



I Do?

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Category: LGBT+

Description: That feeling when you've humiliated yourself in front of your high school crush, and now you're being forced to share a room with him at your sister's wedding...

Chad's craptastic life is about to reach new heights of crapdom. Between his career as a frozen yogurt-slinger and his apartment filled with roadside rescue furniture, he can't imagine things getting any worse. Then his sister morphs into Bridezilla and insists that everyone in the wedding party stay together in a Lake Tahoe lodge leading up to the grand affair of the century. But when she drops the bomb his crush will be joining them? Operation Avoidance goes into full swing.

Spending the week hiding from Raudel could work. What's a few odd stares from family and friends when it means protecting what little dignity he has left? All Chad needs to do is make sure they're never alone, no matter what.

However, his desperate scheme faces a major obstacle when he discovers their room only has one bed...

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Page 1

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CHAD'S CELL phone rang as he grappled with a half-used roll of SpongeBob duct tape. The hope that the sticky, uncooperative strips would secure the spindly leg to the rest of his coffee table still lived on. He glanced at his phone, then back at his home improvement project. He wondered again why he hadn't just stayed at his parents' house instead of moving out.

Because it's pathetic at my age?

They'd been happy to have him there, had said he could stay for as long as he needed to. However, it had been time to leave; he would never find his own way if he didn't. He still had no idea what sort of future lay in store for him, but living with his folks for the rest of his life hadn't made the list.

The phone finally went to voice mail, and he returned his attention to the dinged-up piece of furniture he'd scored after someone left it at the curb along with the rest of their garbage. It'd seemed a shame to waste a perfectly good little table when all it needed was some tender loving care. The deal he'd gotten on the cartoon-character tape had made it an even sweeter deal. He finally got the last of the gummy remnants attached to the leg, then set the table upright and sat back on his haunches, gazing with pride at the latest addition to his little home.

It wavered for a moment. Then the leg gave way, and it toppled over.

Chad sighed. Coffee tables weren't exactly a necessity in life. He didn't have to have one. Even if he'd wanted to make his tiny place a bit homier, a coffee table wasn't the only thing that would telegraph such a thing to potential visitors. Right?

Living alone sucked. Even if he was only in his early twenties, he'd imagined he would at least have a boyfriend by now. Someone kind and sincere, a man who had his head on straight and cared about such things as family, wasn't into partying and other stuff that held little to no interest to Chad.

God, I sound so boring.

He didn't actually think he was, but a few guys he'd gone out with over the years had hinted at it. Enjoying a simple life didn't have to be boring, especially if you had someone to share it with.

Lindsey found her someone.

His sister's impending marriage had driven home to him more than ever that he wanted what she had. It hit him that her engagement announcement had coincided with his moving out. Huh. Maybe he should leave town, go somewhere with a larger dating pool, or at least one that didn't rely solely on the transient population of the base at Naval Air Station Fallon.

He pushed up from the threadbare-carpeted floor, then padded into the teensy studio kitchen. The idea to relocate had occasionally taken hold since he graduated from high school but had never gained any real steam. Going somewhere alone and starting from scratch held no appeal. If he were ever to leave his family, it would be because he was beginning a new life with someone.

He flipped open the cabinet door that held his odd collection of glasses. When he'd moved out, his mom had given him all the strays that had survived the broken sets he'd grown up with. She'd apologized that she couldn't offer him better ones. He'd been too embarrassed to tell her that he liked them, that they held special memories.

He reached for his favorite green one with the weird, mismatched bumps on it, and

his gaze landed on the slightly crinkly photo taped to the inside of the cupboard. He'd folded it in half so that his sister was no longer visible. There were two reasons for that: One, he'd had to steal it from his sister's dresser drawer when he was a teenager; and two, it would be waaaay too creepy if he could see his sister in the picture while fantasizing about her best friend, Raudel Flores.

The one that got away.

Yeah. He was an idiot. It was hard for someone to get away when you'd never had them in the first place.

He trailed his index finger down the image.

So incredibly sexy, yet so cool. The genuinely nicest guy ever.

Thinking he could ever have a chance with Raudel was his downfall. He should've simply accepted that the two years separating them had been a bridge that could not be crossed in high school.

Instead, I opened my big mouth. Enlisted her help.

It was a classic move of desperation. He'd been lust-addled, his brain cells hijacked by his dick. But if it had merely been his cock holding him hostage instead of his heart, he might have recovered from the subsequent fallout of Raudel unexpectedly dropping by his house that day. His cheeks burned from the memory alone.

Chad snatched the glass from the cupboard, then abruptly closed it. Pointless reflection wasn't going to rewrite history so that his moment of utter stupidity hadn't fucked everything up with Raudel. Right as he filled the tumbler with water from his tap, the phone rang.

Once again, he tried to ignore it. Less than two weeks until Lindsey's wedding, and she'd become more unreasonable the nearer it drew. He had a shift at the yogurt shop in an hour and, after the coffee table debacle, wasn't in the mood for her to strong-arm him into another favor.

A stab of shame poked at him. Lindsey was his only sibling, and she'd be moving to San Francisco after the wedding. Who knew when he'd see her again, and even then, things would never be the same.

By the time he wandered into the open area that was the main room of his humble dwelling, the cell had stopped its insistent ringing. He'd turned on his heel to retrace his path to the kitchen, the siren call of a baloney sandwich reaching out to him, when it started up again.

Yup. Lindsey.

Taking into consideration her ever-growing unstable behavior as time ticked away, hurtling her ever closer to the moment when she'd finally become Mrs. Cromwell, Chad thought he'd better answer. He didn't want to be responsible for causing her to finally teeter over the edge.

"Hey, Lin. I've only got a little while to grab a bite to eat and get changed for my shift, so if you need me to pick up anything for you, or whatever, I'll have to do it later after—"

"Listen up, Chad. This is important."

Her tone was calm and serious for someone who'd lately sounded like she was running for her life every time she spoke on the phone. Her words were always breathless because, apparently, everything was urgent and had to be done right now .

“Okaaaay.”

“Remember when I told you that Raudel wouldn’t be attending because of school, and we’d gotten Daniel’s buddy, Steve, to stand in?”

Fear coiled in his belly. Nuh-uh. No way.

He’d marked himself safe when Lindsey had told him almost a year before that Raudel had opted out, that he’d be doing his finals just before graduation, so couldn’t promise her anything.

“Um, yeah. So... what are you trying to tell me, exactly?”

“Chad, darling little brother, I don’t pretend to understand why you avoided Raudel like the plague after confessing to me your everlasting love for him while in the clutches of a rookie drunken stupor. But I do know that you have some sort of, I don’t know, thing about not being around him. Don’t think I didn’t catch how you almost passed out with relief when I said he couldn’t make it.”

“ And ?” Chad never thought he would have the capacity to empathize with the hysteria Lindsey had begun displaying, but he wondered if he should revisit the concept.

“Well, Steve sprained his ankle and can’t make it, so I called Raudel on a whim, and he said he’d work it out and that he’d love to be in the wedding.”

“You did what ?” Chad gripped his phone so tightly he thought it might snap in half. Then he collapsed onto his recent garage sale sofa purchase. The vague, unexplained tinge of cat piss wafted into the air. He kept forgetting not to land on it too hard.

“Chad, calm down. It’s no big deal.”

Chad pressed his lips together, inhaling a deep breath through his nose to keep from raging at his older sister. She wasn't the one who would have to face the gorgeous high school crush who'd witnessed his all-time most embarrassing moment. He wondered if he could somehow break her and Daniel up before the wedding—he might be willing to hazard the bad karma in exchange for being spared the abject humiliation of such an encounter with Raudel. Even if Raudel wasn't still smokin' hot, he'd forever be out of reach the way he'd been after that awful day. It was all very cruel and unfair.

“Chad? Hello? I have a lot of packing to do still. Don't mess with me right now.”

Chad was certain there was some sort of toxic drug in bridal gowns, or perhaps added to the frosting of wedding cake samples, or possibly laced in the vellum of the invitations. It was the only explanation as to how his typically even-tempered sister had morphed into the perfect representation of a bridezilla. “I just remembered. I have some important plans next weekend, so I can't be in the wedding party after all.”

She let out a snort that would've put a rampaging bull to shame. “Right. Important plans. You.” Her tone turned menacing. “I don't have time for your motherfucking high school bullshit right now, Chad. You're twenty-two years old. Suck it up.”

“You kiss your high-society fiancé with that filthy mouth?”

“Fuck you.” She sighed as if the weight of the world was crushing her. “I get that you used to like him a lot, or whatever, but just because he never took the bait when you asked me to put in a good word for you doesn't mean you have to pine for him forever. Jesus, Chad, what were you expecting? You were only fifteen, and he was about ready to graduate.” Her voice returned to its previous threatening tone. “Now look. Be at the Lake Tahoe house as planned, ready to stand at the altar with me, or I'll tell Mom that you lied when you said the dress she picked out for the wedding

was very flattering and took years off her age. That what you actually thought was that it was the funniest fucking thing you'd ever seen, and she looked hideous."

"Jesus, Lin. That's just mean. What's wrong with you?"

His sister used to be so nice.

Right until about a month ago.

"Family members who act as if they wouldn't know what adulthood was if it came up and smacked them across the face. That's what." She let out another sigh, one that had an air of remorse to it. "I'm willing to concede that I may be a tad out of sorts right now."

He didn't dare risk agreeing with her. Or guffawing and stating that her words were a massive understatement.

She carried on. "But Raudel is my best friend. I was so excited when he said he could make it after all. What with it being so last-minute, and finals right around the corner—I honestly never expected he'd agree to be in the wedding after all."

Chad suppressed a groan. Raudel, UCLA law student and the sexiest man ever to be born in Fallon, Nevada, versus Chad, pervy teen who grew up to become the assistant manager of the local frozen yogurt shop.

"I understand, Lin, I really do." He clutched the cell phone so hard, it hadn't yet escaped the danger of being crushed into little plastic shell and sim card bits and pieces. "I'll just..." wear a disguise. Change my name. Pretend I have amnesia. "Keep to myself. Stay out of his way so that we don't have to actually interact. It'll be totally fine."

“Um....”

Chad’s gut clenched, and terror clawed its way up his throat from the hesitant, yet bizarrely apologetic, sound of her voice. “Holy shit. Out with it, woman. What else have you done?”

“I didn’t do anything.” She cleared her throat. “We chose the house in Lake Tahoe way before I knew who would be in the wedding for sure.”

“ And ?” He was going to strangle her through the phone line if she didn’t own up already.

“Well, there’s only five bedrooms. One for Mom and Dad. One for Daniel’s mom and stepdad, one for Grandma, one for me, Brenda, and Shannon—”

“Stop. Please.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, the fear in his gut quickly turning to bile. “Let me guess. I have to share a bedroom with Raudel.”

“Well, I can’t very well ask him to sleep on the couch!”

The couch. Yaaass. “No worries. I’ll take it. The couch, I mean.”

“It’s located in the middle of the house between the kitchen and the rest of the bedrooms. Everyone will wonder what’s going on, and... and... I will not have you sleeping out there and ruining everything !” Her voice had steadily risen in volume as if she were about to shoot into orbit.

“Okay, okay. Don’t freak out. I won’t sleep on the freakin’ couch.” He grunted before another thought occurred to him. “What about Daniel? Where’s he gonna be?”

“The guest house.”

“There’s a guest house? Well, then, maybe I could—”

“Don’t even think about it,” She growled. “Daniel has to stay out there because we aren’t supposed to be together before the wedding.”

“Right. But if he stays with Raudel....”

“He’s the fucking groom, Chad. The groom !”

“All right! Okay. Just... calm down before you hurt yourself.” He still couldn’t believe there wasn’t some solution to his travails. “Are you sure you didn’t do this on purpose?”

His sister growled again. “Hardly. I have much more important things to deal with than my little brother mooning over some guy from back in fucking high school.”

He gasped. “Mooning? Seriously?” He rolled his eyes since she couldn’t see him. “Fine. I’ll bow to your unreasonable bridal will. But I want to go on record that I don’t like it. Despise it, even.”

“Just remember one thing, Chad. I will rip your arms off if you fuck up my wedding!”

Oh no. Not a bridezilla in the least.

CHAD WAS smooshed between his eighty-seven-year-old grandmother and boxes of wedding favors, personalized peach-colored napkins, and a shiny, fake-silver chocolate fountain. Every time they hit a bump, the box the fountain was in would tip over and smack him on the shoulder, and he’d elbow it back into place. The fountain, however, was determined, and for the almost two hours they’d been on the road, it hadn’t given up on the fight to permanently injure him. He almost sighed but then

stopped himself. About an hour before, his mother had asked him if he had some sort of breathing problem, so he'd reined it in since then.

Chad almost swallowed his tongue at the sudden grip on his knee from Grandma Barton's clawed fingers.

"Chadwick. Have you been courting any nice young ladies?"

She cackled before dissolving into a cigarette-induced coughing fit. She swiped her hand across her mouth, then clutched his knee again.

Chad stared at the brown spots and dark blue veins fighting for attention amid the copious wrinkles of her skin.

Would anyone think it odd if I shared the bed with Grandma?

She gave way to another round of loud hacking before coughing up something with some heft behind it into a handkerchief.

Never mind.

"Sorry 'bout that. I gave up the smokes last year, but they're the devil to get out of your system."

Grandma had once confessed to him that she'd been smoking since she was fourteen. He didn't doubt her claim.

She snorted with enthusiasm. "You'd better ask one of your girlfriends to marry ya soon. Don't know how long I got left, so maybe you can get her to pump out at least one great-grandbaby before I croak."

