I swallowed my words. “I was wrong. About everything. I should have never even gone to Stonewall.”

Another wince. He gripped his hands tight, squeezing them between his legs. “No matter what happens, I want you to know I’m dedicated to finding Nomad. If it’s the last thing I do. I swear it, Eli.”

“How the fuck do I even know you’re not Nomad? Huh?”

His head snapped upward, his hazel eyes locked with mine. That comment appeared to have hurt him more than any other.

“You have to believe me when I tell you: I am not Nomad.”

I wanted to believe him, but after all the revelations tonight, I found myself having a difficult time even looking at him. “Just... get out,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. It took every ounce of strength I had left.

“Eli, please?—”

“Get the fuck out, Benji. Now.”

He opened his mouth, ready to protest, but one hard look from me silenced whatever excuse he was about to make. He stood slowly, shoulders slumped in defeat, his expression hollowed and racked with guilt. For a split second, I wanted nothing more than to rush into his arms and forget this all happened.

But I couldn’t. I wouldn’t.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

The door shut quietly behind him. I stood frozen in the peaceful emptiness of my apartment, suddenly feeling more alone than I ever had before. Chaos raged inside my skull. Tears I'd stubbornly held back broke free in a silent stream down my cheeks.

I'd let Benji into places inside of me I didn't even realize existed. Trusted him more than anyone I'd ever been with. Allowed myself to feel vulnerable and hopeful, like maybe this time things would finally work out. Like I'd found something genuine.

But none of it was real. He'd been NightOwl this entire time. He'd played me like a piece on a chess board, moving me to where he wanted, setting up the game so that we were always meant to cross.

I sat on the couch as the tears exploded. It was all fake. Every connection, every touch, every whispered promise. A cruel illusion orchestrated by a man who claimed he only wanted to protect me.

And the sickest part of it all?

I had fallen for him.

Harder than I'd ever fallen for anyone.

And now, that fall shattered me into a million tiny little pieces.

Chapter 23

Benji Morrison

I wanted to bash my skull against the brick wall.

A homeless woman shouted obscenities a couple of feet away from me. She stumbled toward me, yelling about someone named Susie. A speeding car slammed on its horn and nearly took out three tourists crossing the street without paying attention. A baby screeched from its stroller as an exhausted mother walked past me.

Chaos.

Hurt.

Guilt.

Anger.

It was like I stood in the center of an emotional tornado. My entire body hurt, down to my very soul.

I betrayed Eli. His rage—it was palpable. It was like heat blasting out of a furnace. I wanted it to disintegrate me. I deserved it. I was a fucking creep, an obsessed fucking asshole. I didn't deserve Eli. He was too good of a person. He had his shit together, he had a life to look forward to, he had a heart of solid gold, a smile that was as bright as the sun. And then there was me, lurking in the shadows of his life, watching him,

falling for him before he even knew my first name.

I tightened my hands into fists, digging my nails into my palms.

I shouldn't have drunk before meeting him.

I wanted another shot. If I couldn't melt my brain against the pavement, then I'd do it by finding the bottom of a tequila bottle. I wanted to get so fucking drunk I'd wake up in two days not remembering any of this. Maybe that could ease some of the pain I currently felt. It would be enough to at least get me to the weekend, where I could drink myself back into the dark until Monday.

Next week, I'd start fresh. I could figure things out next week. I could maybe come up with a way to fix this. Was there a way to fix this? How would I ever be able to build up Eli's trust again? I certainly was motivated to do it, but there were no guarantees he'd ever even talk to me again, much less trust me again.

"Fuck!" I shouted. The homeless woman lifted her head up from the trash can. "Sorry."

She went back to digging through the trash, collecting plastic bottles and tossing them into the bag she carried with her.

I'd fix this somehow. I had to try.

But for now, I needed a drink.

I started walking toward the subway station. I wanted to get home—fast. The longer I stood outside of Eli's apartment building, the more I was tempted to go back in there and try to make it right. I knew that he needed space, and I needed a miracle, but fuck, I just wanted another chance. Just one more chance to prove to him I wasn't

some psychotic monster. I was just a human who made a series of terrible judgment calls.

My chest still felt tight as I reached the entrance to the station. The idea of going underground, waiting on a crowded platform, pushing my way into a packed train, it made me sick.

Fuck the subway. I needed an Uber. I grabbed my phone and opened the app, about to order my car, when suddenly a text message popped up across the screen.

My heart skipped a beat for a split second. I assumed it was Eli inviting me back inside to talk things out.

It wasn't. It was Damon.

Yeah, I can meet. I'm getting off work now.

I had to read the text twice. I hadn't been expecting Damon to reply to my messages hounding him for a meeting. I'd gotten his number after messaging him on the streaming website. I wasn't entirely truthful (surprise) about why I wanted to meet with him, but I didn't want to scare him off, either. I told him I was a scout looking for new talent for a modeling agency.

He took the bait. He fucking took the bait. Now, I just had to reel him in.

Maybe this was how I got back into Eli's good graces? If I unmasked the real Nomad and showed Eli I had his best interests at heart, then maybe, just maybe, I had a chance of fixing things.

Great! I'm also available now. Where would be a good place to meet?

Good. This was good. This could turn my day around. I just had to click back into investigative mode. My mind was currently being pulled in a hundred different directions—drink, Eli, Nomad, getting drunk, Damon, Eli, Nomad, vodka, tequila, beer, Nomad.

Nomad.

Nomad.

Damon.

Damon.

....

Holy shit.

Damon. His name. Backward.

Nomad.

No... it couldn't have been right there, right in front of my face the entire time.

I'm just leaving work. I can meet at the High Line. I'll drop my pin.

The High Line wasn't exactly the place I expected to meet, but at this point, it didn't matter. I just had to get to Damon. Question him. Figure out just who the fuck this man was and how I could stop him.

Damon. Nomad.

Fuck.

The weight of this hit me harder the second time. I wanted to laugh at how blatantly obvious it had been. This entire time, his username had been right there, mocking me. Taunting me. The urge to wrap my hands around his throat tightened my fingers into fists.

But I couldn't let my anger derail me. I had to stay calm. I had to remember why I was here.

Eli.

I needed to fix this—for him.

My heart stung as it beat, the ache growing deeper with every thought of Elijah's face when he found out the truth. The hurt in his eyes was more painful than most things I'd experienced in my life, and I'd experienced some fucked-up shit.

I opened the pin Damon had sent me. He wasn't too far.

I'll be there in fifteen minutes.

I took a shaky breath and walked toward the curb, where I ordered an Uber and rode it through rush-hour traffic. The car smelled as if the driver had been chauffeuring a fucking corpse. I lowered the window and got hit with a blast of exhaust from the truck in front of us. I couldn't get out of that Uber fast enough.

The late-afternoon sky was painted with shades of darkening lavender and orange. There was a beauty to the city at this time of day that really couldn't be matched. The tall towers of glass and stone were lit up like torches, reflecting the last dying light of the day. The energy on the streets was also different, with people walking home from

work with grocery bags or clicking their heels down the street on the way to happy hour.

I walked along the wooden planks until I saw him.

Damon sat on a bench, silhouetted against the sky. He wore a blue Yankees hoodie and ripped jeans and looked tense, his shoulders hunched forward. He spotted me and stood up, his expression shifting from wary to friendly as though he'd put on a mask.

"You Benji?" He sounded different in person, his tone higher-pitched. It was a surprising contrast to the heavier, bass-filled tone he used when he streamed.

"Yeah, thanks for meeting," I replied. My pulse pounded inside my head. Everything I'd been going through could be culminating in this very moment. Damon could have all the answers we were looking for. I just had to crack him, had to play this right.

He narrowed his eyes. "You said something about a modeling gig? You scouting people off cam sites now?"

I decided to keep my cover going. For now. "Exactly. You've got the look."

He scoffed but looked intrigued. Good.

"You been streaming for long?" I asked, studying him. I needed proof before I did anything drastic.

"Long enough." Damon shrugged, flashing me a crooked smile. He really wasn't bad-looking, although an actual modeling career may not have been in his future, but a restraining order and possible jail time? That was a different story. "Sorry I didn't come more prepared. I'm taking my headshots next week."

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. I sat down on the bench and he followed my lead.

How could I fish this out of him? “To be transparent with you, you aren’t the first person I contacted off the website. I’ve also reached out to a few other models. There’s one who’s made it to the final rounds of casting, and we want you to do a chemistry test with him.” This was complete improv, but Damon appeared to be buying it.

“Is this for a commercial? TV show?”

“I’ll tell you a bit more once we get closer to the audition. For now, I want to know if you would work well with him. EliGoldStroke is his username.” I watched his face for any changes. He remained surprisingly neutral.

“I think we would get along. I mean, I’ve never met him in person. Just interacted with him a couple of times.”

He wasn’t exactly lying, but that wasn’t the full truth, either. Damon had interacted with Eli far more than just a “couple of times.” I had to push a little harder. “We’ve already chatted with him. He says that you two have a history but wouldn’t expand. And we really like your look, so we wanted to just make sure things were clear.”

He paused and started to bite his nails. “I mean... I guess? This is feeling a little invasive, honestly. Is this even part of the audition?”

Fuck. He was starting to catch on. Of course he was. I was drunk and emotionally drained, my mind fired on zero cylinders. I came unprepared. I fucked up. I was a terrible fucking detective.

I had to try and salvage this.

I had to cut straight to the chase.

“So you haven’t been stalking Eli through burner accounts named Nomad, then? Because the obsessive chats on different message boards, the long articles written about him, the DMs you sent to him asking him to collab first, then turning on him, all of that isn’t real? That’s a clever name, by the way. Did you pick it randomly?”

He hesitated, thick black brows slamming together. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“It’s just interesting. It’s Damon spelled backwards, right?”

His expression hardened. I saw a spark of anger ignite behind his eyes. “Who the fuck are you, really?”

“Someone who’s done playing games,” I said, voice dropping dangerously low. My own anger was barely contained beneath the surface. Eli’s hurt face flashed before me, reigniting my rage. “Were you at the Broadway theater the night of the bomb threat?”

Damon’s eyes widened with shock, then narrowed with defensive fury. “What the fuck are you talking about? Broadway? Bomb threat? Are you insane?”

My chest was tight and breathing shallow. “Answer the fucking question.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he snapped. “What night are you even talking about?”

“Last week. Sunday.” I clenched my fists, trying to stop the ground from spinning, both from anger and alcohol.

“I was streaming that night. I always stream on Sundays. Check my damn channel. Why the fuck would I even bother with a bomb threat?”

“Because you’re jealous of Eli. Jealous he’s always at the top. Jealous he’s got everything you don’t. And even though you’re jealous, you also want him. And now that you see he’s happy with someone else, you want to ruin that. It’s classic stalker behavior.”

He laughed bitterly, shaking his head. “You’ve got some serious fucking issues, man. I don’t like Eli, sure. He’s fucking annoying, always acting so goddamn perfect. But calling in a bomb threat? Hell fuck no.”

My jaw clenched, frustration mounting. Damon was clearly a dick, but his denial felt genuine. If he was lying, he was doing a damn good job.

“Go ahead,” Damon continued, pulling out his phone and shoving it toward me. “Check the timestamp. Check my stream history. I’ve got receipts, asshole.”

I snatched the phone from his hand and scrolled quickly, confirming exactly what Damon claimed. The time stamps matched. He’d been online, streaming, exactly when the bomb threat was called in.

Damon wasn’t Nomad. I’d gotten it wrong again.

“Fuck,” I muttered, handing him back his phone.

“Yeah, exactly. Fuck off.” Damon rose sharply and stormed off, leaving me sitting alone, feeling more lost than ever.

My phone buzzed. My heart leapt briefly before sinking again.

Not Eli.

A notification from a liquor store offering me a discount on tequila. Perfect.

I sat there for a long time, letting the dread and disappointment wash over me like an oil slick. I went from feeling on top of the world to being crushed by it.