“Uh, sorry, Grandma. I don’t have any girlfriends.”

“Nonsense! Cute little thing like you?” She pinched a significant amount of the flesh of his cheek and shook it. “Lots of girls would drop their panties for those big blue eyes and that nice bulge you got in those tight jeans.”

“Mom!” His dad braked too hard, swerving the SUV before straightening it again.

Chad rubbed his abused cheek. I hope there won’t be any bruising.

His mother angled her body from where she sat in the passenger seat to look back at them. “Mother Barton, Chad is gay. He doesn’t date women.”

“Gay? When did that happen?”

Chad groaned. They hadn’t even made it to the lake house yet, and he was already working up to a decent-sized migraine.

His mother pursed her lips. Despite the other challenges in Chad’s life, at least his parents had never blinked an eye when he’d come out to them.

“It didn’t happen . It simply is.” His mom sighed, obviously taking over the job for him. “Now, did you need to stop before we get there? Use the restroom? We still have a ways to go before we get to the rental.”

“Nah. I’m not climbing out of this giant hunk of rolling metal until we’re there. But I’d rev up the horsepower to be on the safe side. I’ve never fully tested the resilience of these Depends.”

Chad cuddled up to the fountain as his mom widened her eyes in horror.

“Oh.” She stared at his grandmother for a few more seconds, blinking rapidly before facing forward again.

Chicken.

Within a couple of minutes, Grandma was snoring loudly, her jaw slack. Gravity took over a minute later, and her head dropped against his shoulder.

Fuck my life.

The remainder of the drive was devoid of conversation. Only the snorts and grunts emanating from his grandmother and the electronic keyboard strains of Depeche Mode’s “Black Celebration” filled the car. Chad tried not to think of his dad’s music selection as a portent of his own doom.

By the time they pulled up the driveway to the ridiculously expensive house that would shelter the wedding party and the bride for the weeklong festivities, his sweaty cheek was plastered to the shiny cardboard of the fountain box. He peeled his skin away, then gave Grandma a somewhat gentle nudge to encourage her off him.

Daniel, the Wonder Fiancé.

His sister had wanted a private wedding in a house on the shores of Lake Tahoe, so her prince had rented the large post-and-beam wooden home that loomed before them. Daniel might be dripping with cash, but he was still a prudent man. Since the place had a one-week minimum for a rental, and it was the one that Sis had demanded, he declared they should all spend the week enjoying nonstop revelry together. Lindsey had squealed with delight while Chad had been on the verge of weeping. Even a double shift at the yogurt shop every day for the rest of his life would be preferable.

And now there's Raudel, too.

After he helped to unload Grandma and the mountain of wedding crap they'd brought with them in his dad's Suburban and dumped his duffel bag in the hall outside his assigned quarters—he went back to formulating his strategy for when he saw Raudel for the first time. So far, polite and Stepford Wife-friendly seemed to be the best tactic. He wouldn't give the brown-eyed, dark-haired, bronzed hunk the chance to lure him into any personal, and likely humiliating, conversations.

Chad narrowed his eyes as if his nemesis were before him. Won't give him the satisfaction.

He slammed the box of napkins down on the dining table a bit too hard. His mom yelped.

"Chad, please. This is a rental. Now go get the fountain, but be very careful. We spent a big chunk of change on that thing." She rolled her eyes, then went back to fussing with the food in the cooler they'd brought with them. "God only knows why we couldn't have simply rented one of those things when we got here. It's not as if no one's ever gotten married in Tahoe before. But nooooo, she had to have her very own."

She continued to mutter, and Chad realized she hadn't actually been talking to him. He also mused that maybe his mom wasn't all that thrilled about their enforced seven-day celebration-slash-cohabitation either.

He turned to do her bidding, striding toward the door with purpose, anxious to get the unpacking over with. Staking his claim in the bedroom was a vital part of his plan and had to be completed before Raudel arrived. Maybe he could position the beds so there were several large pieces of furniture between them. He'd take the one by the door. Then he could sneak in and out of the room late at night and early in the

morning while Raudel was asleep. Never even have to speak to him unless it was unavoidable when they were around others.

Maybe even use the guest bath.

He could hide his grooming stuff in there, and if it was only a half bath, he could wash up in the sink.

What if Raudel assumes I never shower? Or brush my teeth? He gulped as an icy finger of dread skittered up his spine. What if there's only one bed?

All the blood seemed to drain from his body. No. No way . At the last minute, he darted from the entryway and booked it down the hall to the bedroom he'd been assigned. He flung the door open, slapping his hand to his mouth before a terrified scream could escape. His absolute worst fears had been realized. Not only would he be sharing a room with Raudel—he'd be sharing a bed .

His life had become an actual living nightmare.

Wiping away the sweat on his upper lip with the back of his hand, Chad took a moment to suck in a few deep breaths. He couldn't get ahead of himself. He could refine his strategy later. There was still time. Raudel wasn't arriving today. There had to be another solution to this ridiculous situation.

Worse case, he could drink a gallon of coffee a day and never sleep. Maybe doze off in a deck chair here and there like it was an accident. It would be a son of a bitch to maintain for several days—hallucinations were a real possibility—but he had loads of motivation and nothing else to do but pander to his sister's demands. Everyone would be so focused on the wedding and Lindsey's random meltdowns—no one would even notice him behaving like a freak.

Yeah. Everything would work out.

The door was still open due to the parade of stuff being brought into the rental, so he returned to his duties, strolling into the early April sunshine. The sun hadn't warmed up the trees enough, so all he inhaled was the faintest aroma of pine. It would eventually become the prevailing scent as the summer heat took over. Tahoe had always been one of his favorite places to vacation when he was a kid.

Still, there was the hint of a chill in the air, and Chad prayed to the weather gods that rain, sleet, or snow wouldn't disrupt Lindsey's fantasy dream week. They'd probably have to rent a straitjacket for her otherwise. He idly wondered if those were available at wedding-party stores.

Both his mom and Daniel's mom had encouraged Lindsey to have the ceremony in the summer, but she'd dug in her heels. According to her, the heat and bugs would be awful, and everyone in the continental United States would be getting married then as well, so it would be too crowded. It was about the only thing regarding her wedding that Chad had agreed with her on so far.

Chad tripped over his own feet and had to grab the side-view mirror of the Suburban to keep from face-planting on the cement driveway.

Raudel. Fuck!

Lindsey had sworn he wouldn't be showing up until the morning, well after the rest of them had arrived. He didn't have his game face on yet, hadn't practiced his nonchalant expressions in the mirror, or put on his best pair of jeans.

Shit. Damn.

Internally swearing wasn't helping, so he refocused on what his opening line to the

ex-crush of his life should be.

Raudel had parked on the carefully maintained dirt near the end of the driveway, over by one of the enormous evergreens surrounding the property. Either the management company or the owners of the lake house appeared to have verified that not one pine needle disgraced the cleared forest area that extended from the end of the driveway.

He seemed busy enough gathering items together from within his vehicle, so Chad thought he might not have even noticed him yet. Chad aborted all plans and raced back into the house, almost mowing his mother over in the process as he slammed into her. He grabbed her upper arms to keep her from crashing to the floor.

“Chad! Watch what you’re doing!”

“Sorry!”

She looked him up and down as if he was hiding something. “Where’s the fountain? You know I can’t carry anything too heavy. My back is still recovering from falling off Sassy.”

His mom had been cranky ever since she’d toppled off her prized mare—which was more of a spoiled pet that she fawned over in their enormous backyard. The doctor wouldn’t let her ride for at least another month, and it was her favorite thing to do. She’d since turned her attention to other pursuits, most of which involved holding her daughter’s hand as Lindsey navigated through the previously unknown, treacherous waters of impending marriage. The rest of her focus was saved for sniping at him and his dad.

“I—” Think idiot, think. “—thought I’d search for a hand truck. I saw a shed in the backyard, so I’ll just go check real quick.”

He'd only made it one step forward before his mom stood defiantly in front of him, hands on her hips, effectively blocking his escape.

"Chadwick Barton. I don't know why you've been acting so strange all day, but I've had it up to here!" He waited for her to indicate how far she'd had it up to, but she carried on with her rant instead. "You can really help out by simply doing what I say right now. We don't have time for thinking. Stay on task." She sucked in a breath, then let out a tired sigh.

For the first time in recent weeks, he stopped to truly study her. He took after her in general appearance—everyone they'd ever met had always commented on it. Chad had the same honey-blond hair and deep blue eyes. They also shared the type of pale skin that burned instead of tanned, which made living in a primarily desert state next to ridiculous. But his mom's features were tinged with something else.

Where Chad's hair was shaggy and hung just below his ears the way he always wore it, her shoulder-length hair wasn't loose the way it normally was, but yanked back into a ponytail instead. The strands that had worked their way free from their hair-tie prison were not helping to make her appear less fatigued. The dark circles under her eyes weren't of much assistance either. A twinge of guilt hit him squarely in the chest. He couldn't imagine having to deal with a twenty-four-year-old daughter who was half-hysterical most of the time and had been embracing the crazy for weeks.

"Sure, Mom. Sorry. I'll totally help out with whatever you need."

She nodded, her exhaustion like a flashing neon sign now that it had caught his attention. He turned around to do as she'd requested, noting that Raudel had made it out of his car with a messenger bag flung over one shoulder. He glanced up the driveway. Chad ducked his head, then marched forward and, within a few long strides, skirted the front of the Suburban, placing the behemoth of a truck between him and Raudel.

“Raudel Flores! Is that you ?” Chad’s mother called out, her voice shrill to his ears, but he acknowledged that it might only be due to his nerves. “Chad! Come here, it’s Raudel. You remember Lindsey’s friend?”

In ways you can’t imagine.

Chad froze, still shielded from Raudel’s probing gaze by the heavily tinted glass his father had had the foresight to opt for on the Suburban. Chad knew it had only been added as protection against the searing heat of their little Nevada town, but he fantasized that it had actually been meant to save him. Or at least offer more in the way of essential stalling opportunities. He let his head fall back as he stared up at the sky. His avoidance tactics were swiftly disappearing.

“Chad? Did you hear me?”

“Yeah, Mom. Just grabbing the fountain real quick.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. You can get it later. Come say hello to Raudel.”

Seriously?

Chad wrestled the fountain loose from the backseat anyway, then wrapped his arms around the box and lifted it up in front of him. If he peered around the side, he could still see where he was going. Sort of. As he tentatively stepped forward, he used the frame of the truck to guide him. He made it around the first headlight, then hazarded a peek.

He jerked his head back behind the safety of the box.

Still hot as fuck. Dammit.

His mother jabbered on about “how long has it been?” and “your mother must be so proud” and “aren’t you graduating soon?”

The sound of Raudel’s smooth voice and soft laugh filled the air as he responded to his mother’s obligatory questions and observations. Since no one had acknowledged Chad’s presence yet, he figured he’d chance meandering to the left, around Lindsey’s Toyota parked in front of the truck then into the safety of the house.

He’d almost cleared his mother when she grasped his upper arm, pulling him back with surprising strength for someone who was supposed to be recovering from a back injury.

“Chad, for heaven’s sake. Where are you going?”

He tried to extricate himself from her grip, but she only dug her fingers deeper into his flesh. “Ow.” All hope of avoiding Raudel was lost, and he again peered around the boxed fountain, his muscles beginning to strain from the effort of holding it up for so long.

“Hi, Chad.”

Raudel flashed the same perfect smile that Chad had once jacked off to all the time and on occasion thereafter. Saving his yearbook had been pure genius.

“Hey. How’s it going?” Chad tossed the words out as if Raudel’s presence had zero impact on him, that he was merely being the polite brother of his sister’s best friend and nothing more .

“Doing well. It’s great to—” Raudel let out a small chuckle. “— almost see you.”

Chad tried for an offhand chuckle as well, but it came out more maniacal. Raudel

extended his hand, and anxiety wreaked havoc with Chad's nervous system. Socially mandated touching hadn't been part of his Raudel-avoidance strategy. He was operating in the dark. Dashed to pieces was his hope of having all possible scenarios involving potential interaction planned out before Raudel's arrival.

In an attempt to prevent the moment from becoming too drawn out and awkward, Chad juggled the unwieldy box onto his other hip, then reached out to take Raudel's offered hand.

His mother's scream echoed across the lake before the boxed fountain had even crashed to the ground. The flimsy cardboard box broke open, the top part of the elegant wedding accessory jettisoning across the driveway, where it landed with a solid thump in the dirt. Chad gazed down in shock and horror at the remaining pieces of Lindsey's precious fountain scattered at his feet.

I am so dead.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:26 am

CHAD DROPPED to his knees, quickly gathering up the now-dented tiers of the fountain as Raudel joined him, collecting the smaller bits, including some long tubing and random nuts and bolts.

His mom yelled out in a tone of pure panic. “Oh my God, Chad. What have you done ? This can’t be happening. We can’t let Lindsey know! She’ll come completely unhinged, and then I’ll quickly follow. I don’t know how much more of this I can take .”

“I’m so sorry, Mom, I swear I am. Don’t worry, I’ll tell her.” He couldn’t keep the trembling out of his voice. “It’s my fault. She can yell her head off at me.”

She groaned. “This whole wedding thing is a nightmare. I need a fucking drink.”

“Mom!”

Raudel caught his eye, then winked. Chad fell back on his butt, his jaw hanging open. Before he could form any coherent thoughts, Raudel tipped his head up and regarded Chad’s mom.

“Mrs. Barton, please, let me help. Why don’t I drive Chad into town, and we can simply pick up a new one?”