At some point in the haze, I stood up and walked to the nearest subway station, body on autopilot.

I had one singular goal in mind.

Back at my apartment, I skipped the glass entirely, opening the tequila and chugging straight from the bottle. It burned beautifully, numbing everything inside of me. I collapsed onto my couch, the room already spinning. Eli's eyes haunted me, the betrayal in his gaze slicing deeper than any blade could.

I'd failed him. Again.

The bottle clinked loudly as I set it down. I stared at the ceiling until it blurred, from tears or from the tequila, I wasn't entirely sure.

I'd let him down. I'd ruined everything we were building together. I was the one person he felt he could trust. This rift—I never intended it. Never saw it coming.

Lucky leapt onto the couch. He curled into my side, rested his head on my lap.

Tomorrow, I'd figure something out. Tomorrow, I'd try to win Eli back.

Tonight, I'd sink into the black.

Chapter 24

Elijah Grant

Zack sat across from me inside the packed dive bar. I had texted him a couple hours earlier, not wanting to be stuck inside my apartment any longer. He showed up late and looking pretty stressed, blaming a brutal week of exams.

“Thanks for even showing up,” I said, grateful I could at least count on my best friend to help me feel normal.

“I’m here whenever you need me.”

It had been a week since Benji’s revelation, and I was still so fucking shaken over it.

He’d been watching me? He manipulated me? He fucking lied to me...

So then why the fuck did I miss him so much? I couldn’t make sense of my emotions. One side of me pulled far, far away from Benji, and the other side of me wanted to be back in his bed, curled up next to him, talking about random bullshit, laughing about dumb jokes, and having some of the best damn sex of my life.

It didn’t make any sense. Logically I should have deleted his number and blocked him and moved on with my life, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

Not only that, but there was still the fact that Nomad was out there, and Benji had been the only one who’d really taken the threat seriously.

“Fucking hell,” I said, dropping my head into my hands. “Why does life have to be so damn messy?”

“Because if it wasn’t, then it wouldn’t be interesting. Duh.”

“I don’t want an interesting life. I want a nice, calm, happy life.”

“You say that now. But I’ve known you for years, and I know that being bored is your archnemesis. You’d hate a simple life.”

“Fine, then maybe not simple, but, like, I don’t know, not as fucking crazy?” I sighed and took a sip of my vodka cranberry. We sat in a dark corner booth inside the steampunk-themed bar. A stuffed deer head was above Zack’s, wearing steampunk goggles and a cute little hat. “I can’t believe I’ve been dealing with a stalker and dating one at the same time.”

Zack shook his head. “I’m sorry, Eli. I hate seeing you go through this.”

“It sucks. And I was really falling for Benji. I hadn’t felt that way with anyone. Anyone .”

Zack took a long chug of his drink, setting it down on the table. He looked out toward the crowded bar. His schoolwork really must have been catching up to him because he seemed exhausted. His hair had grown out over his ears, his beard looking scruffier than usual. Zack normally had a haircut scheduled like clockwork, so seeing him like this was weird. “How have you been doing?” I said. “I feel bad I’ve been so distant. But, well, you know why.”

“I completely get it. Do I miss my best friend? Yes, obviously. Am I upset at him? Yes, also.” He gave me a wink and a smile. “Seriously, though, I’ve been doing alright. Stressed as fucking balls, but I’m acing my exams, so there’s that.”

“Are balls usually that stressed?” I mused.

“Depends on how often you handle them.” He gave me another grin. I laughed and leaned back in my seat, the dark blue cushions of the booth sinking with me.

“Then my balls are extremely stressed lately.”

“Well, you know you always have a friend in me if you need someone to help you decompress.”

That got more laughter out of me. Zack knew that I saw him more as a brother than anything else, so I didn’t take his joke too seriously. “Thanks, Zack. I knew I could always count on you.”

“I’ve got you back... and your balls.”

My phone dinged against the scratched wooden tabletop. For a split second, I expected to look down and see “Detective” written across my screen.

Dumb, dumb, dumb.

It was an email notification, the subject line reading “Self-tape audition opportunity.” I was going to send it directly to spam but figured why the hell not? If it was a scam, then I’d have just wasted a couple of hours of my life filming an audition, and if it wasn’t a scam, then...

“Hmm,” I said, setting my phone back down on the table. “Just got an audition for a featured role in a TV show filming here in the city.”

“No way, seriously? What show?”

“It doesn’t say. I guess they’ll send me the sides when I agree to the audition. I wonder how they even found me.”

“Your agent?”

“I haven’t talked to him in like a year. And he’s not cc’ed on the email.”

“Weird,” Zack said. “Can I see it?”

“Sure.” I slid the phone across the table. He looked over the email and offered me a shrug.

“Looks legit,” he said, handing me back my phone. “Maybe this could be your big break.”

“Maybe,” I echoed, my mind briefly drifting to the countless auditions I’d blown or given up on in the past. “It’s been forever since I’ve really chased acting. Life got in the way, camming took over, and I don’t know—I guess I just sort of accepted that my dreams would never really go anywhere.”

Zack gave me a stern look, eyebrows knitted together. “Don’t sell yourself short. You’re talented. You’ve always been talented. You just let assholes get into your head.”

“You think so?” I asked, my voice sounding smaller than I intended.

“Of course. You lit up the stage every damn time you performed. Remember when you played Mercutio, and everyone fucking cried when you died? That was wild.”

I smiled, nostalgia blooming in my chest. “Yeah, that was a good night.”

Acting had always been my first love. A real passion of mine. I loved sinking into a character and living another life, pulling emotions out of myself and feeling them reflected back from the audience. I enjoyed theater the most because of that live aspect, but I also enjoyed playing for a camera as well. They were two very different mediums—film focused more on subtlety, and theater focused more on making sure everyone in the audience connected with you, even those sitting at the far back.

“Exactly. And it doesn’t matter if you’ve been camming or dealing with whatever else. You deserve another shot at this.”

“Thanks, Zack. Seriously.” I reached across the table and gave my best friend’s hand a squeeze. “Means a lot.”

He smiled, squeezing my hand back. “Of course.” His expression darkened slightly as he withdrew. “Speaking of dealing with things... any updates on the Nomad front?”

My stomach twisted into a tight knot. “No. I mean... Benji was handling it, but now, that’s obviously not happening. I’m thinking about hiring someone else, maybe getting the cops involved again. It’s just—it’s hard to trust someone after that.” Saying it out loud made things feel all the more real. And all the more frightening.

Zack nodded sympathetically. “I don’t blame you. That was some next-level creep shit.” He hesitated, clearly choosing his next words carefully. “What did you even like about the guy?”

I sighed, swirling the ice around my empty glass. “Honestly? He was different. He felt... real. Genuine. I mean, despite the obvious.” I laughed bitterly. “I felt like I could just be myself around him. He never judged me, never made me feel weird about camming or anything else in my life. And, shit, Zack—the chemistry? It was insane. I’ve never connected with someone like that. It just felt right, like everything clicked effortlessly.”

The more I talked about him, the heavier the ache in my chest grew. Despite the betrayal, despite the lies, I still fucking missed him. Missed his smile, his laughter, the way his eyes softened when he looked at me. I missed falling asleep tangled up in him.

“I just... miss him. How fucked is that?”

“Damn, Eli,” Zack said softly. “You really fell hard, huh?”

“Yeah.” I choked out a laugh, eyes starting to sting. “And I feel like an idiot for it.”

“You’re not an idiot. You’re human. We fall for people who hurt us sometimes. Doesn’t make you stupid, just unlucky.”

“So what do I do?”

Zack appeared surprised at my question. “What do you mean? I thought you cut ties.”

“I guess we kind of did, but also, not really? I still feel connected to him. And I want to give him the chance to explain himself when I’m not seeing red.” I dropped my head back and looked up at the black ceiling. Copper pipes crisscrossed above me, a couple of them letting off steam. “He’s a good guy. I want to know why he acted so, I don’t know, fucked-up.”

“What if he doesn’t have a good excuse?” Zack asked. “I really, really don’t want to see you keep hurting, Eli. You’re too good for someone who doesn’t match your level. You’re successful, and you’re handsome, and you’re letting this get way to your head, aren’t you?”

“Kind of,” I said with a smirk. “But keep going.”

“You got the point. I don’t want to see you with anyone that doesn’t deserve you.”

I cocked my head and smiled. Zack always knew how to lift me up. I could count on him to help combat whatever inner saboteur I faced in my life. “Thanks, Zack. But I—it might be dumb, considering the circumstances, but I really feel like even with everything that happened, there’s still something worth fighting for between Benji and me.”

“Just know that if he hurts you again, then I’m going to hurt him back.”

“Alright, tough guy, relax.”

Zack laughed. He pushed a blond strand of rogue hair off his forehead before he glanced down at his phone, his Cher wallpaper taking up the entire screen.

“So, enough about my messy life. What’s going on in yours?” I asked. I’d already taken up enough time bitching and moaning. Now, I needed to give my friend the space to do the same.

“The usual. School’s a bitch, but I’m acing my exams. I’ve been thinking about getting a new tattoo. Maybe another hummingbird or possibly a cool scythe on my shoulder.”

“Two very different vibes.”

“Yeah, I’m having trouble deciding.”

Before I could ask him to elaborate, my phone buzzed violently against the table, startling me. Fran’s name flashed on the screen. My heart immediately sank. She never called unless it was important.

“Fran? What’s wrong?”

“Eli, you gotta come home now. Someone broke in,” she said, her voice trembling and frantic.

“Fuck—are you okay? Where are you?” I shot out of the booth and motioned Zack to follow.

“I’m fine. I wasn’t here, I just got home—but our place is trashed, glass everywhere. They came in through the fire escape.”

“Shit, okay. Don’t touch anything. I’m on my way.”

Zack tossed a few bills on the table, and we bolted from the bar. My pulse hammered in my ears, my anxiety skyrocketing with every step.

This was my biggest fear come to life. And if Fran had been home and gotten hurt... I would have never been able to deal with the guilt. It would have fully wrecked me.

By the time we reached my apartment, my hands shook so badly I could barely open the door. Fran stood just inside, eyes wide and fearful, a police officer at her side. Behind her, our home was chaos—shattered glass scattered across the floor, furniture overturned, cushions torn open, stuffing spilling out like guts made of fluffy cotton. The room felt violated, dangerous. I could almost smell Nomad. Feel his presence inside my home. It stuck to me like an oil spill, clinging to my skin, slipping into my lungs and making it difficult to catch my breath.

“Oh my God,” I said, stepping carefully over shards of glass.

Fran’s voice wavered. “Who would do this, Eli? Why?”

My mind raced. Nomad. Had to be Nomad. Fuck. I turned around, heart hammering as I scanned the corners of the apartment.

“The cameras—” Fran began.

“I took them down.” My voice cracked, the reality crashing down hard. “Fuck, I took them down last week.”

Zack pulled me into a comforting hug. “It’s okay. We’ll figure this out.”

But it wasn’t okay. Nothing was fucking okay. It felt like nothing would ever be okay.

“Are you the other roommate?” the police officer asked me. She had a notepad in her hand and looked slightly bored.

“I am,” I said, feeling my knees start to shake. I leaned against Zack. He put an arm around my side and helped hold me up.

“Would you be okay with giving me a statement?”

“Yes, just... one second.” I reached for my phone instinctively, dialing Benji’s number. He’d know what to do. Maybe he had figured something out. Maybe it had triggered Nomad somehow. It rang and rang, finally clicking over to voicemail.

“Benji, please call me back. Something happened—I need you.”

The words hung heavy as I ended the call. Fuck. Despite everything, Benji was still the first person I thought to turn to.

And now, he wasn’t answering.

Chapter 25

Benji Morrison

My head spun as I reached over to my nightstand and turned off my alarm. Fuck. Why the hell was it even going off? Wasn't it a Saturday? Or was it Sunday?

I blinked away the drowsy sleep clouding my eyes. My hands hurt like a motherfucker. I winced and rolled out of bed, pushing myself up.

“Ow, fuck!” A series of sharp, stinging pains radiated up through my arms. I looked down and noticed two bloody handprints on my bed. “What the...”

My hands... they were covered in blood. Mostly dry, but some cuts had reopened. My bedsheets were coated in it. So was my phone. I looked to the corner of the room where Lucky's bed was. Thankfully, he slept in a curled-up ball without any blood on or around him.

“No, no... what happened? What the fuck?”

I tried to pull at the memories of last night but couldn't find anything. It was a sea of black. I had drunk myself into total oblivion. I wanted to escape the pain, wanted to forget about my life and my problems, even for only just a few days.

But this... what had I done?

I rushed into my bathroom and turned on the faucet. There were clothes all over the

floor, the sink was a disaster, there was grime in the tiles of the shower. Vomit crusted the rim of my toilet.

This was so fucked. I always considered myself a clean person, never once letting my space get this rotted. I didn't even realize how bad things were spiraling.

“Fuck.”

I winced as I put my hands under the warm running water. I gently washed away most of the blood. The cuts were all along the tops of my hands, mostly the knuckles. They were long and sharp, with a couple of them feeling pretty deep. There was one bad cut by my thumb that still bled. A spiral of dark red crimson slipped down the drain, mimicking the way my life felt like it was going.

Down the fucking drain.

I cupped my hands and pooled some of the water in my palms. I splashed it on my face. The man in the mirror seemed unrecognizable to me. He was extremely unhappy, exhausted, angry, depressed, hopeless. I'd gone through dark times in my life before, but this was by far the darkest, and I had no idea how I'd find the light again.

...A drink. I could use another drink.

I found myself walking toward the kitchen without even thinking much about it. My hands stung as I gripped the refrigerator door. The clock on my microwave said it was close to five in the evening. How long had I been asleep for?

I leaned forward and rested my forehead against the cold steel of the fridge door. I snapped my eyes shut. This was the lowest I had ever felt. I had fallen into a pit of despair and could see no way of climbing out. No one was around to throw me a

rope, either. My bottom lip started to tremble as a wave of profound sadness crashed over me. I slid down to the floor, the cold tiles pressing against my knees as I melted against the fridge. The sadness pushed at the stitching of my soul, threatening to tear me completely apart. I started to cry. It was a soft cry at first before quickly developing into something heavier, more consuming. I started to weep, curling into a ball on the kitchen floor, wishing I could just turn back time, wishing I could have Eli back, wishing I could call my mother, wishing I could dump out all the alcohol in my house, wishing, wishing, wishing.

Lucky must have heard and gotten curious, coming into the kitchen and sniffing at my sides. I lifted my head and managed a weak smile when he kissed my cheek. “Good boy, you’re a good boy, aren’t you? The best boy.” I lay on my side and petted my little buddy, the tears flowing even more freely now. He looked at me with as much concern as those big brown puppy eyes could muster. I kissed his wet nose and pulled him against me. He curled up and lay down. That just made me cry even harder.

I was a loser. A creep.

I was a good guy, with a good heart.

I was a failure, and I was alone.

I could turn this around. I could fix things.

My thoughts ping-ponged in so many different directions. And still, I couldn’t figure out where the fuck that blood had come from. Why were my hands all cut up? Had I gotten in a fight somewhere? I didn’t remember leaving my apartment, but then again, I couldn’t even remember how I spent most of yesterday or the day before that.

A drink. I’d come to the kitchen for a drink. Maybe that could kick-start my

memories. A little liquid boost to the psyche. I got back onto my feet and opened the fridge. It was mostly empty except for the two handles of tequila and half a handle of vodka.

Fuck. When did I get like this? Were these demons always inside me, just waiting for a moment of weakness that would allow them to take over? And was there any remedy for it, or was I doomed?

Lucky must not have been done with the floor cuddles. He stood on his hind legs and tried to lick at my hand. Or maybe he was telling me to stop? To close the damn refrigerator door and work to get my life back together.

“You know what... you’re right.”

Maybe I’d officially lost it—thinking that a dog was concerned about my sobriety—but I closed the fridge and went for a glass of water instead. I gulped it down. Refreshing, but it lacked that soft burn that I loved so much.

Just one shot wouldn’t hurt...

No. I couldn’t. I had to get out of the kitchen. I took my glass of water and went into the living room. That’s where the mystery of my cut-up hand finally became clear.

Next to my television was a standing mirror that was completely shattered. Glass shards glittered on the beige carpet. “Fucking hell.” I set my water down and quickly picked up Lucky before he accidentally walked over any glass. I took him to my bedroom and closed him inside, grabbing the vacuum out of the small hallway closet and cleaning up the mess I’d made last night. Glass clinked and crunched together as I passed the vacuum over the carpet.

What had gotten into me?

More importantly, how was I going to get it out?

With the living room relatively clean and free of glass, I let Lucky back out. The hangover from yesterday was beginning to push past the adrenaline that had hit me after seeing all that blood. My head throbbed while my brain swam in thick molasses. I wanted to throw up, I wanted to cry, I wanted to shout.

I wanted Eli.

I wanted him back.

“Fuck!”

This was too much for me to handle on my own. I felt myself spiraling. I grabbed my phone and unlocked it without even looking at the screen. I didn’t have many friends in this world, but I did have one, and I really needed him right now.

“Please answer,” I said as the phone rang.

And rang.

And— “Hey, Benji, what’s up?”

“Jace, you free?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I need to talk to someone. Can you come over?”

Without a second’s hesitation, he said, “Of course. Be there in ten.”

* * *

Lucky was apparently a whore for man laps because it only took him a few minutes before he was curled up on Jace's. He looked way more peaceful than I felt. I didn't blame him for his obsession.

"Alright," Jace said. "What's going on?"

Jace liked to cut straight to the point. It was something I appreciated about him. "Where do I even start."

"How about why your hand is wrapped in a bandage?"

I sighed and sat next to him on the couch. I rested my forearms on my legs as I leaned forward, staring at my blurry reflection in the television screen. "I have a problem."

Those words had never left my mouth before, and I genuinely didn't think they ever would. But after these last few months, they were words I simply couldn't deny. And saying them out loud felt like lifting a bowling ball off my chest. "A drinking problem."

"Thank you for telling me," Jace said, his reaction surprising me. "I know it must be a difficult thing to come to terms with. And to confide in someone. So seriously, thank you." He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. My heart filled with warmth, even though the hangover-induced anxiety and depression worked hard to take over.

"I blacked out last night. Can't remember a single fucking thing. I woke up this morning with my hand covered in blood. I didn't even know what caused it. Not until I saw the mirror right there. I must have punched it last night." I held my bandaged hand, unable to retrieve even a shred of memory from the night before.

“Did anything happen that triggered this?”

“I’ve been seeing someone,” I said. “A client. Eli. I fell hard for him. I was really thinking we were going to be something together. But I fucked it up. I did some things that betrayed his trust, and he basically cut ties with me. I just went straight to the bottle.”

“Is there any way it can be fixed?”

“I don’t know,” I said. It was relatively easy for me to admit my drinking problem, but I couldn’t bring myself to say what I’d done to Eli out loud. I understood it was fucked-up. I allowed my darkest urges to take hold. It was something I deeply regretted and just couldn’t say out loud in that moment.

“Okay, let’s rewind a bit here. Let’s handle one thing at a time. When did you start drinking? Before it really spiraled.”

I sat back in the couch. Jace mirrored me. A silver necklace glinted from between the open collar of his plaid shirt. “Alcohol’s always been around me, one way or another. My mom, she’s an alcoholic. She could never fight it. Some days—months, years—were harder than others.”

“Damn. I’m sorry.”

“We’ve stopped speaking because of it. I understand it’s a disease, and I don’t blame her, especially not now. Not with what I’m going through.”

“Good. Blame could be just as toxic as the alcohol.”

“It feels like this shit hit me out of nowhere, but if I’m being honest with myself, I’ve been sinking toward my rock bottom for a while now.”

“So,” Jace said, still petting Lucky’s head. “Do you think that’s what last night was? Your rock bottom?”

I gulped. Sucked in a breath. This was heavy. It was deep. I didn’t feel a lick of judgment coming off Jace, which made it a little easier, but it was still something difficult to put into words. All of this. It was the most vulnerable I’d been in a while, not counting the moments I shared with Eli.

Oh, Eli...

“Yes. I really do think so.”

“Then would you be open to maybe attending a program? One of my clients went to one. It’s a thirty-day intensive stay at a ranch out in Upstate New York. I can give you the name of it.”

It felt like my friend was throwing me a life raft in that moment. He saw me struggling and reached out a hand to pull me up out of the hole I dug myself into. I could be stubborn and say I’d figure it out on my own, but that wasn’t the road I wanted to take. Not anymore. “Yeah, text me the name so I have it. I’ll reach out to them today.” I gave Jace a genuine smile. “And thank you. For hearing me out. Not judging me.”

“No judgment at all. I just want to see you happy and healthy. We all have our demons. It’s about how we live with them that matters.”

My phone buzzed on the coffee table. “There, sent it.” Jace stood up. “Mind if I use your bathroom real quick?”

“Yeah, go for it.”

Jace left the room, the space feeling extra quiet now. I was grateful I had a friend like Jace. Someone who didn't judge, who offered help. I reached for my phone and was set on sending a message to this program. It could be my way out of this mess.

That's when I first noticed the missed call. It had been from Eli, coming in last night when I must have been obliterated.

Fuck!

I dialed him back. I didn't expect him to answer. Why would he? Maybe it had been a butt dial. Or maybe he had gotten drunk, too, and was now regretting ever calling me.

It rang and rang. I was close to hanging up—giving up. But I stayed on the line. I wanted to know why?—

“Hello?”

Eli's voice came through the phone like a chorus of angels.

Maybe miracles were real?

Chapter 26

Elijah Grant

I shouldn't have answered Benji's call. For a second, I considered sending it directly to voicemail. Fuck him. And not literally.

I was still angry. Disappointed. He hadn't really lied to me, but he had certainly skirted the truth about how he knew me. And to watch me through my cameras? That was something that I couldn't quite move past yet.

And even with all that looming over my head, I still picked up the phone when Benji's name appeared on the screen.

He sounded like he'd been put through the wringer. Yeah, you and me both, buddy. Now, as we sat in the hotel room I'd gotten myself, I could see that he not only sounded like he'd been through it, but he also looked like it, too. He must not have been sleeping these last few days or eating, for that matter. He looked thinner to me. The bags under his eyes were pronounced, and the bandage wrapping around his hand wasn't doing him any favors.

"Eli, I don't know where to begin."

"Start with why you thought it was okay to spy on me."

He winced. He wore a wrinkled white T-shirt and black gym shorts. Even in this state, and even with everything that had happened between us, I still couldn't stop

myself from finding him attractive.

God, what is wrong with me? Maybe I should have jerked off before this.

“Eli, I want to make it clear, I never spied on you. The camera incident was one time, and it lasted a total of probably three minutes. I deleted the app immediately after and have no way of logging back in.”

To be fair, I did make a living out of people watching me, but that didn’t give him permission to just set up cameras and enjoy a private show, no matter how brief it may have been. “That’s still fucked, man. I trusted you.”

I still trust you, for some stupid reason.

I didn’t say that part out loud.

He rubbed his face, covered his mouth as he took in a deep breath. I sat on the edge of the bed while Benji pulled up the chair next to the desk. The room itself could really only be described as opulent. The soft black-and-gray carpet matched the solid gray wood of the desk, which was pushed against a floor-to-ceiling window that offered a beautiful view of the city.

After everything that had gone on, I decided to splurge and get me and Fran a week’s stay at the Four Seasons. She freaked out when I told her, but it was literally the least I could do after having put her in danger, even unintentionally.