Chad’s eyes went wide, and he almost choked on his tongue.

His mother gasped. “Yes! A new one. That’s perfect.” She slapped the side of Chad’s head.

“Ow! God, Mom.”

“Come on, Chad, pick up the rest of the evidence. Raudel? Do you mind putting this mess in your trunk, then disposing of it? Lindsey’s supposed to be out until later with her maid of honor and bridesmaid, but God only knows when they might show up and catch us in the act.”

“Not at all, Mrs. Barton.” Raudel flashed his swoon worthy grin again. “Is there anything else we can do for you as long as we’re in town?”

Something about how genuinely polite and helpful Raudel had always been made Chad hard. Actually, many things about Raudel made him hard, but this was different. Raudel exuded confidence, yet not arrogance. His natural graciousness was yet another part of his charm. Once, Lindsey had confided to Chad that whenever she’d go to his place to hang out or have dinner, all of the children were respectful and never spoke back to their parents, especially their mother. Raudel’s mother ruled the house with a firm hand, but Lindsey said she could tell they were all very close.

“Oh, thank you, Raudel. I’ll think about what I need while I go inside and grab my credit card.”

Chad slumped his shoulders. He hadn’t even begun the battle, and he’d already lost the war. Confined in a car with Raudel within minutes of seeing him for the first time in years was much more devastating than avoiding any interaction with him in a house full of people.

“Chad, please hurry!” With that, his mother trotted up the driveway and back into the house.

“Yes, Mom.”

He pushed himself up from the ground and had almost made it to a standing position when Raudel curled his fingers gently around Chad's arm as if to help steady him. He'd never been touched by him before. The handshake that the destruction of the fountain had averted would've been the first, but the warmth of Raudel's hand on his bare skin, right below his T-shirt sleeve, had taken its place.

"You okay?"

"Um...."

"Have you been carrying a lot of things inside? The sun shining down makes it worse. Maybe you need some water?"

Chad couldn't meet his gaze, couldn't make sense of his words. Is he pretending to be concerned about me?

It had to be a trick. A way to lull him into a false sense of security before he pounced, mocking him when they were alone in the car, telling him what a disgusting pervert he was and that he couldn't believe he had to share a room with him.

Wait till he finds out about the bed .

Chad's gut clenched. Was Raudel even aware they were sharing a room? Or was there still a chance to salvage the rest of the week? The shed he'd mentioned to his mom held real possibility as a hiding place and sleeping quarters.

Raudel let him go as his mother rushed out of the house.

Before she'd even reached them, Chad noted the disapproving scowl on her face. "Boys, this junk is still all over the place." She may have used the plural, but her annoyed stare was fixed on him. "Here, Chad. I have a list of food to pick up for the

house. This should hold us for a couple of days. Here's my card. Keep all the receipts. And please do your best to find a fountain exactly like the one you destroyed."

Chad pressed his lips together. It was tempting to wonder if she was treating him like he was twelve because she'd been jolted back in time by Raudel's presence. The fact that he shopped for her all the time at home seemed to have slipped her mind. If anything, he had an advanced degree in receipt gathering. "Sure, Mom. I got it."

"Yes, Mrs. Barton. We'll take care of everything. Don't worry."

We'll. Ha!

"Thank you so much for helping out, Raudel. I feel terrible about this, what with you just arriving after that long drive. And please, call me Kate."

She offered him a bright smile, and Chad had to admit that he was grateful for Raudel's charms in terms of how they helped ease some of his mom's stress. The memory of all the little things that had originally warmed him up to Raudel filtered back. Even for a horny fifteen-year-old boy, he'd been able to see past Raudel's outward beauty enough to realize that there was a lot more to him inside. Something real. Someone worth getting to know. And one moment of stupidity had forever destroyed any chance of that happening.

"It's no trouble at all, Mrs.—" Raudel cleared his throat. "—Kate."

Chad watched in wonderment as a deep scarlet bloomed in Raudel's cheeks. He hadn't known that self-assured Raudel was even capable of being embarrassed.

"That's better." Chad's mother turned to him. "Oh, I forgot to add propane to the list. We'll need it for the barbecue on Wednesday. The small canisters are fine. We

brought two portable grills. One for meat and one for veggies.”

Chad frowned. It appeared that every moment of every day had been carefully planned out. Any attempts at evading enforced socializing would likely be thwarted by his mother’s mega-scheduling. “We’re having a barbecue on Wednesday?”

His mom huffed. “Didn’t you look over the itinerary, Chad?”

Itinerary? She was insane.

“Oh, I have mine with me, Mrs. Kate. I can go over it with Chad.”

“It’s just Kate, Raudel. No Mrs.”

The blush made a reappearance, crawling its way up Raudel’s neck and into his face. “Of course. I’ll admit, it’s going to take me a while to get used to it.” He let out a light laugh, and Chad went back to being amazed at Raudel’s ability to be charming even while being embarrassed. He had skills.

Raudel turned to him, and his gaze locked on Chad’s. The heat under his own skin meant that Raudel wasn’t the only one sporting a blush. “Well, Chad. Ready?”

No. No I am not. “Sure. Better get this over with—uh, get going.”

His mom’s scowl hadn’t lessened in the slightest while regarding him. She’d been all smiles for Raudel. Chad maintained that he had the right to be petulant and childish. After the week with Raudel was over, he’d probably have to disappear into the wilderness and live off the land to escape the specter of his own humiliation. Eventually, he’d descend into madness and be freed from the memory of his original downfall.

At the ghost of Raudel's fingertips at his elbow, Chad started.

Raudel glanced at his mom. "Then let's go. Do you need us back by any particular time? It may take a while to locate a place with a fountain. I haven't been to Tahoe since high school and wasn't paying attention to anything like that back then."

If Raudel didn't stop chuckling as though everything was so wonderful, Chad thought he might start screaming.

"No, I don't think so. The girls probably won't be back until eight or nine. They said they'd grab dinner in town after they'd finished shopping. I brought some sandwiches in the cooler, so that'll be fine for Grandma and us. You boys go on and have a good time."

Good time? God help me.

She frowned. "But don't bring the fountain into the house when you get back. We can sneak it in after she's gone to sleep."

Chad couldn't remember when his mom had turned into a secret agent, but he imagined it had formed naturally as a result of protecting herself from Lindsey's Jekyll-and-Hyde behavior.

"Okay. Then we'll get something to eat while we're in town as well. See you later, Kate."

His mom pointed a finger at Raudel, a big grin on her face. "See? Calling me Kate wasn't so bad. I'll see you boys later." She waved them off, then headed back into the house.

Alone at last. Chad almost groaned out loud.

He lowered his head, picked up a portion of the fountain debris, then marched straight for Raudel's Honda Civic. It was black and appeared well-maintained. Only a very fine coating of dust from the drive down the forest road and some pine pollen from parking so close to the tree had marred the surface of the shiny car. Chad paused when he reached the trunk, ready to help Raudel load the mess.

But what are we going to talk about once I'm trapped with him in the car? Maybe I can keep the conversation going, never give him a chance to speak. Yeah. That could work.

"Just set that down, and I'll take care of it. You can wait for me in the car, get off your feet. I want to rearrange a few things in here anyway."

Chad let out a nervous chuckle again. "But I'm the one who ruined it. I should help."

Raudel patted his back and Chad's bastard of a dick twitched in his jeans. "Go on, Chad. I'll just be a minute." He nodded shakily, then took a couple of steps before reaching for the handle of the passenger door. Raudel beat him to it. "Let me."

Chad wouldn't meet his gaze, but he mumbled out a thank-you. He was still convinced that Raudel was buttering him up for the kill.

The door squeaked open, and Chad only tripped a little as he climbed inside before seating himself. Raudel leaned past him as he deposited the messenger bag in the backseat, his body pressing briefly against Chad's side. Once he straightened, Raudel shut him in, and Chad wiped at the sweat that had been building at his hairline despite how crisp the air was.

Shit . He hadn't thought to bring a jacket for when it got cooler later.

Chad twisted his fingers, then tried to still them. He had to make plausible topics of

conversation materialize, and he only had seconds to work with. Raudel slammed the trunk, and Chad yelped. He ran a hand across the top of his mussed-up hair, removing more sweat while simultaneously wondering how much worse he'd made it look.

Raudel opened the driver's side door, and as he entered the car, Chad had a flash of brilliance.

Maybe I can use not having my hoodie as a pretext to go back inside. Then I can run through the house to the backyard, jump off the pier into the lake, and swim to freedom. Or hide in the attic.

If nothing else, it would give him a few more minutes to gather his wits.

He had sucked in a breath to tell him he'd be right back when Raudel met his eyes. Chad snapped his jaw shut and settled back in the passenger seat, clutching the seatbelt strap as if it could somehow save him. He would never survive the day.

Raudel cleared his throat. "I...." Chad grimaced, his body tensing the way it did when he was at the top of the large drop of a roller coaster. "Well." Raudel gave a shaky laugh. "I guess we should get going."

Chad almost groaned in relief while still acknowledging that Raudel could strike at any moment.

Raudel switched on the engine. Chad immediately stared out the window on the passenger side as if the myriad of nearly identical trees was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

They bounced and jostled down the dirt road, which eventually led them to the main highway. The biggest, most awkward silence of Chad's young life stretched out. He didn't think it was too far into town. On the drive up, his mother had informed him

that it would be easy enough to go back and forth without too much trouble.

Raudel cleared his throat again. "So. What have you been up to since high school?"

Chad squirmed in his seat. "Oh... this and that. Working." Making two dollars above minimum wage. Doing my mom's shopping. Duct-taping furniture together.

"Yeah? Cool."

Another silence. Chad went back to looking out of the window, gauging what his chances of survival would be if he leaped from the car.

Get him talking about himself before he decides to talk about anything else. "Lindsey says you're about to graduate."

"Yeah." Raudel seemed to grip the steering wheel tighter, the muscles in his jaw working hard as he stared straight ahead.

Chad frowned. He wasn't making much progress. "How're your folks?"

"Doing good." Raudel paused, ran a hand through his thick hair, then placed it back on the steering wheel, the grip of death returning. "Your mom looks good too."

Chad snorted.

Raudel glanced his way before returning his gaze to the road. "She's not all right?"

"Not since Lindsey's wedding morphed into the event of the century."

Raudel chuckled. "Yeah. My mom was the same way with my sisters. It'll all work out. Then everything will go back to normal."

“Thank God.”

“What about you, Chad?” Raudel’s voice softened. “Seeing anyone?”

Holy hell. He swallowed hard, the synapses in his brain firing off like rockets as he struggled to find a non-loser way of answering Raudel’s question.

“Sorry. That’s none of my business.” There was a tinge of melancholy to Raudel’s voice.

“I’m not seeing anyone,” he blurted before his mind could analyze the response from all angles.

“Oh.” Raudel sounded oddly hopeful.

Don’t. He wasn’t going to add meaning to anything Raudel said. Not when there was still the “thing that must not be referred to” looming over him.

Raudel cleared his throat. “Me neither.”

The sweat on Chad’s forehead that he thought he’d wiped away earlier was back with a vengeance. “Sorry.”

Raudel shrugged. “It’s fine. I’m at the point now where I only want to be with someone if it could end up being the real thing.”

Chad’s stomach clenched. “Oh.”

Thankfully the subject of their non-relationship status seemed to have come to a conclusion, so Chad dug his phone out from his pants pocket. As they sped by the lake, he drank in the sight of the water reflecting the gorgeous blue of the sky. He had

to admit that it really was beautiful. The cluster of buildings that made up the town of Lake Tahoe drew closer, and it occurred to him that they still had no real clue where they were going.

“Want me to Google some party stores?”

Raudel appeared to jolt out of some reverie. “Oh yeah. Good idea.”

If he was lucky, they could concentrate their remaining chitchat on wedding and grocery-related topics. He soon had a couple of options. The one with the word emporium in its name seemed to be the most likely candidate for multiple chocolate fountain choices.

“Got one. Hold up. It’s trying to locate us.” Chad held the phone up to the window. He had no idea if it made a damn bit of difference, but he always went with it. “Okay, the blue arrow is pointing straight ahead.”

The next few minutes were taken up with Chad navigating them until they turned off the main drag. They landed in the practically empty parking lot of a building the size of some small islands in the South Pacific. An air-dancing tube clown wiggled and flapped from atop the two-story structure, the deranged expression of the balloon’s circus character the stuff of young children’s nightmares. If the Party Planner Emporium didn’t have a chocolate fountain—no one would.

Raudel pulled up close to the front entrance, then parked. For reasons Chad couldn’t name, the loss of the sound of the car, the motion, the feel of it beneath him made being alone with Raudel much more difficult. Almost as if the Honda had been a buffer between them.

Raudel angled his body toward him, his demeanor that of someone who was about to speak on an important subject.

Nope. Chad hastily scrambled from the car. Don't need to get into any chats about high school antics.

He'd have to remain alert. Avoid any moments that might afford Raudel the chance to talk with him privately. The chirp of the car alarm was quickly followed by the sound of Raudel's footsteps.

Chad rushed into the store then froze. Raudel halted next to him, similarly pasted to the floor. The woman behind the long glass showcase counter had jerked her head up at the noise of the door chime, her visage bizarre and frightening enough that Chad wondered if she was dressed in a Halloween costume.

Except that it's April.

A thick white powder covered her skin, almost as if she'd woken up that morning and decided she should look like a mime. The rest of her heavily made-up face appeared petrified. Her wide-eyed stare was only slightly less disturbing than her large, painted-on eyebrows, which were raised almost to her hairline. A silver-streaked, black-helmet hairdo gave the impression that an F5 tornado wouldn't dislodge even one strand, and some sort of pink, fur-like scarf was wrapped around her neck multiple times as if she were being strangled by a fuzzy boa constrictor. She still hadn't said anything, and Chad was too petrified to speak.