“I’ll earn that trust back, I swear it, Eli. I... I’ve been going through something. Fighting a battle. I haven’t really spoken about it, but I had a realization after all of this...” He looked down at his hands, squeezing tight enough to turn the skin red.

“What is it?” A flash of worry sparked in my chest. I snuffed it out, remembering I

was supposed to be mad at him.

“I’m an alcoholic, Eli. Functioning but spiraling. I’ve been denying it for a while now, but this all pushed me down to my rock bottom. I can’t run from it anymore. Can’t hide it. A lot of my shitty decisions—not to excuse them but to explain them—happened when I was five shots deep.”

I took a moment to process his words. Had I picked up on the smell of alcohol on his breath? Sure, sometimes I did. But had I realized he had a drinking problem? No, it hadn’t crossed my mind.

“Missing your call last night, it was one of the straws that broke me. I was blackout drunk. I had no idea you needed me. I’m so fucking pissed with myself, Eli, but I swear, I’m going to make a change. I’m going into an intensive program. Already called them and signed up for a spot next month.”

“That’s... I’m sorry, Benji. I didn’t realize you were struggling.”

“I hid it as well as I could. It’s been one of my demons, but I’m learning to live with it. I don’t know how difficult the road ahead’s going to be, but I’m determined not to end up like my mother.” Benji’s hazel gaze locked with mine. I could see that he really meant what he was saying. Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes. He wiped them away with the back of his hand.

“When did it start?” I asked.

“A while ago. Actually, I think when I was in high school. I...” He paused, looked out the window, and collected himself. The sun had already set, the sky as dark as the light pollution would allow it to be.

“It’s okay,” I said, realizing this was difficult territory for him to tread. “You don’t

have to tell me.”

“No, but I do.” He looked at me, his eyes glistening. I scooted over on the bed and motioned for him to sit next to me. If I were being honest with myself, every second he wasn’t inches away from me was torture.

Fuck. Was this stupid of me? Possibly. But then again, when did anyone have rational thoughts around someone they lov—whoa, whoa.

Liked.

Liked.

“I’ve told you about Michael already. He was my best friend growing up. My rock, my support. He’s someone I also developed really, really strong feelings for. I can genuinely say he was my first love. My mom would sometimes take me to church on weekends she felt extra guilty, and I remember praying for Michael and I to end up together. Married. It wasn’t even legal back then, and I still prayed for it.” As Benji spoke, it felt like he was unfurling himself, petal by petal, opening for me. I gave him the space to continue. By the sad tone in his voice, I could already get a sense of where this story was going. Michael broke his heart. Michael crushed his idea of “soulmates” and “true love.” “I came out to him freshman year of high school. Then he came out a few months after. We kept it a secret from everyone, which only made the bond between us stronger. And then, a week before Christmas of our senior year, he was taken from me. Shot and killed. A road-rage incident that spiraled out of control.”

I couldn’t keep the shock from twisting my neck, my jaw dropped. “Benji...”

It somehow got worse.

“I was there when it happened. Told him to keep driving after the guy rear-ended us. But he wanted to file a police report. The driver got out, angry as hell, started calling us both fags. This set Michael off. He shouted back, and before I could pull him away, the other driver took out his gun and shot twice. One missed. The other tore right through his heart. I caught him, watched the light completely fade from his eyes. Sometimes when I look at my hands, I can still see them covered in his blood. I started drinking the day after that.”

“Oh, Benji...” There was nothing I could truly say that would encompass the vast expanse of sorrow I felt for him. I’d never been through something as deeply traumatic as that. Couldn’t even fathom what that would have done to my spirit.

“The driver fled. They couldn’t find him, either. It wasn’t until a private detective got involved that they were able to locate the guy. It’s part of the reason why I do what I do.”

“I can’t—I’m sorry. That’s beyond difficult.”

“It’s been rough. I don’t think I’ve ever fully processed it, either. Whenever I get even a moment of clarity, I try to dim it with alcohol. But not anymore. I’m going to change that. It’s what Michael would have wanted.”

I nodded at that. As difficult as this was to hear, I was happy that there was at least a turning point ahead.

“You remind me of him, you know.”

“I do? How?”

“You have the same sense of humor. I feel like he’d send the same exact silly memes or like the same shows. And he had a passion for theater, too, except he wanted to

direct and produce. Would have been great at it.”

I could feel the hurt radiating off Benji, but I could also sense a warm gratitude for having met Michael in the first place. “Sounds like he was a great guy.”

“He was. He really was.”

“What happened to the driver?”

“Life in jail. Rotting away. Still not a good enough punishment, but I was glad he was at least caught. He was a day away from leaving the country.”

“Whoa,” I said. I reached over and placed my hand on his thigh. I could have kept up an invisible barrier between us, but I didn’t want that anymore. I made a choice to invite him here, to listen to his story, and now, to rub his leg, squeezing it. “Thank you for opening up to me like that. You didn’t have to.”

“I know, but I felt like I needed to. Thank you for listening.” He blinked those long lashes of his, lips slightly parted. I swallowed a heavy lump in my throat. My heart started to beat a little faster as the heat from his leg spread up through my palm, coursing down to my core.

I wanted to kiss him. Fuck, I really wanted to kiss him.

“I’m sorry. Again. For being a creep. For not telling you everything from the start.”

“It’s okay,” I said, genuinely accepting his apology. “Just promise you won’t hide things from me again. Or watch me, unless I’m streaming and you’re tipping.” I gave him a wink to show I wasn’t being fully serious.

“I swear it. And I swear I’m going to stop drinking. Get things back in order.”

“And I’ll help out however I can.”

He smiled and squeezed my hand in his. He looked around the room, appearing to notice it for the first time since he got here. “Alright, so now tell me what happened last night? Why are you staying at one of the more expensive hotels in the city?” Benji’s eyebrow arched. “Not that I’m complaining.”

I chuckled at that, even though the question made my skin crawl. “Yeah, well, I am complaining. Nomad broke into my apartment yesterday.”

Benji’s jaw dropped. “What? How?”

“Through the fire escape. Broke the window.”

“Fucking hell. Eli, fuck. I’m so sorry I wasn’t in the right mindset to help you.”

“It’s okay. I understand. It sucked, that’s for sure, but thankfully, I wasn’t home, and neither was Fran. The cops came and said they have video of the person they think it is.”

“Did you see the video?”

“Mhmm. It’s from a coffee shop next to my building. It shows a lanky guy running down the street ten minutes after the break-in happened. He had a sweater on and had the hood over his head, so I couldn’t see a face. But the sweater was white, and there was clearly blood around the front pocket, where his hands were.”

Benji glanced down at his bandaged hand. I cocked my head. “You know, it’d be dumb of me if I didn’t ask...”

“I punched a mirror last night. In my drunken haze, I must have been pissed off at

myself. I know it's not great timing, but I swear, that's what happened."

If it weren't for the security cam footage, I would have found myself slightly more suspicious of how Benji hurt his hand. But I believed him.

I felt like I was making the right choice in trusting him.

Please, please, please, don't prove I'm wrong.

Chapter 27

Benji Morrison

I had to be dreaming. None of this could be real. Was I really this fucking lucky?

I messed up, but I owned it, and Eli appeared to have accepted my apology. He wasn't kicking me out or raising his voice. He wasn't smiling, either, but who was I to complain about anything? At least there was a chance for me to earn that smile back. That's all I needed.

A chance.

"I'm sorry again. Really." I tested the waters by reaching for his hand. He didn't pull away.

"Just please, Benji, don't fuck this up."

"I won't," I said, smiling. His lips twitched, curling at the corners. I was getting there, breaking through the invisible wall that had been erected between us—all because of me. "And I'll make it up to you."

"You better. That's a whole lot of making up."

"I fucked up. I really, really did. But I'm awake now. I can see what needs to be changed. And I'm going to change it—for myself."

“Good. You need to make sure you’re open to changing. It’s not going to be an easy road, but I know you can do it.” His hand squeezed mine. His lips curled up a little more, his blue eyes glinting in the light shining from the floor-to-ceiling window. We were on the thirtieth floor of the hotel, giving us a picturesque view of the city. Yet, no matter how beautiful the view could be, I found that my eyes wouldn’t drift away from Eli’s.

I got him back. I thought I was going to lose him, but this may have just made our bond even stronger.

“And,” Eli said, “I’ll help however I can. I doubt you can take Lucky with you, so I’ll be sure to watch him.”

That touched my heart. He didn’t need to go out of his way to make any of this easier. “I think he’ll be happy about that. Lucky seems to love your lap for some reason.”

“I mean, can you blame him?” Eli teased, brow arched.

I chuckled. “No, no, I definitely can’t.” The warmth in my heart began to spread outward, tendrils of heat stretching toward my fingers and toes, pooling around my gut. I wanted to lean in and kiss him but was unsure if that would be too much, too soon. Was the connection between us healed enough to give in to the primal lust that stirred inside me, or should I silence it and keep things simple for the night?

Eli, as if reading my mind and deciding to answer my question for me, leaned in. I didn’t hesitate or flinch. I matched his movement, leaning forward, lips crashing together, my good hand rising up to cup the back of his head. The kiss started off at a hundred. Our tongues lashed together, his taste filling me up and making me hungry for him. The heat in my core roared to life, exploding, burning through my nerves and turning my body into a taut live wire.

During a brief break for breath, I looked into Eli's eyes and tried to search for any hesitation. "You don't need to?—"

"Just shut up and kiss me."

I smiled and did as he asked, kissing him hard. We fell back on the bed. Eli climbed on top of me, grinding down on my stiffening cock. I moaned into the kiss. He was already rock hard. I could feel his need for me straining against his shorts. I wanted them off.

Needed his skin against mine.

Craved the heat of his cock, the taste of his precum.

I reached down and tugged at the waistband of his shorts. He lifted up slightly and pulled them off, revealing he hadn't been wearing anything underneath. No wonder I could practically feel every vein, every twitch of his rock-hard dick.

"Get up here," I said, pulling his hips toward my face. He finished kicking off his shorts and inched upward, his cock already dripping wet as he brought it to my hungry mouth. I licked the precum first, squeezing his cock at the base to try and get more. A clear bead dripped out. I ran my thumb over it, took it between two fingers, and spread them, watching the clear and sticky precum stretch between my fingers.

"Fuck, I love how wet you get," I said, looking up into Eli's eyes as I sucked my fingers clean.

"Let me have a taste," he said. I stroked him again, drawing out more of that tasty precum. I collected it on my thumb and brought it up to his lips. He sucked my thumb into his mouth, smiling, cock twitching. Part of me still expected to wake up on the floor of my apartment with empty bottles of vodka littered around me, Lucky giving

me judgmental stares from his perch on the couch. How could any of this be real? How could I really be underneath my dream man after almost losing him the day before?

Whatever. I wasn't in a place to question anything. I had to let it go. Sink into this moment and enjoy it with Eli. We were back together again. He didn't want me to disappear off the face of the Earth.

"Suck it," Eli said, pushing his cock forward, painting my lips with his precum. I smiled up at him and massaged his balls, leaning up so I could bury my nose in the crook between his leg and cock, inhaling his addictive scent. He groaned and twined his fingers through my hair, pushing my head down onto his cock. I opened my mouth and took him in, enjoying the way he twitched as my mouth enveloped him. "Fuck yeah," he hissed before reaching behind and rubbing my cock through my pants. My full balls ached for his touch. He started to pull down my zipper but was having a little trouble, so I let go of his balls and helped him, his cock still stuffed down my throat. I lifted up and tugged my pants and underwear off.

"Damn, look at that big cock," he said, stroking me while I continued to suck him off. "Here, let's sixty-nine."

Fine with me. He pulled his cock from between my lips and turned around, his legs on either side of my head as he positioned himself above me. He slowly lowered down. I took him in my mouth as he took me in his. The pleasure felt insane. He knew how to suck dick, swirling and hollowing his cheeks and taking me to the back of his throat without hesitation. It felt even better with my moans being stifled by his throbbing dick. He tasted so good, too. Salty, sweet, heavenly.

We worked each other for a blissful amount of time, the entire world disappearing and leaving nothing behind but the two of us. After everything we'd been through, this was exactly what I felt was needed to push through it. A reminder of the absolute

euphoria our connection created. This shit transcended beyond sex. It was pushing into spiritual territory.

Eli pulled up for air, gasping and groaning as I continued to blow him. Just two men, exploring and connecting and playing with each other. Pure passion and sex. We were here for each other, pushing us up to the heights of absolute fucking ecstasy.

“God, this feels so good,” Eli said before going back down and taking me between his lips, his heat encasing the head of my cock first before he opened his jaw and took more of me.

Eli gave a thrust, his cock pushing deep, his smooth and tightening balls resting on my nose.

That’s it, baby. Use me like a fuck toy.

Eli started to face-fuck me while he continued to deep-throat my dick. It was nearly too much. I felt close to blowing, and we hadn’t even gotten to the main course yet. This was just the appetizer.

I reached up and pressed gently against his hips. He stopped his thrusts and pulled out, a string of saliva still connecting me to my man. “Fuck, baby, I’m already getting close.”

Eli lifted himself off me, turning around to meet my gaze. His blue eyes were blown wide, lips red and swollen. He looked primal, beautiful. His blond curls were shining in the sunlight, one rogue strand falling down onto his forehead.

“I want you inside me,” I said, almost breathless, the words tumbling from my lips. I needed him to fuck me like I needed air in my lungs.

His lips curled into a delicious smirk. “Fuck yeah, I’ve been wanting to sink this inside you.”

He grabbed the base of his thick cock, slick from my spit, and rubbed it against mine. “Do it, please. I need it.” I reached out, my hand sliding around the back of his neck, pulling him down into a searing kiss. Our bodies aligned perfectly, and I felt his erection throbbing against my thigh. Eli groaned softly into my mouth, a sound that sent sparks straight to my twitching and leaking cock.

Eli reached into the bedside drawer, grabbing some lube. “Always be prepared.”

“That’s why I l—like you.”

Whoa. That was close.

Eli smiled and slicked himself up. I opened my legs and squirmed as he used his lubed-up hand to stroke me. I grabbed a pillow and pushed it under my lower back, making it easier for the both of us. My heart hammered with anticipation as he positioned himself between my legs, pressing the head of his cock against my hole. His eyes never left mine as he slowly pushed inside, a guttural moan escaping both our throats as the head of his cock slipped in.

“Fuck, Eli,” I gasped, gripping the sheets as Eli hoisted my legs onto his shoulders. I welcomed the stretch, the burn that melted into pure bliss as he sank into me balls-deep.

“You feel incredible,” Eli whispered, kissing my ankle, kissing my foot. He began to move, hips rolling sensually at first, each stroke deliberate and slow, driving me to the brink of near madness. Every nerve ending in my body ignited, every piece of me so hungry for this man. “So fucking good.”

He increased his pace, slamming into me deeper with every thrust. Sweat began to bead across our skin. I grunt with every thrust, Eli looking down and watching his cock disappear inside me. Our rhythm grew frantic, desperate, each movement filled with passion, apology, forgiveness, and pure fucking bliss.

“That’s it, baby,” I said, my toes curling, the sound of skin slapping skin nearly drowning me out. “Pound my tight hole. Make me yours.”

“You’re mine. You’re mine, Benji.”

“I am. I’ll always be. Fuck yeah, oh fuck.” My eyes rolled to the back of my head.

“Benji,” Eli breathed, voice strained with pleasure as he grabbed my cock, stroking me in sync with his thrusts. “I’m gonna come.”

“Fuck, yes,” I groaned, losing myself entirely beneath him. His cock pounded into me, hitting every perfect spot inside, sending white-hot pleasure coursing through my veins. “Fill me up, Eli. Please.”

He cried out, burying himself deep as he exploded inside me, flooding me with his warmth. The feeling pushed me over the edge, my own orgasm erupting in thick ropes across my stomach and chest. Rope after rope of it. Felt never-ending. Stars exploded in my vision, my legs twitching and shaking, still lifted up on Eli’s shoulders. He looked down at my load with an impressed look.

“Holy fuck,” Eli said. “That was incredible. You came so much.”

“Think this could be a record.”

“Hot,” Eli said. He ran his fingers through a streak of cum across my chest and brought it up to his lips, sucking and smiling.

“Shit, Eli, you’re so insanely sexy. It’s almost unreal.”

“Says one of the hottest men I’d ever laid eyes on.” He leaned down and kissed me. I could taste myself on his tongue, which made my still-swollen cock twitch and leak. I looked up and felt myself becoming lost in those eyes. He hadn’t pulled out yet. I felt full, complete, wanted and needed and happy and...

“I love you.” The words had left me before I could even think about what I was saying.

Eli’s eyes went wide. He blinked a couple of times, his mouth in the shape of a surprised O, dick still inside me.

Well... fuck. That wasn’t exactly the reaction I’d been hoping for.

Chapter 28

Elijah Grant

The words came as a complete and total shock. At first, I thought I must have misheard. He couldn't have possibly said he loved me... right?

Except he had. And it certainly sounded like he meant it.

I shifted above him, still inside him. Fuck. I wanted to say it back, wanted to reassure him that I was beginning to feel it, too, but... it wouldn't be fair. This was too soon. My mind still reeled from everything that happened.

"I... Benji, I'm?—"

Fuuuuck. I slowly pulled myself out of him, trying not to focus on the look of sheer disappointment that momentarily crossed his face before he went neutral. I lay down next to him on the bed, propping myself up on an elbow.

"It's okay. It wasn't the right time for me to say that. I'm sorry," he said.

"No, you definitely don't have to apologize for that."

"I mean it. It's alright. We aren't even anything official. It's just, I don't know, I couldn't keep it from coming out."

I swallowed a heavy lump in my throat. It wouldn't necessarily be a lie if I said it

back to him. I just... I needed more time. I had to sort through my thoughts first. I knew I accepted his apologies, and I wasn't one to hold any grudges, but it'd be irresponsible of me to blindly move forward without actually taking the time to process anything.

But there was something else I could say that would help ease the burn of the situation. "Then how about we make it official?" I asked. I may have been hesitant about saying three of the most impactful words in the English language, but I wasn't at all hesitant about asking Benji to become my boyfriend. We'd been through some shit, but nothing that didn't make what we already had weaker. If anything, I felt like I could trust Benji more after this. He could have lied to me. Kept everything a secret. I likely wouldn't have figured it out. Instead, he came clean about everything, even knowing how fucked-up it had been.

We were all humans, and humans made mistakes. Some of those mistakes were larger than others, but most of them were forgivable. Understandable. And it was true that I never felt unsafe with Benji. The exact opposite, actually. Maybe it also helped that I earned a living from people watching me. Not that I wanted Benji having unlimited access to what I was doing, although giving him some access could actually be kind of hot...

"I'm covered in a gallon of cum and currently have your swimmers doing laps inside me. I think you know my answer to that." The laughter between us helped ease over any residual awkwardness. "Yes. I think that'd be incredible."

"Great, Detective. " I leaned in and kissed him, holding his face, his beard gently scratching at my palm. I'd been through a hefty swing of emotions lately, but if I could just stay in this happy-filled, blissful zone, then I'd be good. And that was another reason why I didn't hesitate to forgive Benji: he made me happy . Not just safe but genuinely and truly happy. He made me forget about my worries and focus in on the "now." His presence and warmth had the same effect as spreading a cold

handful of aloe vera lotion over a sunburn. He soothed me in ways no one else had before.

There was still a rocky road ahead, and he'd need my support to make it through the program to help with his drinking, but I was more than willing to help him.

"Let me get you a towel," I said, kissing him again before rolling out of the bed and going to the bathroom. I grabbed a towel and soaked it in warm water before wringing it out and bringing it back to Benji. "You look like a glazed starfish," I said, chuckling as I sat on the edge of the bed.

"Are you into it?" he asked with a wink.

"Actually—yeah, kind of." I laughed. He reached for the towel, but I shook my head and began to gently clean him off, wiping the cum off his hairy chest and belly. He put his hands behind his head and watched me work with a relaxed grin on his handsome face. He was likely overdue for a haircut by a week or two, judging from the dark brown hairs that started to inch over his ears, and even then, he was still one of the hottest guys I'd ever laid eyes on. He had a rugged handsomeness to him that always had me in a constant state of arousal. He was the essence of man, and I loved that. Broad shoulders, strong chest, hairy stomach, big balls, and a thick dick.

Oh, and those damn forearms of his. Couldn't forget those.

He was a work of art. An altar I wanted to worship at for weeks on end. And maybe now that we were officially boyfriends, I'd be able to do exactly that.

I ran the towel over his stomach, down toward his soft cock. I gently wiped his still-leaking dick, grabbing him, then bending down and kissing his pubes, his shaft, his thigh. He started to get hard again, firming in my grip. I sucked him into my mouth and laid my head down on his leg, gently swirling my tongue around the head. He

grew harder between my lips as he played with my hair and let out a soft moan.

“Damn,” he said. “I’m already ready for round two.”

I popped his stiff cock out of my mouth and held it up, admiring the girth and length. I had one of my legs thrown over his, my own hardening dick twitching between us. I rutted my hips and rubbed myself against him. He wasn’t the only one who was ready for round two.

“Good,” I said, slowly stroking him. “Because I want to fuck another load into you. I want to keep claiming you until the sun comes up.”

“Make me yours.”

“I plan to.”

* * *

I woke up wrapped in Benji’s arms, my head pressed against his chest, his steady heartbeat a comforting rhythm in my ear. The warmth of his body wrapped around me made me feel safe, secure. Loved—even if I wasn’t ready to say the word yet.

Sunlight streamed through the thin white curtains. I stretched slowly, careful not to wake Benji.

Today was my audition day. Excitement and nerves tangled in my gut, propelling me out of bed. I hadn’t been to an audition in over a year. I thought that part of my life—those dreams of mine—were done and dusted. But judging by the bundle of nerves sitting in my chest, I still felt like I wanted to be an actor. That dream had never died; it only took a step back, biding time for the perfect opportunity to present itself.

Could this be that opportunity?

I grabbed my laptop, opened the audition email, and reread the details. Everything seemed straightforward enough. I still didn't have any sides, but that was fine. I was good at improv and on-the-spot memorization. I wondered if this was for one of those superhero movies, and that was why they had to keep the script top secret.

Benji stirred on the bed, one of his big, hairy legs sticking out from under the plush comforter. He was a heavy sleeper, so I didn't worry too much about waking him.

I left the laptop open on the table as I got ready. Showered, dressed, and buzzing with anticipation, I scribbled a quick note for Benji, promising to bring back coffee and a bagel for him. Lucky was here, too, curled up on a pillow next to the window. I gave him a head scratch before sneaking out.

The audition venue wasn't far. I walked through the busy hotel lobby, past a huge group of cheerleaders who likely were here for a competition. I walked out into the fresh spring morning and was greeted by a blast of exhaust from a delivery truck. I coughed and waved it off, walking down the street toward the subway station.

My nerves didn't get any better as I waited for my train. The lady chanting some kind of spell a couple of benches down from me wasn't helping that anxiety, either. I moved to another platform. This one was empty.

I was alone.

Fuck... I was alone. This was what Benji told me exactly not to do. I should have woken him up but then what? I didn't want to ask him to chaperone me everywhere I had to go. He was a detective, not a personal bodyguard. I had a feeling he wouldn't say no to me if I asked, but that was all the more reason for me not to ask. I'd be fine. I couldn't live my entire life in fear.

That was pretty easy to do when I was riding the high of last night's fuck-fest. Any logical thought still left in my brain had been emptied out of me after every orgasm. I woke up feeling like today would be my day, and I was about to make this audition my bitch.