Raudel took one for the team. "Do you carry chocolate fountains?"

Chad widened his eyes, his jaw going slack as she spoke without her lips moving.

"Rent or buy?"

Botox is not this woman's friend.

“Buy.” Raudel turned to him. “Right?”

“Uh...” She wasn’t a train wreck. More of a fiery plane crash.

“Chad?”

“Huh? Oh! Yes. Buy.”

She pointed to the rear of the building with one finger that was crowned with a long, sharpened claw.

Raudel gave her a warm smile. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Chad had to admit he was impressed. He was still trying to wipe what he was sure was a look of horror off his face.

She didn’t react to Raudel’s smile but simply kept staring. Chad could sense the hatred pouring off her. He wasn’t sure whether it was because of her job at a crappy, run-down, cheap party place, or that she hated all of humanity because she’d worked the past fifty years at a crappy, run-down, cheap party place.

A vision of his future flashed before his eyes. Only it was yogurt replacing the paper streamers and white folding chairs. “Oh God.”

“Come on. Let’s see what they—Chad? Are you all right?”

He jerked his head toward Raudel. “Do you think it’s too late?” He had to get a grip. He was only twenty-two, dammit.

Raudel furrowed his brow. “Your mom said not to worry about getting back until later.” He laughed, his beautiful eyes shining back at Chad. “Besides, we just left the

house about thirty minutes ago.”

Chad nodded, giving himself a mental shake. “Yeah. Silly me.”

Raudel indicated for him to go ahead. “Shall we?”

He forced himself to move forward even though his legs weren’t interested.

They traversed the gaudy displays and hodgepodge aisles filled with old, sad silk flower arrangements, outdated karaoke machines that featured the use of cassette tapes, and other elements that boasted of parties from a bygone era.

They halted when they reached a white lattice-board archway. Beyond it lay all the large shit the store couldn’t shove onto the expanse of dented metal racks. Everything from Greek-style columns to banquet table setups graced the fake turf that made up the rear of the warehouse. At one side was their Holy Grail—fountains. They were both drawn to them at the same time.

Chad sucked in a sharp breath when he glanced at the first price tag. I’ll be working at the yogurt shop until I’m a hundred and seven to pay back Mom for this. Primarily due to the fact that five dollars a week was the amount of his disposable income.

He shuffled over to a less gargantuan and ornate one.

“Chad?”

He glanced at Raudel, who had shuffled right along with him. Chad did one more shuffle as Raudel crept up on him a bit too close. He struggled to keep his breathing even.

Never show your fear when facing the enemy.

The task at hand had temporarily allowed him to push aside the harsh reality that he was still at risk of being humiliated by Raudel.

Chad's nemesis spoke up. "I just want you to know how glad I am that I was able to make this trip."

He waited for him to continue, but all Raudel did was stare, a slight tug at the corner of his mouth.

Chad swallowed hard, his mouth too dry to ease the way. "Uh." He croaked it out. "Yeah. Lindsey was super excited that you could make it." He licked his bottom lip to moisten it.

Raudel glanced down, then back up again so quickly Chad wondered if he'd hallucinated the whole thing.

"It'll be great to see her again. But I'm very happy that you're here too, Chad."

To have your chance to mock me? The heat that bloomed in his face had to be turning his pale as fuck skin scarlet. Raudel smiled wide in what Chad imagined was victory. He snapped his head forward and snatched up another price tag.

Shit. I'm fucked all the way around. He dropped the tag, then crossed his arms angrily.

A long pause followed, and he shifted uncomfortably on his feet. His curiosity got the better of him, and he stole a glance at Raudel. Chad widened his eyes at Raudel's expression. Raudel appeared to be contemplating whether or not he should say something.

Oh God. This is it.

“Chad, I don’t know how to say this.” Raudel furrowed his brow.

Time to man up. No avoiding it now. “Look, this wedding is very important to Lindsey. I mean, really, really important. Whatever happens between you and me could potentially ruin her day, and since you’re her best friend, I’m hoping that you’ll take that into consideration before—” He swallowed hard. “—you know.”

Raudel arched his eyebrows. “I know?”

Chad looked away. The moment had arrived; the bringer of doom stood right next to him with Chad pleading for mercy, yet all he could think about was how much he wished it had all been different. That it still could be different. But there had never been a chance, and there never would be. In a mortifying move, tears burned in his eyes, threatening to spill over.

He jerked away from Raudel’s soft touch, the feel of him too much of a tease.

Raudel dropped his hand but stood close enough that all it would take was the barest movement of his fingers, and they would be in contact with his skin. “I understand, Chad. I suppose I’m being selfish. But I can’t lie. I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to spend the week with you. Be together as adults instead of when we were all struggling to figure out life back in high school. Maybe once Lindsey is married and her time is done, maybe it can be our time. I studied for hours and hours before I left so I could devote myself to discovering whether or not the fantasy I’ve held of you for all these years is real.” He sighed. “I know it must sound crazy that I’m still thinking about you after so long, but I can’t help what I feel. And I don’t really have to be back in LA for two weeks, so I was wondering... um. What I mean is... well, would you consider it?”

What the actual fuck?

Chad held his breath, head lowered as he stared at his hands. He'd obviously lost his mind. Completely, utterly, and wholly lost his mind.

Finally he couldn't hold in the enormity of it any longer. The stress building up from the whole week, waiting to be exposed, terrified of what would happen when he finally saw Raudel again for the first time in years—it was too much. His jumbled emotions exploded out of him in a snorting chuckle before it turned into a flood of laughter that had tears spilling down his cheeks for a much different reason than wishing Raudel would like him.

Nothing Raudel had said was funny. It was fucking tragic . So unbelievably ridiculous, Chad wondered if the sanest thing for him to do at that moment would be to nab a bus ticket, then get the fuck out of there. It wasn't as if he'd be able to function like a normal human being for the rest of the week, anyway.

Raudel toying with his emotions was beyond evil. So much worse than if he'd simply made fun of and mocked him. It occurred to him that maybe the wondrous attributes he'd attached to Raudel over the years were false. Maybe his seemingly gracious behavior had been nothing but a big part of his act. Because the load of horseshit that Raudel had just shoveled his way had been done with such genuine sincerity, Chad could almost believe it.

Almost. He wiped his eyes, his stomach still cramping from his sudden outburst.

Raudel remained quiet, and Chad assumed it was because he hadn't expected him to collapse into hysterical laughter. He'd probably hoped that Chad would get all excited and confess his love, too—right before announcing it was all a big joke.

A well of hurt replaced the unexpected laughter only a few minutes before.

He still wanted him. Still fucking wanted him anyway. Something deep inside, where

the hurt had embedded itself, made him wonder. He'd been so stupid to tell Lindsey he had a crush on Raudel, but he'd ached to have her intercede on his behalf. He'd hoped that Raudel could see beyond the awkward geek he was back then.

Then, after Raudel had walked in on him that horrible day, Chad had begged her not to say a word about his childish feelings after all. He was too mortified that Raudel might find out how he felt about him. But had she done it anyway? Had it been too late to take it back?

"I'm sorry, Chad." Raudel's voice held none of the smooth, assured tone it always did. The sound of loss and sadness had replaced it. "Forget I said anything. I knew it was a long shot. We'll help out your mom, then I'll bring you right back." Raudel moved away from him, idly playing with another price tag. "I'll stay out of your way the rest of the week. I don't want you to be uncomfortable because of me."

Chad shot out his hand, grabbing Raudel's arm to keep him from retreating further. "Wait. What? I don't get it." His heart pounded in an out-of-control rhythm that threatened dizziness. "Is all...? What you said, all that stuff about wanting to spend the week with me... I mean, you were just messing with me, right?"

Raudel let go of the tag, and Chad loosened his hold on Raudel's arm. But he didn't remove it, didn't want to let go. Not yet.

"No, Chad." Raudel's expression still radiated pain. "I meant every word. I always believed you were into me in high school. I was ashamed because I was almost eighteen and you were only fifteen, but I couldn't help it. I wanted you. Then, when Lindsey told me that you thought I was a stud..." He quirked up one corner of his mouth. "I thought there was hope. But after I caught you that day—"

"Whoa!" Chad snatched his hand away as if he'd been stung. "No. Nope. Not talking about that."

“Why?” To his credit, Raudel appeared genuinely confused.

“Really? You’re asking why ?” Chad huffed, then fixed his gaze on a fountain edged in butterflies.

“Chad, I don’t understand. I assumed what you were doing was for my benefit, but then you got scared when the reality of me being there became too much, which was why you ran away. It was my fault. I expected too much when you were still so young. I’m hoping you can forgive me.”

Chad whipped his body around to face him. “I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about, dude. I ran out of there because I had a dildo shoved up my ass, and I was embarrassed as fuck.” Chad gasped, rising on his tiptoes as he jerked his head around to verify that no one had heard him.

Cruella De Vil didn’t appear as if she’d even twitched since they arrived, so he assumed he was safe in that regard. He turned to Raudel again. “And I guarantee you it wasn’t for your benefit, even if....” Chad cleared his throat. “Well, in some ways it was.” He placed a hand on his forehead. “Never mind.”

Raudel leaned closer, enough that Chad could sense his heat, smell the clean soapy aroma of the only man he’d ever wanted to have more with than just sex. But none of what was happening made any sense, and he desperately needed it to.

“Yeah? In what way, Chad? Did you hope I’d catch you?”

“Oh God.” Chad’s knees wobbled, and he latched onto a white, wrought iron arch draped in fake ivy. He shook his head. “No. No way. I was....”

I can’t tell him this. Then he’ll know for sure what a weirdo I am.

“It’s okay. You can say it, Raudel whispered. “And just so you know? It was the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. You gave me a gift that day. Whenever I’m alone and need to get off, that memory is right there.”

Chad slowly turned his head to verify that Raudel was serious. The expression Raudel radiated back at him, with his pupils blown wide, told him all he needed to know. He was telling the truth.

Unbelievable. Un-fucking-believable.

“I was... getting myself ready to have sex, you know? So I’d know what to expect and wouldn’t be scared when it happened for real.”

“Oh, man. Really? I wish...” Raudel shook his head. “No. I believe things happen for a reason. It wasn’t the right time yet.”

Yet? “So, what made you burst into my bedroom unannounced?”

They both laughed shakily. So much of his tension had been released that Chad felt a bit off-kilter, kind of like he needed to take a nap or something.

“Lindsey said you were waiting for me in your room, that I should go over there while your parents were out so we could be alone. She left the front door unlocked so I could sneak in and go to you. Be with you.”

Chad gaped at Raudel, his jaw going slack. He had the horrible feeling that Raudel was telling the truth, in which case, he wanted to destroy Lindsey’s fucking wedding fountain all over again.

“But.... She acted like she never knew what’d happened.”

“She didn’t. I didn’t want to embarrass you, so I told her I chickened out and never went over. I wanted it to be something we dealt with between us.” Raudel stroked his cheek before dropping his hand, then gathering up one of Chad’s. “But you wouldn’t let me talk to you. You ran away whenever I was near. Six months later, I left for college and realized that you were too young. Like I said, the timing wasn’t right yet.”

“That was, like, seven years ago.” Chad snorted. “You assumed I’d be here waiting for you after all this time, raring to go with my trusty dildo?”

Raudel laughed, his eyes bright, the melancholy driven away by something else.

Something like hope.

“I didn’t assume. As a matter of fact, I figured I needed to move on, convinced myself that high school stuff never lasts anyway. I even lived with a boyfriend for two years, but it didn’t work out. I dated lots of men. Some were unbelievably handsome, a couple were very rich and wanted to take care of me. One even declared he was irretrievably in love with me. Then there was this famous actor who—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I get the picture.” Chad groaned. It could’ve been so different if he hadn’t been such a total wimp that day.

It could’ve been Raudel instead of a dildo.

“Chad?”

He rolled his head to the side, Raudel only inches from him. He’d never been this close to the man he’d dreamed of over and over for so long. The man with whom he’d believed he could have something special. Yeah, he’d been young. But he’d also known how he felt. There wasn’t anything wrong with falling in love before hitting

sixteen. Nothing wrong with it at all—except for the part where his heart had been broken into a million pieces.

“Yeah?”

Raudel smiled. “I’m telling the truth. I never stopped thinking about you. That’s why I couldn’t love those other men. I only wanted you.”

“No shit?” Chad swallowed hard. “Sorry. Still processing. Then what—I mean, what is it that you want from me now?”

Raudel caressed his face again, but this time he didn’t stop. “I won’t ruin Lindsey’s special week, Chad. I promise. But can I still have a chance with you?”

Holy Jesus. The man wasn’t kidding.

“A chance?” Chad grunted. “Shit, Raudel. You can have whatever the fuck you want from me.”

Raudel barked out a laugh. “Then how about I start with this?”

The first press of Raudel’s soft lips against his own was so much better than the fantasy. Chad’s body responded as if it was meant to belong to Raudel all along. He relaxed into his touch, opened up to the kiss. Stirrings of arousal awoke within, his desire freed now that all the scariness had disappeared. Even if Raudel never caressed his cheek or gently explored his mouth again, he’d still have this one time. He’d have the memory that Raudel was even more amazing than he ever could’ve imagined.

As Raudel dropped his hand from Chad’s face to wrap it around his neck, as he pushed the kiss deeper into his mouth, the stirrings in Chad’s core bloomed into raging lust. His cock pushed insistently at the rigid zipper of his jeans, the throbbing a

warning that he could easily lose control. That wasn't something he was prepared to handle in public at a decrepit party store with the Crypt Keeper nearby.