The audition wasn't too far from my hotel. It was down by the Financial District, a busy part of the city—as if the city had any spots that weren't busy.

I took a deep breath as I entered the building. It looked like a run-down office building. I walked up a cramped staircase that smelled strongly of musty mold before reaching a long hallway. Silence engulfed the empty space. Strange. There were a few doors that were closed with different casting agency companies written across the frosted glass. Where were the other actors?

“Hello?” I called out, hearing my voice echo.

Hmmm... okay, this was weird. The hair on the back of my neck stood tall. I shouldn't be here. I had to turn around.

A door creaked open. I nearly jumped out of my skin. A tall woman with bleach-blond hair and a skimpy pink swimsuit walked out, holding a stack of what appeared to be her headshots. “Thank you!” she said cheerily over her shoulder.

“Tell your agent to keep an eye on her emails!”

The girl gave a giddy laugh and said she would before she strutted past me. She was nearly a foot taller than me and smelled like vanilla and suntan lotion.

Okay, so there were clearly actual casting offices in this building. It couldn't be all that dangerous. It wasn't like I was showing up at someone's apartment for a casting couch moment. This must have been legit. I couldn't turn back now.

I checked the email again. The audition was in room 1120. Judging by the numbers on the doors around me, that would be closer toward the end of the hall. I straightened my shoulders and strengthened my resolve. This could be huge. I didn't have time to second-guess things or succumb to fear. I allowed myself to do that before. I gave in to my inner saboteur and almost abandoned my dreams of becoming an actor altogether.

Not today. I had hope. Things were looking up for me. I would bundle this energy up into a tight and inspirational ball, swallow it down, and stroll into the audition with the mindset that I'd already landed the role.

I walked past more closed offices. Milk Casting. Abbot & Abbot Casting. Sunshine Dreaming. I reached room 1120. There wasn't a name of a casting company written on this door. I knocked first, but no one answered.

Again, those damn spindly little shivers crept up my spine. Instinct pulled against logic.

I jiggled the doorknob. It pushed open. I walked into a small room with black walls and a red leather couch set in front of a tripod and a camera. There wasn't a desk behind the camera where the casting director likely sat. A box of cheap props was pushed up against the wall. There was a curtain that hung from the ceiling just to my left, covering what must have been the wall.

"Hello?"

I heard a shuffling sound from behind me. Before I could even react, a sharp prick pierced my neck, followed by an immediate, overwhelming dizziness.

"Wha—" My vision blurred. My knees buckled.

Darkness overtook me as I collapsed onto the cold, hard floor.

Oddly enough, I didn't feel fear in those fleeting moments before the black. Instead, I felt dumb. So fucking stupid. I should have turned around and gone right back into bed with Benji. This had been a mistake, a huge one.

Possibly a lethal one.

Fuck.

Chapter 29

Benji Morrison

I woke up with a deep stretch under the covers. My morning wood throbbed against the mattress. I gave a sleepy groan and pushed down against the firm pressure.

Boyfriend. He can help.

I rolled over and expected to throw an arm around a snoring Eli but was met with empty space. That's when I remembered him mentioning his audition this morning. It was the first audition he'd been to in a while, and he had sounded nervous when he brought it up. I told him I'd go with him, but I guess he didn't want to wake me.

Hmm. Not great.

I didn't like the idea of him being out there alone. We still hadn't made all that much headway with Nomad, and the fact that they were bold enough to break into Eli's apartment didn't bode well. This person was growing more and more desperate for his attention.

I reached for my phone. Lucky stirred, lifting his head and watching me as I sat up on the bed. It was already ten thirty in the morning. What time had Eli said the audition was? Ten? It should have been over by now.

I sent him a text. He always kept his phone on silent, so I wasn't worried about ruining his audition.

Morning stud. Hope you're killing it at the audition. Text me when you're done.

Swoosh . The text was sent. I set the phone down and threw off the comforter. My cock was still rock hard and throbbing. We'd fucked three times last night, and I was still horny for him. Fuck.

Beyond the sex, last night went so much better than I had thought it would. Sure, I might have stuck a foot in my mouth by prematurely announcing my love for him, but thankfully, the stinging embarrassment only lasted a minute or two before Eli eased over the situation with his "boyfriend" proposal. I wasn't upset that he couldn't say it back, either. In fact, I respected Eli even more for being truthful. It's what this relationship had to be built on. A foundation that would carry us together no matter what pressure or outside forces were exerted.

He gave me hope and optimism, two things I'd need in spades if I wanted to successfully complete that thirty-day program. It was an anxiety-inducing prospect. Even the idea of it made me want to open up the minifridge and see if they had any tiny bottles of vodka I could down. But that was exactly the point. I'd become dependent—addicted—to the numbness that alcohol brought with it. I'd fallen down the same black hole my mother fell into... Was she still falling?

Her struggle had been a long one. I didn't understand it when I was younger. I took it personally. Felt as though if she couldn't stop drinking for me, then I must not have meant enough to her. But knowing what I did now, it had nothing to do with anyone else. Alcoholism was a nasty disease with insidious claws that sunk deep into the victim before they could even realize it. It was a literal fucking toxin.

I didn't know what got into me. Maybe I was still riding the high and thrill that came from making Eli mine last night. I grabbed my phone again, unlocked it, and went straight to my contacts. I tapped the M button and, without another thought, called my mom.

It started to ring, and my heart started to hammer. This was a mistake. She wasn't going to answer. She probably didn't even recognize my number. I should have done this sooner, should have reached out years ago. What if she needed my help? What if?—

“Hello?”

I sat in a brief moment of stunned silence. My mom's voice. Shit. I hadn't heard her in so long.

“Mom, it's Benji.”

“Benji!” My mother's voice came through the phone, slurred and disoriented. Guess that answered my questions about how she'd been doing with her drinking problem. A sting of disappointment hit me directly in the chest. I guess I'd been hoping a different version of my mother would pick up my call. “It's been—God, how long? What's wrong, sweetheart? Are you okay? Wait—hold on.” The clink of a glass bottle echoed through the phone. My heart sank even further. Flashes to being a kid and finding empty wine bottles all over the kitchen as I made my own breakfast before school, Mom passed out cold on the couch. She'd get angry when the noises of me getting ready for school would wake her.

“I was just—are you drunk right now? I can call back.”

She hesitated, her breathing turning ragged. “Don't—don't start. I'm fine. What's wrong?” Her voice trembled like she'd shatter if I pressed any harder. The warmth I'd been hoping for turned bitter cold. This wasn't how I imagined it—how I wanted it to be.

“Mom, listen. I called because...” I didn't even know why, exactly. To reconnect? To forgive? To try to understand what my own recovery might look like? “I just needed

to know if you were alright. I wanted to?—”

“I’m fine, Benji,” she cut in harshly. “I’m always fine.”

Her words pierced straight through me, an old wound reopened, blood still fresh. I’d heard this same tired refrain so many times before, and it hurt just as much now as it ever had. She was never truly fine, and her lying to herself only ever brought more pain and trauma.

But maybe I’d been coming at this wrong the entire time. I’d developed a thick shell to try and deflect some of the mental and verbal blows she’d give me. It had turned me cold toward her. What if warmth and understanding was all she needed? I could at least offer her that.

“You don’t have to pretend,” I said softly. “We both know?—”

She cut me off with a scoff. “You called to lecture me?” Her voice sharpened. “Don’t you have your own life now? Your own problems to worry about? Do you need money—is that what this is about?”

My chest tightened painfully. This wasn’t the conversation I’d hoped for, but it was the one I should have expected. “I don’t need money.” I need my mother. “But that doesn’t mean?—”

“I can handle myself, Benji. You’re not my parent. You’re my child.” There was a silence, filled only with our strained breathing.

“Where, uh, where are you right now?” Damn. I didn’t even know where my own mother was. What state she was in, where she considered home. How had I allowed things to get this bad?

“I’m in Philly right now. Had an old friend out here. It’s been a rough couple of years, Benji. Can’t sugarcoat it for you.”

“I know, Mom. I know. I’ve been going through shit, too. Trying to fix myself now. I think maybe... I don’t know. I can check in with you more and push you to maybe do the same?”

“You mean, what, go to rehab?” My mom’s tone turned acidic.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.”

She huffed out a breath. “Look, I’ve gotta go. It was nice talking to you. Maybe call me again in another year.”

She hung up, leaving nothing but silence in her wake.

Silence and questions and regrets.

I should have reached out sooner. Should have been the bigger person and tried to bridge the distance that had grown between us.

But, well, I didn’t. I was too caught up in my own bullshit to realize how far away my own mother drifted. I hoped she wasn’t lost to the sea. This was only the start. I cracked open the door, now I just had to gently keep pushing it open.

I dropped my phone onto the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. I’d been stupid to think that one phone call would magically fix everything. But still, the motivation to help my mother, to help myself—it solidified into something solid inside my chest. A promise. I wasn’t going to become like her. I’d make the program work. And when I came out the other side, stronger and clearer, I’d help her, too.

With a heavy sigh, I rolled out of bed and went to get dressed. My cock had softened completely—nothing like family drama to kill the mood. My thoughts turned to Eli. It'd been nearly half an hour since my text, and still no reply.

A strange prickling ran down my spine. Auditions could take a little bit of time, but there was probably more time spent waiting than actually auditioning. He should have seen my text. Sent me a quick update.

I grabbed my phone, shot another quick message.

Brushed my teeth, pulled on some shorts. I refilled Lucky's water bowl. Went to check my phone. Still no reply.

Something felt wrong. Deeply wrong. He must have left close to two hours ago. I could be overreacting, but what was the alternative? Lie in bed and wait around while Eli could have been in serious trouble?

That's when I noticed Eli's laptop, still open on the small hotel desk. I approached, glancing over the email he'd left open. The audition details were vague—too vague. A hot flash of anxiety rippled through me, my instincts suddenly screaming louder than ever. The location—downtown, in a seedy office building—felt completely off for any reputable casting call.

My pulse quickened, pounding like a drumbeat in my ears.

Fuck. Eli had walked straight into a trap.

Grabbing my keys, I bolted from the room, the address seared into my memory.

* * *

The building loomed above me like a crusted and gray giant, rising high toward the cloudy sky. It didn't look as abandoned as the image I'd seen on the street view. There were even a couple of well-dressed actors walking out, still holding the lines they auditioned with.

That put me more at ease. This likely was just an overreaction.

A second thought crossed my mind: what if Eli was just fine and found me chasing him down? What if he thought I was stalking him? This was purely just for his protection, but I could see how the optics would get twisted.

The last thing I wanted to do was scare him away. Shit. I should turn back around. Give him some more time. He mentioned how it sounded like it was for a big project. What if I ruined his chances at his dream role because I made a bad judgment call and barged in there?

I started to turn around. He was going to know I looked at his computer. Read the email. Wasn't that a break in the trust and guidelines we set up just the night before?

And still, something tugged at the corners of my psyche.

Don't leave him. Just check.

I couldn't risk it. He'd understand if I was wrong, and if I wasn't...

I threw open the warped wooden door, the hinges screeching loudly in protest. Inside, the smell of dampness and decay assaulted me, the hallway stretching out before me like a sinister maze.

The rooms appeared to all belong to casting companies, which was another good sign. I almost turned around, but my feet carried me forward.

Second door on the right. It was cracked open. I pressed an ear against the door. It was completely silent. Odd. I'd think there would at least be some conversation happening. Or that I'd be able to hear Eli reciting his lines.

But then I did hear something. A pained and elongated moan. Eli.

Was it part of the audition? Could he be acting as if he were hurt?

Fuck it. I had to check. Had to make sure.

I cracked open the door. No one shouted at me to shut it. I peeked inside.

There he was, sprawled out on the dirty concrete floor, barely stirring. There was a camera, but it wasn't even pointed at him. The tripod had the camera aimed at a wall.

No. This wasn't right. I barreled inside, running to Eli, falling to my knees next to him. I lifted his head. His eyes fluttered open and had a difficult time focusing on mine.

"Benji...?" he slurred weakly, eyes glassy. "What, uh, what's going on?"

"I'm here, Eli. It's alright. We'll?—"

"Watch out!" Eli's scream shattered the quiet, his eyes snapping wide with panic.

Adrenaline surged through me as I twisted sharply, instinct saving me from the needle aimed directly at my neck. It missed by inches, the attacker stumbling forward with a frustrated growl and falling onto a couch, knocking over a tripod and sending the camera flying across the room.

My heart slammed against my ribs as I looked around, bracing for a fight.

Shock rooted me to the ground.

Standing there, eyes cold and filled with venom, a syringe clenched tight in his trembling fist, was someone I never expected to see. Someone who was toward the absolute bottom of my suspects list.

It was Zack, Eli's best friend.

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Chapter 30

Elijah Grant

It felt like my world had been flipped upside down. I didn't know what the fuck was happening. Why was Benji here, holding me in his lap? Why did my head feel like it'd been crushed under a car tire? Why was Zack currently running toward Benji with a needle—holy fuck.

“Watch out!”

The words were ripped out of me. Benji twisted just in time to dodge the needle and stop it from plunging into his neck. The move brought me closer to him. He cradled me almost as if I was a baby.

Memories began to form, to sharpen. My audition. My fear. A cold and sharp pain sinking into my neck before the curtains dropped on my vision.

And now Zack was here? What was he doing here? Why did he have a needle? Why...

I lifted my head and locked eyes with my best friend. He had his back against the wall. The room wasn't large, but Benji was already getting to his feet, and in one swift movement, he pulled a gun out from a concealed holster.

The room suddenly became a hundred times smaller.

My breath hitched. A gun. I'd never seen one in person before, this close and lethal. He held it out in front of him, feet braced on the dirty ground. Zack's eyes widened before he looked to me. He had a crazed appearance to him. He wore dirty dark blue scrubs, his hair long and unruly. He was nearly unrecognizable.

My best friend. The closest person to me besides Benji.

He was also my stalker.

Zack was Nomad.

"Why?" I asked, getting up onto my feet. I rubbed at my neck, which was still sore. I hadn't realized there were tears forming until they slipped down my cheeks, wetting my lips. Benji thrust a protective hand onto my chest and gently pushed me back. Zack's attention shifted back to the barrel of the gun, pointed directly at his head. My mouth was ash dry, my heart beating like a sledgehammer against my ribs. "This entire time. It's been you. Why? Why, Zack?"

"Because I love you, Eli! Isn't that obvious? Because I've loved you since we were younger. I fell even more for you once we hooked up. You'd given me the best couple of nights of my life. You were always there for me. You, you, you cared for me. When I felt abandoned and lost, like I couldn't make anyone around me happy or proud, you lifted me up. Reminded me that—fuck!—reminded me I was worth something. I asked you out, wanted you to be mine, but you kept rejecting me.

"Then I started watching your streams. Eli, I couldn't get enough. The obsession I have for you is—Eli, fuck, I want you. That's when I saw Damon commenting, when I saw how much he hated you. That night I came up with the Nomad character—flipped his name backward, thought it would be the perfect way to push you into my arms. I'd be there to protect you from the crazy stalker. But... you didn't come to me. And if I can't have you, then no one can. Do you understand that? Do

you understand that I can't see you with anyone else but me?"

Zack looked like a cornered and rabid dog. Spitfire foamed at the edges of his mouth. His pupils were blown wide open. I wouldn't be surprised if he said he'd railed back seven lines of coke before this.

I didn't recognize my best friend at all. I was staring at a monster. A complete and utter monster, devoid of any heart, wanting to simply feast on mine. A mixture of absolute shock and stomach-twisting nausea washed over me. I wanted to drop to my knees again but somehow managed to keep upright. Benji's hand held the gun steady.

Jesus fucking Christ. A gun. This could all go very, very badly.

"My apartment... did you break in?"

Zack nodded. "I was going to wait for you. I was done waiting for you. But then you text me to meet up. I changed my mind. Then I thought I could use that moment to get you to stay over. You didn't."

"What were you planning on doing to him?" Benji asked. I could tell all he felt was raw anger. His face was red, his attention pinned to a trembling Zack. He held the needle out like a gun of his own. How did this happen? How did we get here? I was just with Zack a couple of days ago.

His knuckles. They were all cut up.

He'd been the one to break into my apartment. Had he planned on dragging me right out of my bed?

"I was going to end it. End it all. Eli, you've said it before—you've told me how when you find your one true love, you never want to let them go. I don't want to let

you go. Ever. So I was going to wake you up, kiss you, then kill us both.”

I blinked as if that would suddenly clean the slate and make this all okay.

There it was. A full confession. He was going to kill me. I didn’t know what got into me—maybe a heavy dose of adrenaline could be blamed—but I laughed. Literally fucking laughed. Shock was giving way to the same anger that radiated off Benji as if he were a flickering blue flame. “Here? You were going to kill me in a shitty casting office? What the actual fuck?”

Zack’s head reeled back. He looked around the dingy room. “It was... the only place with last-minute reservations open. I faked a casting company. I knew you’d come if I made the audition sound big enough.”

“Why not just invite me to your place? At least there, I could have died on the couch I lent you money to buy.” Benji tilted his head and glanced in my direction. This was fucking insane. I felt like I was losing my mind. How could this actually be happening? “Zack, we could have been best friends for the rest of our lives. I would have always had your back. Always been there if you needed?—”

“Don’t you fucking see! That’s what makes this even worse. You’re always so close, and I still can’t even touch you. Like at the masquerade party. I wanted to fuck you so bad. When I saw you leave to the private room, I almost killed everyone in that fucking party. I was about to find a knife and go on a fucking stabbing spree. That’s how wild you drive me. It’s fucked-up.”

Benji’s finger twitched on the trigger. It was clear in Zack’s tone that he wasn’t joking in the slightest. He meant every single word he uttered. He really was ready to kill everyone just because I let him down. How had I ever been so close to someone so broken? And not even realize it?

He dropped the needle. It rolled to a stop near my feet. I took a breath, hoping this was a sign it was all drawing to an end. Nothing needed to be escalated from here. There was no saving the friendship, but at least no one had to get hurt today. That's what mattered most. I wanted us all to be able to walk away from here so that we could all eventually heal from this somehow. That wouldn't happen if blood had been shed today.

"Just let us call the police," Benji said. He didn't lower the gun. Its presence in the room felt like being locked in a cage with a lethal tiger. I was just glad that it was Benji who held its leash. "We can get you help. Get you better."

"No you can't. Nothing except having Eli will make this better. I'm broken. Ruined. Eli, you ruined me."

I shook my head, the anger turning into a hollow sadness. "I would have tried to help however I could."

"No. You broke me." Zack's face turned into a snarl. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife. It was small but looked lethal, the sharp steel glittering in the surgical white lighting. Benji looked like he was about to shoot. I was about to watch my ex-best friend's brains get blown out all across the wall.

"Zack, please, put that down," I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

Zack's eyes darted wildly between Benji and me. Panic flashed across his face, his breathing rapid and shallow. I could see the exact moment something inside him snapped. A guttural, animalistic scream ripped from his throat as he lunged toward us.

"Eli, move!" Benji shouted, stepping protectively in front of me. My body froze, trapped in the paralyzing vise of shock and fear. Zack closed the distance in less than

a heartbeat, the knife aimed straight at Benji's throat. In one fluid motion, Benji twisted his body, sidestepping the knife's deadly trajectory, bringing the grip of the gun up hard and swift against Zack's temple.

A sharp crack echoed through the room.

Zack staggered, his knees buckling beneath him. He collapsed to the floor in a heap, his eyes rolling back, the knife slipping from his fingers. The silence that followed was deafening, broken only by the sound of our ragged breaths.

Benji stood over Zack's unconscious form, chest heaving, gun still gripped tightly in his shaking hand. Slowly, he lowered the weapon, turning toward me.

Holy shit. It was over. This entire saga had come to an end. All my fear, my anxieties, my worries, they all had been leading to this. There would be a lot of time and therapy that was going to be needed to fully comprehend all of this, but at least it was over.

I was safe. We were safe.

I turned away from Zack and leaned against Benji, my heart still racing. He pulled me into a protective embrace. The strength and warmth of his body instantly enveloped me, grounding me back to reality, pulling me into the moment. Benji had come to rescue me. From the start. If it wasn't for him, this could have all ended very differently.

"Fuck, Eli," Benji whispered, his voice trembling as he clutched me tighter. "Fuck. I thought—shit, I thought I was going to lose you. Are you okay? Hurt at all?"

"No, I'm okay. I'm okay." I buried my face into his chest, breathing him in, feeling his heartbeat pound steadily beneath my cheek. It was the sweetest sound in the

world. “You saved me,” I whispered, voice thick with tears. “Benji, you saved my life.”

His arms tightened around me, his hand gently stroking the back of my head. “I would have torn this city apart looking for you. You’re everything to me, Eli. Everything.”

My vision blurred with tears. My best friend had betrayed me, nearly killed me, and the one man I’d been hesitant to fully trust had risked everything to save my life. There were no more questions left unanswered, no more doubts lingering in my heart.

“I don’t want to hold back anymore,” I murmured, lifting my head to look into Benji’s deep, soulful eyes. “Life’s way too short for that.”

He cupped my face in his large hands, brushing away my tears with his thumb. “What do you mean?” he asked softly, uncertainty flickering briefly in his expression.

“I mean I love you, Benji. I love you so fucking much, and I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the other day. I should have. I don’t want to live with any what-ifs.” The words spilled from me effortlessly, truth resonating with every syllable. I’d never meant those words more than when I said them to this man. He opened my eyes to a world that was full of love and companionship. He never once judged me, never looked down on me. He made me happy in every single way imaginable.

How could I not love this man?

Benji’s eyes widened slightly, surprise quickly melting away into pure, unbridled joy. His smile stretched wide, illuminating his entire face. Even under these terrible fluorescent lights in this cramped space, he still looked good.

“I love you, too, Eli.” He shot a glance down at the floor. I couldn’t even look at

Zack. “Now, let’s get the police here so we can explain what happened and get us out of here.”

“Good idea,” I said. “I really don’t want to be here anymore.”

“Go wait outside. I’ll keep an eye on Zack until the cops get here.”

He squeezed his hand around mine. I leaned up and stole another kiss before I left the room. I stepped into the hallway. A couple of actors were milling about, likely trying to listen to what was happening in the room. It probably sounded like a wild audition to them.

I walked out of the building and sucked in a breath of fresh air for what felt like the first time in years. The sunshine was bright, the city loud. Everything felt so much more alive .

Well, I didn’t get the dream role, but at least I got the dream man.

Chapter 31

Benji Morrison

The apartment had never been quieter.

The city's sounds still filtered in—sirens, car horns, the occasional bark from a neighbor's dog—but inside, everything felt still. As if the walls were holding their breath along with me.

Eli was in the shower. I could hear the faint rush of water through the door as I stood in the kitchen, staring at the half-full bottle of wine I'd left on the counter.

I didn't want it. Not anymore. Not after everything that happened. Not with the weight of reality still pressing down on my shoulders like an invisible elephant.

I ran a hand through my hair, gripping the strands until it hurt. Fuck, these last few weeks had been a fucking whirlwind. And then it all culminated with Zack. What he did... what he almost did—I'd seen some unhinged shit in my years, but watching someone I had zero suspicion of, someone Eli trusted, unravel like that?

It shook me.

I'd let my guard down one too many times. I'd seen the path of destruction the bottle led my mother down. I had stepped onto that path myself.

No more. Day one started now.

I twisted the cork out of the wine bottle and dumped the rest of it down the drain.

That felt... good. Cleansing. A small act of control. I rinsed the bottle and dropped it in the recycling before turning off the kitchen light and moving to the living room.