Aaaaand erection officially killed.

As if sensing the change in Chad's reaction to their clinch, Raudel broke the connection. He pulled back enough to search Chad's face but still held on to his nape. "Is this too much for you right now?"

Chad locked gazes with him. He couldn't fuck up again. It was time to grow a pair and take what was being offered. A chance . "Not even close."

Raudel licked his lips, his crooked smile enticing Chad's cock back to attention. "Then let's have some fun."

Chad arched his eyebrows. "Deciding on a chocolate fountain?"

Raudel lowered his hand, then squeezed Chad's fingers. "Deciding on a chocolate fountain with you . That's what makes it fun."

Chad's heart stuttered. "Then fountains it is."

Raudel grinned, squeezing him one more time before letting go. "We've got the rest of the day, Chad. Let's get started on making up for all that lost time."

Chad laughed, an almost giddy sound. "Cool. Sounds pretty fucking awesome to me."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:26 am

CHAD WANDERED in a daze at the third enormous warehouse-o'-party-shit they'd scoured so far. The first house of horrors hadn't worked out. The only fountain she'd actually had in stock was the gigantic one that would never fit in Raudel's Honda. The rest of them had apparently only been on display to tease them. After the second option had also proved futile, they decided to grab some coffee to fortify them on their search.

As they sat on a bench outside, gazing at the crystalline lake, Chad was struck by how startlingly clear it was, how the brilliant blue and green tones of the huge body of water were hypnotizing in their beauty. Plenty of snow still clung to both the Carson Range and the Sierra Nevada that rose to the left of them. The occasional kayak drifted by, but it was still too early in the season for much in the way of water activities, especially since most of the ski resorts were still open.

Despite the sun, it was damn cold sitting so close to the lake, so Raudel fetched an extra sweatshirt out of his car for Chad to wear. Chad wrapped his arms around himself as if he could contain the aroma of Raudel that still clung to it. A rich, male scent so alluring that he'd wanted to roll around in it like catnip.

He couldn't stop jabbering like a loon, filling Raudel in on what happened to many of the kids from high school—who married, who left town, and who ended up in jail. In the back of his mind, he knew there were much more important discussions to have, but he needed mundane first. His emotions were already so rattled that recovery time was essential.

Raudel didn't seem to mind, and Chad wondered if maybe he was going through the same struggle. The revelation was the most surprising event of Chad's life, and

maybe Raudel felt the same from his side.

His cheeks ached from all the goofy grins. The teeniest of hesitant twinges tried to shoulder their way in, whispering that all Raudel had promised was a couple of weeks. But he squashed them down. He wasn't going to let his usual certainty of doom mindset ruin an amazing day.

They hadn't known each other very well in school, and they'd spent all of a couple of hours actually getting to know each other for the first time that day. Of course Raudel wouldn't make long-term promises. It wasn't as if he expected anything more, either. He couldn't possibly be sure of Raudel yet, had no idea whether he'd ever want anything beyond a fling.

"Hey," Raudel whispered in his ear. "I hate to say this, but we should get to the next place on the list."

He placed his hand on Chad's knee, making him shiver. His response had nothing to do with the cold.

"You're right." Chad sighed. "The sooner we find that ridiculous thing, the sooner we can move on to better pursuits."

Raudel let out a low chuckle, and Chad's face heated. He supposed his words could be taken a few different ways.

Once they reached the party place and made their way to the floor displays, they discovered there were a few choices that might work. But when he glanced at the price tag of a less hideous one than the others, he winced. He hoped his mom's credit limit was high enough to buy the fake silver nightmare.

Chad glanced up to see Raudel in deep concentration as he pondered an intricately

designed, gold-embellished fountain option, rubbing his forefinger and thumb over his stubbled chin, his prominent eyebrows pulled together, full lips pursed as he considered it. Then he bit at the pad of his thumb, and a wavy lock of hair drifted across his forehead.

Oh, who am I fucking kidding? Of course I want more than a fling with him.

Chad let out one of the sighs that had almost made his mother take him to the emergency room on the drive up to the lake house.

“Too expensive?” Raudel regarded him with the same smile he’d been flashing ever since their first kiss.

Our first kiss.

Chad unconsciously touched his bottom lip before yanking his hand away. “Uh, I’m not sure any price is too high for Mom to fork over right now. It’s how much I’ll be stuck paying her back that concerns me the most.”

Raudel sidled over to him. He slipped an arm around his waist, never taking his eyes off Chad’s. “I’ve been thinking. It’s partly my fault that the fountain got broken.” He briefly pressed their mouths together before pulling back. “I’ll pay half. Let’s get this fountain thing over with, then go grab some dinner.”

Chad blinked repeatedly, lost in the spell of Raudel’s sultry gaze. As far as he was concerned, standing in the Party Clown Solutions Outlet store staring into each other’s eyes all night was just as cool an idea as getting something to eat.

Raudel pulled him closer, his hold tighter. “My treat. Where do you want to go , mijo?”

“I, uh, wherever is fine.”

Jesus . How would he survive so much awesomeness?

Raudel brushed his lips against Chad’s temple, the scrape of his stubble sparking the nerves under his skin. “Tell me what you like. I’m going to find out as much as I can about you in the next two weeks. It’ll be like we’ve known each other our whole lives.”

“Wow.”

He’d never been the most eloquent thing on two legs, and he’d certainly never been wooed before. As much as he was reveling in the moment, he wanted to tell Raudel to save his energy. It wasn’t as if he had to worry about whether or not he’d score. He’d give it up for Raudel anytime, anywhere.

Raudel chuckled, and for once, it belonged only to Chad. For however long Raudel wanted him near, he’d take it. It had nothing to do with being needy or due to some vague unhappiness he wished to be temporarily distracted from. Being with Raudel was all about being unafraid to take what he deserved, to believe he deserved it, and to enjoy whatever might come from their time together.

“I like Italian. You know, the ‘old-fashioned, giant meatball, heavy tomato sauce with a mountain of powdered cheese on top’ Italian.”

Raudel nodded. “Hmm. Sounds good. What about lasagna? I like lasagna.”

“Sweet. I’ll Google it.”

Raudel grinned. “I’ll go see if Bozo the Clown over there can ring up the fountain.”

Chad snorted. “Good luck with that. Clown-boy could be dangerous. He’s hated us ever since we set foot in here.”

Raudel rolled his eyes. “I’ve got news for you, honey. I’m willing to bet he hates everybody.”

Chad scrolled through the listings. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” He frowned at the screen. “This place looks good. Oh, wait... it’s on the California side of Tahoe. Is that a deal-breaker since we had to drive all the way up to this store?”

Raudel got close to Chad’s ear, the heat of his breath tickling the little hairs in the canal. “If it makes you happy, that’s all that matters.”

Damn. He’s good.

Raudel straightened, then strode over to ascertain whether they’d both get out of there alive, and if it would be with a new fountain. Chad decided he’d rather ogle Raudel’s round ass as he walked away. Then he’d consider other restaurant listings.

Priorities.

CHAD SNAPPED the breadstick in half and crumbs flew everywhere. He widened his eyes. “Sorry.”

Raudel snatched one of the halves, smacked him on the back of the hand with it, then took a bite while winking at him.

“You brat.” Chad couldn’t stop laughing. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had so much fun, and truthfully wasn’t sure if the fun had ever been so incredible.

Raudel had ordered them a bottle of Chianti. They’d already drunk their way through

half of it while eating their salads and a bushel of breadsticks.

Chad was stuffed, and he hadn't even seen one meatball yet. He wasn't much of a drinker in general, but when he did have anything, it was usually a beer or two. The wine had turned out to be surprisingly potent. "So, are you excited school's almost over with?" Chad grunted. "I know I'd be."

Raudel nodded as he chewed. He swallowed the last of his wine, then reached for the bottle to pour another. He indicated to Chad's half-full glass.

"Nah. I'm good."

Raudel refilled his own. "'Glad' doesn't begin to cover it." He set the bottle down. "Don't get me wrong. There's so much about it I've loved. UCLA is in a great part of LA. Westwood's nearby, and it's a cool place to hang out on the weekends, lots of excitement. Bars, clubs, movie theaters, people on the street. And the university itself is amazing. So much history there, such a grand place."

Raudel looked down at his hands, and Chad had the sense that he was mulling something over. Finally, he glanced up again. "I have an internship this summer with a well-respected law office in Century City. That's kind of on the other side of the city, but very nice too. They've told me that barring any unforeseen circumstances, they'd like to take me on in the fall."

Chad swallowed, the wine not sitting so well on his stomach anymore. "Oh. Well. Congratulations." He cleared his throat a bit too loudly. "I mean, that's exciting news, right?"

Raudel pressed his lips together. "Is it?"

"Uh, sure. After all, you moved all the way down to California, studied and worked

hard for all those years, and now here you are. Some high-class legal firm wants you right away. You don't even have to go out and search for a job, it's waiting right there for you."

Chad had almost blurted out "your mom must be so proud of you" but stopped himself in time. He was obviously spending way too much time hanging out with his mother.

"Well, I'm not so sure. I do love LA, though, want to work in a good firm, so it's not that, but—" He shrugged one shoulder. "—I want more than just a good job."

Chad gazed around the restaurant as if the building itself held the secrets of young men's futures. He wasn't an idiot, not really, not in the way he thought of himself on occasion. He was capable enough that old man Sherman had steadily promoted him from a part-time yogurt slinger all the way up to assistant manager in less than three years with incremental raises that had brought him to that two dollars above minimum wage. For the small town he and Raudel had been born and raised in, it was practically the Franklin Mint.

Yogurt wasn't a career. It was a placeholder. It allowed him the freedom to live in a shithole and come and go as he pleased, except for the part where he had to be at the shop forty hours a week and hope his shift wasn't when the middle school kids would come in and dare each other to throw the frozen, pseudo-dairy product in his face. Or whether he'd have to confront a group of young moms gossiping about whoever had been crowned Skank of the Week while simultaneously ignoring their spawn, who were also throwing yogurt all over the store.

Must be something about that shit that makes people want to throw it.

He finally answered Raudel. "I guess I keep thinking that you have a purpose. You decided on something, then left our crappy town and did it. Even though it was hard,

and you didn't have your family there, it didn't stop you from reaching your goal, making something of yourself. Whether or not you ever take that job, or even if you never practice law one day in your life, you'll still have that degree. You earned it. It's yours. That deserves a congratulations if nothing else."

Raudel stared back at him, his eyes glittering, head tilted to the side. "Why did you stay?"

Chad shrugged. He'd asked himself that so many times and never come up with a definitive answer, only the feeling that he didn't want to leave his family for no particular reason. He sincerely doubted that a family-style Italian restaurant on the California side of Tahoe would inspire the truth of it to magically appear. "Where would I go?"

Raudel didn't answer. He reached across the requisite red-and-white checkerboard cloth and took Chad's hand, intertwining their fingers together, holding on with gentle strength.

Even if everything else was a mystery to Chad, one thing was clear: he wanted Raudel even more than he had before.

"I'M NEVER eating again."

Chad patted his typically flat tummy. He'd barely been able to tolerate grocery shopping. All that food. He wasn't used to such gargantuan, starch-enhanced meals. His normal fare mostly consisted of frozen burritos, along with the occasional orange, so he didn't die of scurvy. He knew better than to eat the shit he served at work—even if it was free.

Raudel squeezed his knee. His hand had rested there ever since they'd gotten back in the car, and Chad occasionally pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming. He

hoped Raudel hadn't noticed.

Then again, he thought finding me with a fake dong stuck up my ass was hot, so self-pinching is probably pretty timid by comparison.

"We should go over the itinerary before we get back."

Chad narrowed his eyes, attempting to study Raudel's expression to see if he was fucking with him. "She actually made an itinerary? As in, telling us what to do and where we need to be every hour of every day?"

Raudel let out a snorting chuckle. "Pretty much. I mean, I can understand it to a degree. There's a lot that goes on with these weddings, and the last week before go time is particularly difficult."

"Yeah. I sensed that." Chad crossed his arms, his mood deteriorating from elated to cranky in record time.

Raudel tickled his knee, and Chad jerked his leg. "Hey!" Something akin to a giggle escaped him. "What are you doing?"

"Don't you think I checked when all the free times would be? I have them memorized. Then we can do whatever we want. Together."

Raudel sported a ridiculous grin, and Chad found himself drawn back to a happier state by his upbeat attitude.

Chad held back what would surely turn into an embarrassing giggle. An odd snort came out instead. "Oh yeah? Tell me about those. Then maybe I can suffer through the rest." A sudden thought filled him with dread. "Is there a photo session before the wedding? You know, with us all tricked out in those horrible tuxes with the peach

satin bow ties and little hankies?”

Raudel laughed. “They’re called pocket squares, and yes, there is.” Raudel gasped. “Did you just say peach ?”

“You didn’t know? Sorry, dude. This whole thing has turned her into a creature I no longer recognize as someone I share DNA with.”

Raudel shook his head, his eyes fixed on the dark and quiet road. “You don’t have to explain it to me. I’ve been through the same thing with my older sisters and a couple cousins. Now, I’m not getting down on Lindsey—you know I love her—but my sisters were just the same. It turns what should be a beautiful day to share with someone you love, someone you want to spend the rest of your life with, into a stressful nightmare. Who needs it? I’d much rather be with my guy for our special day, then have a party with everyone else later on.”

Chad’s face heated up to an alarming degree. Should I say anything? Agree? Change the subject? Cry out that I just had a Bigfoot sighting?

As soon as Raudel had confessed his secret longings about him, Chad hadn’t been able to stop thinking about forever afters. Even if he shouldn’t, he couldn’t pry the goofy thought from his head that something about the whole situation was fated.

We had an unrequited crush when we were horny kids. Now we’re horny adults about to share the same bed for a week. No big.

“Yeah.” Chad was back to maniacal chuckling. “Sisters.”

“Anyway, about our free time together.”

Raudel appeared not to notice anything odd regarding his nervous reaction to

Raudel's future wedding wishes. He'd gone back to playing with Chad's knee in a way that had his dick wondering when it would get a piece of that.

"Is it going to be along the lines of we can dip our big toes in the lake for ten minutes between prepping the grill and tying bows around the tiny favor bags holding the sugared almonds?"

Raudel chuckled, a sound that Chad was already addicted to. "Kinda. But I have a secret plan to get us more time together."

"Right on. Tell me about those moments."

"Well, like today. This worked out great, right? We shopped for the fountain, picked up groceries and propane canisters, but we also had lots of time for just you and me."

"True. And I loved every second of it, Raudel, I swear." He tried not to fall back into his habitual sighs. "But the closer it gets to the wedding, the more stuff there will need to be done. I doubt we'll get so lucky again as to have a whole afternoon and evening to ourselves."

"Don't worry, mijó. We have the week after the wedding, and we have every night alone in our room."

Raudel ran his hand up the inside of Chad's thigh, so close to his hardening length that his entire body tensed with anticipation.

Come on. One more inch.

Raudel moved his hand back down to Chad's knee.

Dammit.

Then it struck Chad what Raudel was really saying. “So... I don’t know if you knew that the room we’re sharing only has one bed, and I wasn’t sure if you wanted—?”

“You aren’t?” There was a playful note to Raudel’s voice. “Then I’ve been absolutely terrible at seducing you properly. I want you, Chad. I want as much of you as you’re willing to give, and not just in bed. The day we’ve spent has made that very clear to me.”

Fuck . Chad didn’t know how to respond, how to act. Raudel had been with rich guys and some famous actor or another, while he had never had an actual boyfriend before. Was Raudel suggesting something more... permanent? He couldn’t be, though, could he? There was the job in LA, but even if Raudel didn’t take it, he’d still have to go back and finish his degree. He’d been melancholy at dinner when they discussed it, but the food had come shortly thereafter, and they’d changed the subject.

Raudel spoke in a tentative voice. “Am I overwhelming you? I know I can get intense. You can tell me to back off, it won’t hurt my feelings.”

“No! Don’t back off.”

“Good.”

Chad stole a peek at Raudel. His smile was wide and toothy as he stared ahead. The reality that Raudel desired more was clear. He wasn’t entirely sure what that was , but he trusted Raudel. Something inside told him that he could leave his heart in Raudel’s care, and it wouldn’t get damaged or broken. With Raudel, he could be safe to discover what having a man in his life was about.

A rumble of laughter echoed in Raudel’s chest. Chad furrowed his brow. “What?”

“Oh, I was just remembering what you said about the dildo.”

Great. That'll never go away. "I'm scared to ask."

"Did it work out for you? You know, when you finally had sex, were you glad you'd practiced with it?"

Chad was back to calculating what the risks would be if he leaped from the car. He couldn't entirely see what was beyond the side of the highway. Would he be hurtled into the lake or simply slammed to the ground? If it were only broken bones to contend with, he might've gone for it, but they were going fast enough that death was a real possibility.

"Chad? I feel like I keep asking you things you don't want to talk about. That's not what I'm trying to do. It's only me needing to learn about you—that's all. Get caught up on all the years I missed."

"I know. And it's cool. I want to learn about you, too." He winced. "It's just... you're so sophisticated now." He chewed on his lip, searching for the perfect words. Not one of his best traits. "Don't take this wrong, because I totally mean it in a cool way. But you've changed. You're still the same for the most part, but there's this aura about you that's different from before." He snorted. "Obviously, you were a lot younger and everything, but still, you're so worldly or something. I dunno." He rolled his eyes. "I sound like an idiot."

Chad lowered his head, not sure if Raudel could understand how inadequate he felt in comparison. He didn't think he was that bad of a catch—he could make a mean pot roast, knew how to budget like a champ, and would give his whole heart to the man he loved. But he was still the same guy from the same stagnant desert town, while Raudel had been living the high life in Los Angeles, one of the most glamorous places on Earth.

"Stop that." Raudel gave Chad's knee an extra-harsh squeeze. "You're not an idiot. I

am, in some ways. I don't regret all I've done. I'm glad to get my degree and want to be involved in the legal field somehow. But like I said earlier, I want more." He paused before speaking again. "I was hoping that more might be you."

Chad jerked his head up. "But what about all those actors and rich dudes throwing themselves at you?"

Raudel shrugged. "They weren't real, mijó. They were a mirage, something I thought could fulfill me, make my life better." Raudel glanced his way before returning his gaze to the road. "Do you know that when I visited my family for the holidays, I almost approached you a few times?"

Chad dropped his jaw. "No way."

Raudel grinned. "Way."

"But... all that stuff you said about still thinking about me. Why didn't you try to see me, then?"

Raudel kept his eyes forward, his jaw working as if gritting his teeth. He finally answered, still staring straight ahead. "Because I knew if I saw you, I'd never return to Los Angeles."

Raudel traced lazy circles on Chad's knee again, while Chad's belly tightened, a funny, euphoric sensation filling his chest.

"Oh." He swallowed, his throat too dry. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you're glad I'm here now, that you think we could be good together. That you'd like to give us a try." Raudel sniffed loudly. "Even if it's not true."

If he starts crying, I'm a goner.

Chad grasped Raudel's hand and clutched it with as much resolve as he could muster. "It's true, Raudel. You have no idea."

Raudel sniffed again, then laughed shakily. "I know you said I could have whatever I wanted from you, but I needed to verify you meant more than a lay."

Chad ducked his head, still holding on to Raudel as if to anchor them both. "Come on, Raudel. You know how big a crush I had on you in high school."

"Had? What about now?"

Chad squirmed in his seat. He had to tell Raudel the truth. All of it. Not just the really squishy good parts he wanted to share and was pretty sure Raudel wanted to hear. Because the truth was so much more than wishes and longings and what could've been. It was about where they were heading next since their lives had gone in such different directions.

"I was convinced you thought I was some perverted weirdo because of what you saw. That's what's been in my head all these years. 'Raudel thinks I'm disgusting, Raudel never liked me, never could'—all those mindfucky things we do to ourselves. But even with all of that, I held on to the fantasy part of you. The part I knew deep down was more than a crush, that all this time—" The hint of a panic attack built, but he sucked in a few good breaths to stave it off until he could force the rest of his thoughts out. "That all this time, I might still be in love with you. Because even when I tried to tell myself I was way too young to have known what love was, the reality is that a crush doesn't stick to a person the way it has when I think of you. If I hadn't tried so damn hard to find another guy, I'd think it was obsession. Hell, I might still think that anyway. But I want to find out the answer to it one way or the other. Because before you leave, I want to either be with you from now on or walk away

from you for good.”

A slow trail of sweat snaked its way down one cheek.

Hopefully, he won’t slam on the brakes, then toss me out of the car.

“Oh, mijó.” Raudel brought Chad’s hand to his lips, then kissed his knuckles before setting their twined fingers on his thigh. He rubbed his thumb over Chad’s skin. “I suppose this means I have to show you before I leave how much I do want you to be with me from now on.”

“I know you’re not promising, Raudel. I’m not either.”

It made him a little sick to say it, but he was done being Loser Chad. He was something more than a guy who pulled the lever that oozed out fake yogurt in colors that didn’t appear in nature. He wasn’t simply someone who had no one to share his life with, so instead he’d go to his mom’s house once a week to do his laundry before doing her grocery shopping.

If nothing else, his time with Raudel would shake him loose from that dead-end existence.

“We don’t have to promise, mijó. All we need is to be.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:26 am

THEY DROVE for a while in silence, their hands still joined as if they'd never let go.

As much as Chad didn't want to overanalyze things, wanted to bask in the moment of what they'd just revealed to each other, it didn't alter the fact that they'd be back at the rental soon.

Could be awkward if we're still holding hands and cooing to each other. "So... when we get back to the house, what do you think we should do?"

Raudel laughed. "I know what I'd like to do. But you never answered my question from before." Chad frowned, trying to recall what Raudel might be referring to. "If your first time having sex was good?"

Hmm... how to put this.

When Chad didn't answer, Raudel squeezed his fingers. "Did he hurt you?" Anger tinged his voice.

"I'll let you know." Chad had never been more grateful in his life that he was shrouded in darkness. He didn't want Raudel to see his expression or the accompanying blush.

"You'll let...?" Raudel sucked in a sharp breath. "Oh. I see."

Chad couldn't help it. He covered his eyes with the hand that wasn't imprisoned by Raudel's. He somehow managed to contain the groan, however.

“Hey, Chad. It’s okay.”

“I swear I’m not as goofy as I seem. I’ve been told I give a helluva BJ, and I’m a tad bigger than average. I’m friendly, loyal, even-tempered, a hard worker....”

Jesus. I sound like a St. Bernard.

Raudel let out a hearty chuckle. “I don’t think you’re the least bit goofy.” His tone lowered to the smoky one that made Chad pop a boner every single time. “And I’m glad I’ll be your first.” He brought Chad’s hand to his lips again. “Hopefully, the only.”

Holy shit.

Chad wondered how long the ice cream they’d picked up at the store would hold out if they stopped by the side of the road for a cherry-popping quickie.

“So... Lindsey will probably be back by the time we get there. She’ll be super excited to see you.” He attempted to get his tone into the casual one he’d meant to practice earlier before Raudel’s arrival. “I bet you’ll have a lot of catching up to do.”

When Raudel spoke, Chad caught his grin in his peripheral vision. “I want to be alone with you too.” He jostled Chad’s hand. “But we’ll only do whatever you’re comfortable with. We can go slow or wait for a special night for your first time.”

Chad let out an inelegant snort. “Any night qualifies as special if it’s my first time. Don’t hold back on me now, cowboy.”

“You’re okay with everyone being at the house when it happens?”

“Well, I wouldn’t recommend bending me over the couch while Grandma plays

Parcheesi, but a chair under the bedroom door should be adequate.”

And a sock in my mouth.

Raudel gave a low whistle. “Ay Dios mío . You’ve got me so hard, and we’re almost back to the house.” He groaned as he adjusted his position in the driver’s seat. “Do you think Lindsey’s so exhausted from her day she’ll want to wait until tomorrow for us to get caught up?”

“I think Lindsey’s like the Energizer Bunny on crack right now.”

Raudel muttered under his breath. “This is cruel. I can finally be with you the way I’ve always dreamed....” He chuckled. “I am being selfish. But I don’t want to take you for the first time in the house with everyone there anyway. It should only be us.”

Chad couldn’t help but be selfish, too. With his mom’s meticulously planned schedule and the house crawling with people, there wasn’t any room for amorous desperation. “We could pull over real quick. It’s pretty dark. I doubt anyone’ll see us.”

“Mijo... no.” Raudel paused, and Chad noted how serious he appeared, his lips pressed together as if he was in deep thought. “No. I have an idea. We’ll socialize for a couple hours—”

“Speak for yourself.”

Raudel jostled his hand again. “Listen, this’ll work. We might be worn out and tired all day tomorrow, but we’d at least have tonight.”

Chad’s dick perked up in interest. “I’m tired all the time anyway. No one will think anything of it.”

Raudel's happy grin was back.

"OH MY God! Delly! I can't believe you made it!" Lindsey raced down the driveway, her terrycloth robe flapping around her slender body and skinny legs, ponytail swaying madly.

Her high-pitched screeching has undoubtedly scared off the black bear population for miles around, so that's a plus.

Chad not so patiently gathered grocery bags from the backseat while Raudel, his Raudel, swung his sister around, both of them laughing and talking over each other. There was a moment of clarity when unloading the cart back at the store, where he and Raudel agreed there couldn't be any reason whatsoever to open the trunk once they returned to the house.

The joyful squealing had subsided enough that it seemed Lindsey had finally noticed his presence. The bizarrely bright outside light streaming down the driveway barely cast a glow where Raudel had parked the car. The location of his vehicle was all part of the master plan dedicated to the raunchy, yet private, sex that would divest him of his virginity.

"Hey, dork." She glanced back at Raudel, then back at Chad again. "So, Mom said you guys have been gone since about one?"

This time, it was Chad who glanced at Raudel. His sister could be very stealthy. Lindsey was excellent at leading you down what seemed to be a primrose path until she'd gotten you to reveal your most carefully guarded secrets. She'd wasted her time in cosmetology school; she should've become a detective.

Chad shrugged. "Yeah. She wanted us to get groceries."

Lindsey crossed her arms, then balanced her weight on one hip. “Where did you go? Vegas? It’s almost nine o’clock.”

“That’s my fault, Lin.”

Saved by the new boyfriend.

Lindsey twisted her body to regard Raudel. “How come?”

“I asked Chad if he wouldn’t mind hanging out with me while I did some sightseeing. Then it started getting late, so we went and grabbed a bite. Your mom said you, Brenda, and Shannon wouldn’t be back until later, so I thought I’d kill some time until you got here.”

Whoa. Talk about a dick punch.

Logically, Chad realized Raudel had to be careful about what he said for the time being. It wasn’t that they wanted to hide their status, per se, but it was still so new. They wanted some time for it to belong only to them. They’d also agreed that any happy announcements would likely disrupt Lindsey’s wedding week by drawing some of the attention away from the bride. After all, it was all about her .