It was a small step forward, but it was a step none-the-less.

The apartment smelled like Eli. Like his cologne and the minty balm he put on his lips. He'd been staying here these last couple of days, the two of us cocooned in here with a never-ending supply of greasy delivery food and shows we'd been meaning to watch but never had the time to start. Lucky was curled up on the couch, one ear twitching as he adjusted to a new position, but otherwise still as a statue.

I sat down, letting my body sink into the cushion. It had been two days since everything went down. Since Zack was taken into custody. Since Eli collapsed into my arms.

And still, I hadn't let myself fully feel it. Not yet.

The bathroom door creaked open and Eli stepped out, a towel around his waist, another rubbing at his hair. His skin was flushed from the heat of the water, eyes pink at the corners. He looked tired, but better. Whole.

Also so damn fucking sexy.

"Hey," I said softly.

He gave me a genuine smile. "Hey."

"How was the shower?"

“It was great. I didn’t take too long did I?”

“Not at all,” I said, a sense of peace and contentment filling me as I watched him in my space.

He crossed the room and dropped onto the couch next to me. Not quite touching, but close.

“How ya’ feeling?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said after a pause. “Good, I guess? I keep thinking I should be feeling good, you know? I’m safe. It’s over. But every time I close my eyes, I still see his face.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t need to. I just reached out and took his hand, still slightly damp from the shower.

“He was my best friend,” Eli whispered. “I trusted him with everything. I let him in.” He looked down at our joined hands. “And he wanted to kill me.”

I felt his words like a blade sliding beneath my ribs. “None of that is your fault.”

“I know,” he said, though his voice was thin. “I do. But I keep replaying everything. What I missed. What I should’ve seen. I keep wondering if there’s something about me that attracted someone like that.”

“No,” I said, firm. “Eli, no. There’s nothing wrong with being open. With caring. You didn’t invite that kind of obsession—he made that choice. You didn’t cause what happened. You survived it.”

He blinked rapidly and gave a shaky nod. “Thanks,” he murmured.

I moved a little closer, knees brushing. “You were brave as hell. Through all of it. Hell, you warned me, even when you were barely conscious.”

He gave a soft, surprised laugh. “That was... fuzzy. But I remember feeling you there. And knowing I was going to be okay.”

That made something in my chest ache. “I was terrified,” I admitted. “When I got to that building, when I didn’t see you next to me in bed, I just knew something was fucked..”

“I should’ve woken you up. Told you where I was going.”

“No,” I said. “This isn’t about blame. If anything, I should’ve pushed harder. I should’ve—fuck—I should’ve seen it sooner. Zack, he was always... around .”

Eli’s brows furrowed. “It’s not your fault either.”

A long silence stretched between us.

“You know what’s fucked up?” he said finally. “I still don’t know if he would’ve gone through with it. If you hadn’t been there, would he have just...” He trailed off, eyes distant.

“He was dangerous. And unpredictable,” I said. “And now he’s where he can’t hurt anyone.”

Eli nodded slowly, leaning his head back against the couch. “I just... I need a little time to feel normal again.”

“You can take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere.”

He turned his head and looked at me. Something sparkled in the air.

“I didn’t expect this,” Eli said, voice low. “Any of it. You. Us. But I don’t want to run from it either.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “That makes two of us.”

We sat in silence again, but this time it was comfortable. Charged in a different way. It was pushing us away from the negativity and into a more positive space. Where the air crackled with an energy that felt right.

I brushed a damp curl from his forehead. His eyes sparkled with something soft. He reached out and grabbed the front of my tank. “Come here.”

I leaned in. Our foreheads touched. His lips brushed mine, light, tentative—like he was still testing the waters.

But when I kissed him back, it was with the promise that I was here . Present. Committed.

Not as the detective who kept secrets.

But as the man who’d do anything to keep him safe.

Eli smiled against my mouth. “You didn’t even drink tonight,” he whispered.

“I didn’t want to. Not anymore.”

His fingers ghosted over my jaw. “That’s... that means a lot.”

“You mean a lot.”

We kissed again, deeper this time. Slower. My hands slid over his waist. His towel had loosened but didn't fall. I wasn't rushing us. Neither of us needed to.

When we broke apart, we stayed close, foreheads pressed together. Breathing in sync.

"You tired?" I asked.

"Not really," he said, eyes glinting. "But maybe we could lie down anyway."

I took his hand. "Come on, then."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:27 am

Elijah Grant

The city outside Benji's windows had gone silent, as if even New York understood what this moment meant.

He stood in the doorway of his bathroom, barefoot in sweats and a tank top, the lean muscles of his arms flexing as he moved to dim the lights. I watched him, heart thudding in my chest, and knew without a doubt: I was in love with this man. I never wanted to let him go.

And after everything that had happened in my life, I knew that Benji would forever be my anchor. My safe space. He had rescued me. Risked his life for me.

He had saved me.

There was still so much healing I had to do to truly get over the events of these last few months, but at least I had someone like Benji by my side to get me through it.

As for tonight? Tonight there'd be nothing but healing.

"God, you're so hot," I growled as Benji strode toward me, clearly not wearing any underwear. I had tossed off my towel already so he could see how hard he was making me.

"So are you," he said, placing a hand on the bed and leaning in.

He kissed me in a way that kicked off a shower of golden sparks. It wasn't the kind of

kiss that came from lust alone, even though we had that in multitudes. This kiss said I see you. I want you.

I choose you.

I reached down and tugged the hem of his tank up. He lifted his arms and let me pull it off. My fingers splayed over his warm skin, feeling the rise and fall of his breath, tracing over the tiny beauty marks scattered across his side like constellations. I kissed each one.

Benji leaned down and kissed me again. Our bare chests met, skin to skin, warmth to warmth. I was so fucking hard already, aching and thick, but I didn't want to rush. I wanted to take my time. I tangled my hands in his hair and held on. I reached between us and stroked him through his sweats.

"Take these off," I murmured against his lips.

Benji took a step back and quickly shed the sweats, throwing them to the side. He stood there in all his hard and manly glory. Dick already leaking, hairy chest flushed pink, nipples standing at attention.

God, this man was perfect in every single way.

I stroked myself, slapping my heavy cock against my stomach. Benji licked his lips like he couldn't help it.

"Get a taste," I urged him. He didn't waste a second, climbing onto the bed and getting between my legs, holding my cock in both hands before slowly lowering, kissing the head, licking the slit, stroking my shaft. He took it slow at first, soft. I gently massaged his scalp, letting every muscle in my body relax.

He moaned as he sucked me into his mouth, swallowing me. My eyes rolled to the

back of my skull. The heat and wetness combined to make a torrent of pleasure. He swirled his tongue around my dick, taking me deeper down his throat. He arched his back so his ass was high in the air. I leaned forward and reached for it, squeezing him as he swallowed me all the way down to the balls.

“Fuuuuck, baby,” I said as I ran a finger off his tight hole. “Yeah, keep that cock in your mouth while I play with your hole. That’s it.”

He started to gag around my cock. I leaned back and let him come up for air. He wiped his lips, a smile splitting his face. “You taste so fucking good.”

“Now it’s my turn,” I said, maneuvering us so that Benji was laying down instead of me. I straddled him, grinding against him slowly, rubbing our stiff lengths together. His hands found my hips, guiding my rhythm. I bent and kissed his neck, his jaw, the corner of his mouth. “You’re mine,” I murmured.

He growled. “Always have been.”

Every inch of skin was touched, every moan was earned. I kissed a trail down his chest, licking over his nipple and biting gently. His hips bucked. I could feel a streak of pre-cum paint my belly.

I took my time worshipping him, intoxicated by the way his skin tasted and by how his body reacted to my touch. So wet, so hard, so fucking hot.

When I finally reached his cock, I gave him one long, slow lick that made his head fall back with a grunt. I took him deep, slow, wanting to taste every inch. He threaded his fingers through my hair and whispered my name like a prayer.

He tasted like heaven and hell and everything in between. He gave me life with his cock. He gave me what I needed, what I craved.

He made me crave even more.

When I pulled off, he was panting.

“I need to be inside you,” I said.

Benji spread his legs and reached into the nightstand. “Then take me.” He handed me a bottle of lube, his body splayed out for me to enjoy.

“Oh, I will.”

I took my time with him, dragging slick fingers down the curve of his ass, teasing over his entrance until he was panting and begging for me to enter him. He was so fucking responsive—every gasp, every shudder, every slow grind of his hips was a drug I wanted another hit of. I watched him unravel, bit by bit, offering himself up to me without hesitation. His thighs trembled. His toes curled. His moans grew louder, more unhinged as I stroked him with one hand and circled his hole with another.

“I need you to fuck me,” Benji said. “Please.”

My cock throbbed. I didn’t need anymore encouragement. I pushed back and got on my knees, lining myself up with him. He lifted his legs and I put them over my shoulders.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Mhmm,” he said, already fisting the sheets.

When I finally pushed inside, slow and deep, his whole body arched. His eyes locked on mine—wide, hungry, raw—and he gasped like he’d been waiting his whole life for this. The connection hit like lightning.

“Jesus, Eli,” he choked out. “You feel... fuck, you feel insane.”

I pulled almost all the way out, then slammed back in. “Yeah?” I growled against his neck. “This what you needed?”

He cried out, his hole clenching around me. “Don’t stop.”

I didn’t. I couldn’t. The rhythm built—deep, deliberate, passionate. Skin slapped, breath tangled, the sound of his need pouring into my ear like gasoline, feeding the wildfires that roared inside me. I was burning. We both were.

We’d be nothing but ash by the end of tonight.

His legs locked tight around my head as I fucked him harder, deeper. Sweat slicked between us. I kissed him like I needed his mouth to breathe, like if I let go of him I’d shatter into dust.

“You’re mine,” I growled. “Say it.”

“I’m yours,” he breathed, his voice broken, eyes glassy with lust. “I’ve always been yours.”

I reached between us, grabbing his cock. It was soaked in pre-cum, thick and flushed, twitching for release. I stroked him in time with my thrusts, our bodies locked together in a rhythm only we knew, only we could know.

His back arched. “Eli—I’m gonna—fuck, I’m?—”

“Let go,” I whispered, pressing our foreheads together. “Come for me.”

He did just as I asked.

He shouted my name, loud and guttural, as his body convulsed. Cum splashed between us, across our stomachs and chests. I didn't stop. Couldn't stop. The way he clenched around me sent me spiraling. My orgasm hit like a fist to the gut—I shoved in hard, spilling everything I had inside him, mouth open in a silent cry.

We collapsed together, shaking and destroyed and made whole again.

I was still inside him, both of us drenched and dazed, our chests rising and falling in uneven sync. I managed to lift myself up and looked down at him—his flushed cheeks, the blissed-out curve of his mouth, the faint pink bite marks along his collarbone.

Benji cupped my face, thumb brushing over my lips. His eyes were blown wide, hazy, and full of something that made my ribs ache.

“I love you,” I whispered.

The words came out rough and unfiltered, no hesitation left in me. I meant them with everything I had.

His breath caught. “Say it again.”

“I love you, Detective .”

He smiled in a way that resembled the brightness of a hundred stars. And then he kissed me. Kissed me like I'd just handed him the only thing he'd ever wanted.

“I love you forever and always, Eli.”

We quickly cleaned up and then held each other in the warm, thick silence after. His arms stayed wrapped around me like he was afraid I'd vanish. I curled into him, nuzzling my face into the space between his neck and shoulder, inhaling the scent of

sweat and sex and him.

“Forever?” I asked.

He chuckled, that low, warm rumble that lived somewhere between my ribs now.
“Forever.”

The city outside whispered in the distance, but all I could hear was the slow, steady beat of his heart against my cheek.

We’d been through chaos. Through fire. Through darkness.

But now, here, wrapped in each other and everything we’d survived?—

We were finally safe.

We were together.

And we were never letting go.

* * *

Thank you for reading HIS EVERY MOVE.