“Huh. I see.” Lindsey held Raudel’s gaze, his impeccably gorgeous smile never wavering.

She turned to Chad again, her eyes narrowed. It didn’t help that the last time she’d spoken to him, he’d been having a bridezilla-worthy meltdown of his own at the prospect of seeing Raudel again.

“Where’s my fountain, Chad?”

He dropped one of the full plastic bags, the unmistakable sound of fizzing soda gurgling at his feet. Raudel rushed over to help him gather the wayward groceries. Chad had the sense that if Raudel planned on having him around from then on, he should probably become accustomed to picking shit up off the ground a lot.

“Why do you ask?” Chad wasn’t about to fall for one of her tricks.

“When I questioned Mom, she said she wasn’t sure where it was because you were the one who was supposed to bring it inside.”

Didn’t take her very long to throw her only son under the bus. “I don’t know, Lin.” He ripped open one of the packages of paper towels and fruitlessly attempted to wipe off a muddy cola can. “There was so much crap to haul in. Did you ask Grandma?”

Raudel coughed into his fist in a pathetic effort to mask a snort.

“Hmmp. Well, after you put the groceries away, you can go look for it while Raudel and I spend some quality time together.”

Raudel locked gazes with him and winked. Chad scolded himself over getting so butt hurt. He’d known it was more than likely that Lindsey and Raudel would be hanging out a lot, especially for the first night when they hadn’t seen each other in years. But talk about a prick tease. He’d waited a lot longer than that for Raudel to touch his cock.

And the kiss.

He almost let out a wistful sigh before he could stop himself.

“Here.” Raudel rose, then extended his hand. “Let me help you up. I transferred all the non-sticky stuff to this bag. You take that, and I’ll get the broken eggs and leaky

sodas.”

As Raudel pulled him to a standing position, Chad could almost feel the heat of Lindsey’s glare as it bored holes in his skin.

“It sure is nice that you two got to spend so much time together today. You know, reminisce about high school and such.”

She used her “butter wouldn’t melt in my mouth” voice, and Chad was struck with terror. Had she somehow found out what happened back then? Had Raudel told her about him after all?

They strolled up the driveway, Chad making a point of walking as far away from her as he could without drawing suspicion. He wondered if she could somehow leach the truth from him if he stood too close.

“We didn’t have very much to reminisce about since we didn’t really know each other back then. But Chad did bring me up to speed on what happened to some of the people from school. Did Harry Rhodes really get arrested for being too friendly with old Mr. Bean’s pony?”

If Chad weren’t already pretty sure he was in love with Raudel, that would’ve done it.

“Ooh, gross, Chad!” Lindsey made a gagging sound. “I can’t believe you told him that.”

But it had done the trick. All talk of fountains and what he and Raudel had or had not been doing all day was derailed in the face of hometown gossip.

Now to wait for Lindsey to let Raudel out of her clutches while I ready our escape.

“WELL ? DOES it look exactly like the one you destroyed?”

His mother had a wild look in her eyes as she peered over Chad’s shoulder from where they stood in the massive open kitchen. She was undoubtedly verifying Lindsey’s whereabouts. His sister was guffawing with gusto in the large high-beam living room, so she wasn’t too difficult to locate. Sis was also snuggling up to Raudel where they sat on a shaggy blue rug in front of a roaring fire in the rather impressive river-rock fireplace.

“Are you okay, Mom? You seem... overwrought.”

“Don’t mess with me right now, Chadwick. Your father tried that earlier, and he regretted it too. Now, what about the damn fountain?”

Chad let out a small growl. He was tired of being treated like the Guardian of the Holy Fountain, and he was really over watching his sister rub herself all over Raudel.

Okay. Maybe a bit of an exaggeration.

He wasn’t jealous of them, as in them- together them. It was that she was touching Raudel and he wasn’t.

“Chad?” His mother snapped her fingers repeatedly in front of his face.

He brushed them away like gnats. “Okay, okay. God, Mom, stop it.”

“Well? Fountain?”

He squinted at her as his sister’s words drifted back to him. “By the way, thanks for backing me up there, Mom. ‘Gee, Lindsey, I don’t know where it is. Chad was the one who had it last.’”

“It’s not my fault.” She gritted through her teeth. “She caught me off guard. She’s like that, you know.”

Chad rolled his eyes. “Boy, do I.” He leaned closer. “We left it in Raudel’s trunk like you said. I have all the receipts.”

“Fuck the receipts. Does it look like the same fountain?”

“Damn, Mom. You never used to F-bomb the hell out of every conversation. I’m starting to worry about you.” He glanced around the general area, leaning over the counter and pointedly ignoring the way Lindsey played with Raudel’s hair while blathering on about something Chad was certain was completely stupid. He might be overreacting to the whole stupid thing, but he was getting increasingly frustrated on many levels. “Where’s Dad? I don’t think I’ve seen him since we got here.”

“He drank beer for four hours while staring at the lake, had a sandwich, then went to bed around six.”

Smart man.

His mom and dad actually had a good relationship. But his dad was one of those people who knew when to fold. He’d begun folding almost as soon as Lindsey announced that she wanted to have a private wedding with the entire family cohabitating for a week.

His mom sucked in a huge breath. “Okay, this is what we do. They could be at this all night.” She indicated Lindsey and Raudel with a jerk of her head. “So, we might have to set our clocks for 5:00 a.m. and sneak it in together—”

“Mom, we’ve got it handled. Don’t worry. Raudel said he was very, very tired and wanted to crash early. We’ll get it in the morning so you don’t have to. He’s only out

there now trying to be polite.”

Raudel’s boisterous laugh burst out with Lindsey yelling, “I know, right?”

Mom raised her eyebrows. “Yeah. He seems as if he’s about to drop at any minute.”

Dammit. “Well... just sayin’.”

Come on, Raudel, it’s been almost two hours.

Chad had hidden in their room for as long as he could stand it, but his mom had kept at him to join her in the kitchen, so he’d relented. He’d also hoped his presence might jar Raudel into action. Literally.

Chad kept peering at them while his mom rambled on about the itinerary. Something about the wedding party photo session being moved from Thursday to Wednesday because rain had been forecast at the end of the week, so the barbecue would have to take place an hour later because by the time the photographer packed up and left....

Chad tensed. Raudel and Lindsey were getting up from the floor.

What the fuck?

They were headed to the bedroom she shared with Brenda and Shannon. Thankfully, Daniel’s parents wouldn’t be arriving until later in the week, so they hadn’t been added to the lake house clusterfuck yet.

“Chad! Did you hear a word I said?”

He whipped his head in his mom’s direction. “Yeah. Totally. Rain and photo session. Got it.”

She considered him with way too much suspicion. Her hands were on her hips, and she was back to narrowing her eyes. He seemed to inspire that a lot in the females in his life. “Why are you so interested in what’s going on with Raudel and Lindsey?”

“What? I don’t care what’s going on with them.” He tittered nervously.

She ran her hands over her head, the frizzy strands refusing to stay down. “Oh God, Chad. Do you think we’ll really be able to pull off this extravaganza?”

He couldn’t help but feel bad for her. He wished he could be of more real assistance than he’d been. Taking orders was pretty easy for him, but he honestly didn’t understand the constant state of near hysteria that had begun with his sister, then subsequently infected their mother.

Raudel was right—it wasn’t worth it. If he ever got married, he’d do it like Raudel said. Together, with the man he loved, the two of them sharing their vows with each other and no one else. A quick selfie to capture the moment, then party with family and friends at a later time. Fuck the whole trap of trying to make everything go perfect and be perfect. Life wasn’t like that. Why begin a marriage by setting yourself up for eventual disappointment?

His mom seemed so wrung dry that Chad couldn’t stand it. He pulled her into his arms, then rested his head on her shoulder. It was bonier than normal, digging into his jawbone. She hugged him tightly, letting out such a long, sad sigh that he was ashamed he hadn’t been more aware of what she was going through earlier on. Sure, he was there every week to do the shopping, but that was nothing compared to the monumental task of what they were experiencing—as well as what was still left to handle.

“It’ll be okay, Mom. You guys have done a great job so far. We have everything here, ready to go.” He chuckled against her clavicle. “Even the fountain. We just have to

get through a few more days, and no matter what, it's going to be an awesome wedding. If things don't go exactly perfect when the guests are here, it doesn't matter." He lifted his head to look at her. "They don't know what's supposed to happen when or if something's not there that should've been. They'll be at a crazy beautiful house on a lake with champagne and cake and people in fancy dresses and an obnoxiously ornate fountain overflowing with chocolate. What more do they want?"

His mom sputtered and snorted laughter until he thought she might pass out, but he understood. She'd needed to let loose the plethora of emotions she'd been dealing with, the same as he had earlier.

"What's going on in here? I could hear Mom snorting from the back of the house."

Chad whacked Lindsey on her arm. "Be nice."

She scowled at him. "Me? I'm not the one hitting people."

"Okay, enough." Mom pointed to the fridge. "There's a cheese platter and some veggies and dip in there if anyone wants to snack."

Raudel strolled in, chatting with the blonde-haired Shannon, her shorty nightshirt showcasing her long, perfect legs. Brenda wasn't much of a late-night girl. When they were growing up, the geeky Brenda with the Annie-esque mop of red curls, complete with the matching freckles, had always been the kid at his sister's sleepovers who had a mustache drawn on her lip in Sharpie or her hand placed in a bowl of warm water. Chad wondered if she'd only agreed to be in the wedding party to extract some awful Carrie-like revenge for all the wrongs committed against her twelve-year-old self.

Lindsey and Shannon opened the door of the enormous chrome appliance. They took

their time peering into it, to the point where Chad wondered if they were trying to air-condition the entire house. He pulled his phone out of his jeans, then woke it up. The time spent in their bedroom hadn't been for naught. He'd located three cheapie, out-of-the-way motels no more than a thirty-minute drive away.

"Why are you looking at Google Maps?"

"Because none of your business."

Lindsey crunched away on a carrot while trying to peek over the top of his phone. Chad was only five foot eight, but she was a shrimp at five-two. He raised his cell higher.

Mom shook her head. "It's like I've been thrust back in time, and it's ten years ago. Lindsey? You're about to get married and will be responsible for your own home. You'll need to communicate maturely with your husband, your partner, the man who I hope will finally help get me some damn grandchildren." She turned her attention from her slack-jawed daughter to Chad. "As for you, you've been living on your own for a year now, but if you're ever to find a good man, someone who you deserve—" She gestured to Raudel. "—someone like Raudel, for instance, you need to get your act together, figure out what you really want out of life, then go for it. Yogurt isn't the answer." She huffed out a breath. "And with that, I'm going to bed." She gave Chad a pointed look. "I'm sleeping in until at least eight. There's no reason for me to get up any earlier, is there?"

Chad shook his head vehemently. "None that I can think of."

She dipped her chin. "Good." With that, she marched out of the room.

Shannon was still digging through the refrigerator, and Lindsey had switched from carrots to celery. However, she still regarded Chad with suspicion.

He cleared his throat. “Um, so, I guess there’s no reason for me to stay up either. I think I’ll go take a shower, then head to bed. Night, everyone.”

“Yeah.” Lindsey’s scowl had lessened very little. “Night.”

Shannon waved, a chunk of cheese clutched between her teeth.

Raudel spoke up. “Chad. If you leave the bathroom light on but close the door almost the whole way, I should still be able to see enough that I don’t disturb you when I come in later.”

“Cool. Night.”

Raudel offered him a sultry smile. “Good night, Chad.”

Chad quickly averted his gaze, then scurried out of the kitchen before Lindsey could make any sort of remark. Raudel’s goodnight had been more ooh-la-la than advisable in front of his sister. He wasn’t sure how either of them would make it through the week without everyone catching on. Not when the vibe between them was so intense.

“MIJO? YOU awake?”

Chad rolled over, blinking to adjust his eyes to the small amount of light streaming in from the crack of the bathroom door. He was wearing the clothes he’d changed into after his shower, lying on the covers and waiting for Raudel to make his excuses. However, he’d obviously dozed off in the meantime.

Raudel sat next to him on the bed, stroking his arm, then brushing his hair back from his forehead. “Do you still want to go?”

“Totally. Do you?”

“More than you know. House is all clear, everyone’s in bed.” He bent over to give Chad a kiss.

My second one.

It was as soft and searching as the first one, but Chad could sense more of a claiming in it, as if once Raudel heard Chad say he wanted more, it changed the game. Whatever it was that Raudel meant when he’d said he’d have to work hard to make sure Chad would stay with him, it seemed to have already begun.

“Let’s go, mijó, before I take you right here.”

Chad could only nod. His aching balls and raging hard-on had already stolen his verbal skills—who knew what might fail next? He was more grateful than ever that he’d already tugged one off in the shower.

Raudel helped him to his feet then Chad grabbed his hoodie and phone off the charger. Once they’d lifted the blinds, they wrapped the cord around the hook near the top of the sill. Chad had already tested the window while waiting in their room earlier.

They slid the pane to the side, and then Raudel climbed through the opening, dropping a couple of feet to the ground below. He extended his arms, Chad falling into them as Raudel helped pull him through the window. They closed it enough that wild creatures couldn’t get inside but left it open a crack so they could still get back in when they returned.

“You okay?”

Chad nodded again, more worried that his teeth would start to chatter than anything else. They held hands, and Raudel guided him with a small flashlight as they skirted

the edge of the house.

The dazzling light of the outdoor flood lamp burst on. Chad shouted and Raudel clapped a hand over his mouth as they dropped to the ground.

Damn you, motion sensor.

They huddled together on the soft detritus of the forest floor, waiting to see what fallout, if any, might be the result of Chad's yelling. After a few minutes, the light shut off and they seemed to be in the clear.

Raudel whispered next to his ear. "I think we're okay. Come on."

Chad's stiffy, which had been frightened into softness, began to swell back up.

They rose, then scurried as quickly and quietly as they could toward Raudel's Honda, also known as their getaway vehicle. A tiny midair glow caught Chad's attention as they rushed past the front of the house. It was like a hovering firefly, except for the small detail that there weren't any fireflies in Tahoe.

A loud, hacking cough resounded in the darkness.

They froze, Chad clutching Raudel's hand in a tight, sweaty grip. He figured they were experiencing what they'd missed out on had they gotten together back in high school. Stolen moments, thwarted plans, the terror of being caught by nosy family members.

"Chad? Quit standing there with your hunky date and get over here."

Chad squinted against the darkness. "Grandma?"

Raudel lifted the flashlight, illuminating his grandmother, who was propped against a mustard-colored, regulation bear can. She took a long drag on a cigarette.

“Well, it ain’t the Easter Bunny. You boys are out awful late.” She pulled hard on her cigarette again, making the end burn brightly. “Come on, help me inside. It’s colder than my sex life out here.”

She tossed the still-lit smoke to the ground, and Chad rushed over to stomp on it.

“Grandma, you can’t do that!” He grabbed her arm in order to help her in as she’d requested.

She wrenched it free. “Let go of me!”

She muttered something else, but all Chad caught was something that sounded like “little asshole,” but he couldn’t be sure.

“Grandma, I thought you gave up the smokes last year?”

She blew a raspberry. “That’s what I told your interfering parents. I’m an old woman. I’ll do whatever the fuck I want.”

Chad leaned into Raudel. “Let me get her inside real quick. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll help you.” Raudel maintained the same expression he’d had before they’d climbed out of the window. He didn’t appear annoyed or frustrated by the unwelcome turn of events.

He didn’t mind helping his grandmother for the most part. But every once in a while, she’d get extra hostile, and that was when the real challenge would begin.

They both shuffled on either side of her, making sure not to get too close, but still in position to catch her if she keeled over.

“Wait a sec, Grandma. I’ll get the door for you.”

Super, extra quietly.

The key his mom had given him when they’d returned earlier was tucked away in his jeans pocket. He retrieved it, then carefully stuck it in the lock. He turned the key with a gentle hand, hanging on to the knob with the other, slowly maneuvering it so as not to make a sound.

“While I’m alive, Chad! I could’ve had another smoke by now. What’re you doing? Seducing it first? Come on already!”

“Shh , Grandma.” Chad placed a finger in front of his lips, his voice a harsh whisper. “You’ll wake up the whole house.”

“I don’t give a fuck! Open the goddamned door.”

As if responding to his grandmother’s forceful invectives, the door in question flung open.

“Chadwick!” His mother stood before him in what looked like a hastily donned robe, her hair askew. “What in the name of all that is holy are you doing outside with Grandma at this gruesome hour?” She squinted past his shoulder. “Is that you, Raudel?”

“Yes, Kate. I’m so sorry we woke you.”

Chad dropped his head in his hands. So much for that whole losing-my-virginity

thing.

“Get out of my way.” Grandma pushed past him and his mom, and Raudel moved closer until he was standing next to Chad.

“We thought everyone was asleep, that it would be a good time to get that item you wanted us to pick up in town today.”

“You mean the—”

Chad coughed loudly into his fist as Lindsey crept up on them.

“What are you guys doing?” Her voice had the distinct edge of a whine to it. “I need my rest . The pictures are in a couple days, and I’ll just die if I have puffy eyes with dark circles.”

“Use lots of makeup, Lin. No one’ll know.”

The glare Chad got for his efforts surprised him. He’d actually been sincere.

Mom threw her hands up in the air. “We had a problem with Grandma wandering off, so Chad and Raudel went to find her. Now go back to sleep, and let us worry about it.”

Lindsey huffed. “Fine. But if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, Chad , mind keeping it down?” She didn’t wait for his answer, flouncing off instead.

Mom craned her neck, undoubtedly checking to see if Lindsey was out of hearing range. The click of a door sounded at the back of the house, so it seemed they were in the clear. She moved in conspiratorially. “You guys get the fountain while I unlock the shed. Go down the other side of the house to the back, away from the girls’

bedroom, and I'll meet you there." She frowned at Chad. "What was Grandma doing out there, anyway?"

He was about to tell on her but changed his mind. Grandma was right. She was an old woman with probably very little time left. If she wanted to smoke and not be hassled about it every five minutes, he didn't blame her. He'd probably feel the same way once he reached her age. "I'm not sure. Maybe she needed some air."

His mother arched her eyebrows. "At one in the morning?"

Chad shrugged. "Her room was stuffy?"

Mom tipped her head back, groaning. "This entire family has gone mad." She regarded him again. "Let's get this over with. I don't want to wake up your father. We're all out of beer."

Chad furrowed his brow. "We brought another six-pack from the store when we went shopping."

She crossed her arms. "And your point is?"

"Damn, Mom."

"I don't need you judging me right now. I'm not in the mood. Can we please finish this? Lindsey's not the only one who needs her beauty rest."

No good could ever come from comments he might make to reassure her that she was always beautiful no matter what. He'd already stepped on that landmine with Lindsey's dark circles. He glanced over at Raudel, who shrugged in resignation, his features tinged with the same sadness that filled Chad.

Their assignation had been derailed by the fountain. The evil, conniving fountain.

Page 5

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CHAD POSITIONED a chair underneath the doorknob of their bedroom. He'd dragged the piece of furniture in from the den after they'd unloaded the fountain, and everyone in the house seemed to have settled back down again. The chair was more of a protection against his night-wandering grandmother than anything.

He glanced over at Raudel, who sat on the bed. The only illumination in the room came from a small lamp on the nightstand. Like everything else in the house, the furniture and accessories were new and tasteful, but they still screamed Early Blasé Rental. Raudel patted the spot next to him, and Chad's eyebrows shot up.

He grinned, then hurried over, dropping onto the bed so that he was flush to Raudel. "The bed's small, Raudel. Not bigger than a double."

He had no idea what he was getting at, only that he was so nervous he didn't know what to say.

"I don't mind. Do you?"

Raudel snaked an arm around his waist, holding him tightly. He ran his opposite hand up Chad's torso, then around his neck until he had a fistful of hair in his clutches.

The whimper left Chad's mouth before he could stop it. "Mind? Why would I mind?"

Raudel smashed their lips together, the kiss nothing like the ones from earlier. He licked his way into Chad's willing mouth, taking what he wanted with eager swipes. Chad wrapped his arms around Raudel as he kissed him back with as much force as Raudel used on him. They clutched and grasped at each other's shirts, their heated

breaths mingling as the clinch turned frantic.

Fuck. He's gonna make me come just like this.

As if sensing Chad's urgency, or perhaps gripped by his own crisis, Raudel broke their connection but didn't release him. Their chests heaved as they stared into each other's eyes, the shadows of the semi-dark room giving the moment a noir quality.

"I need to get off." Raudel kept his voice to a whisper. "I'm still saving making love to you when I know we're alone, when we can relax. But waiting any more after all these years to feel your skin next to mine? To know what it's like when your cock swells in my hand right before it pumps out your cum over my fingers? See what your expression is like when you do come? I won't survive the night."

"Yeah. That. Same here." Eventually, his brain would catch up with his pleasure-starved body, but he didn't think Raudel minded.

Raudel smiled, and Chad melted. "Then take off your clothes."

Chad gave him a jerky nod as Raudel loosened his hold. They both gave themselves enough room to yank off shirts, kick off shoes, and fumble with belts. The debris of their various items of clothing littered the floor at their feet until they were both naked.

It wasn't that Chad was particularly shy when it came to sex; more that his limited experiences had either been spontaneous encounters with a stranger or an awkward attempt at something with a date. Both scenarios involved neither one of them being interested in pursuing anything more since they were only there for the orgasm.

This was different. This was important.

Chad openly admired Raudel's cock: the way it curved up to his belly, kissing the skin right above his navel. A smattering of dark curls across Raudel's chest highlighted dusky nipples that had tightened from either arousal or cold or a combination of both. He licked his lips. He wanted to run his fingers through the hairs there, then play with the coarser ones at the base of Raudel's rigid length.

Raudel groaned as he wrapped his fingers around Chad's dick. Chad arched his back, hissing as he pushed his erection through Raudel's tight fist. Raudel stroked him with languid movements, never quite reaching the head, the touch a torment. Chad thrust his hips, encouraging Raudel to give him more, but Raudel kept the control.

"Ay, mijo. Mine now."

Chad nodded. "Yes. Yours, Raudel. That's what I want. What I've always wanted."

Raudel moved closer, encouraging him onto his back but not letting go of his aching cock. He took Chad's mouth in another claiming kiss, and Chad could no longer stay still. He rutted into Raudel's hand as he dug his heels into the mattress, giving himself more purchase. He tried to pull Raudel on top of him, but instead, Raudel cradled his head, never breaking their kiss. Chad grasped at Raudel's shoulder instead, digging his fingers into the muscled flesh. Raudel's cock slid against his hip, a trickle of precum smoothing the way. Chad wanted a taste.

His thrusts came faster, the rhythm erratic as his balls tightened. At last, Raudel lengthened his tugs, bringing his palm to Chad's cockhead, twisting his wrist every few strokes. Sparks danced up his spine, and in a rush, his body tensed, thighs shaking as cum erupted over Raudel's hand. Chad fed a cry into Raudel's mouth. He'd never come so hard.

Raudel released Chad's swollen lips, slick with spit and tingling from the force of his kisses. He continued to jack Chad slowly, seemingly careful to stay away from the

sensitive tip. He nibbled along Chad's jawline, then left a trail of tiny kisses along both sides of his face, barely more than a ghost of his lips.

Chad's breathing finally slowed to where he thought he could speak. "Let me suck you."

Raudel captured his earlobe between his teeth, then scraped them across the soft skin. Gooseflesh bloomed across Chad's upper back. "Don't move, love."

Chad allowed his eyes to drift closed. The mattress rose as Raudel stood, and Chad imagined he was retrieving a towel to clean them up. He started when Raudel returned, ashamed to admit to himself that he'd been about to doze off. It had just been such a long day, so much emotion and stress.

And wine.

He chuckled. At least he was a cheap date.

"You're feeling good?"

Chad rolled onto his side to face Raudel, then smiled at him. "So fucking good. I wanna do the same for you."

"A helluva BJ, you said?"

Chad's smile turned to a grin. "Fuck yeah."

He scooted down the length of Raudel's body with many stops along the way to taste his skin, to inhale his clean, masculine scent. He paid special attention to the nipples he'd been lusting after earlier. As he sucked and nibbled on the peaked flesh, he caressed Raudel's skin wherever he could reach. A thought crossed his mind that

maybe someday he'd know Raudel's body as well as he knew his own.

As he got closer to his prize, Raudel's cock jumped and twitched, and each time his dick touched his belly, beads of precum gathering at the tip were left behind. Chad lapped up Raudel's arousal, then captured the source into his mouth. He teased the glans in the valley underneath the tip with his tongue, then traced the prominent veins as he continued to take him all the way in. Raudel groaned and clutched at his hair, restless as he writhed underneath Chad's skillful mouth.

Once Raudel's cock bumped the back of his throat and Chad had pressed his nose into Raudel's pubes, he swallowed. Raudel cried out before muffling the noise somehow. Chad held his breath as he continued to work his throat around Raudel's dick. He pulled off to suck in a big gulp of air, but quickly descended again, repeating the same move as before.

Raudel locked his heels around Chad's back, froze, then growled out his release as he pulsed his seed down Chad's throat in multiple waves. Chad took it all, triumphing in the fact that he could give Raudel such pleasure.

Chad let Raudel's softening erection fall gently from his lips. He rested his head on Raudel's abdomen, breathing in the scent of the sex they'd just shared. Chad continued to run his hands over Raudel's soft skin, through his body hair, then across the still-pebbled nipples. Raudel grabbed one of his hands, lifting his head to kiss Chad's palm. He dropped it back on the pillow but still held on to Chad, curling their fingers together and resting them against his chest.

"I love you, mijo. Even if you think I'm crazy, I do."

Chad rubbed his cheek against Raudel's groin. "Guess I'm crazy too."

Raudel tightened his grip and Chad's heart hurt from so much joy. And yeah, they

were probably both crazy. But seven years of never being able to get the other out of their heads had to stand for something. The day and night they'd spent together had only proved to him that it wasn't merely an unfulfilled fantasy.

They clicked. Chad had tried to move on, and Raudel said he had too. Chad had always figured his love hadn't been real because he was too young, and they'd never been together the way he'd hoped for back when they were in school.

School was out. They were adults. It was time for them to start the life they'd wished for once upon a time when it seemed impossible that they could ever be together.

“MMM.”

Chad snuggled into the warmth wrapped around him. He was so fucking tired, and he had some vague memory of his grandmother being outside in the middle of the night. His eyelids fluttered before he managed to open them. He gasped.

Jesus. I'm waking up in Raudel's arms.

His morning wood fought for superiority with Raudel's as they both stirred from sleep. Raudel's stubble was heavier and scratchier than Chad's, but he didn't care. He rubbed against him anyway. He wasn't sure how sexy a morning-breath kiss would be, but he was pretty sure they could at least have time for some mutual masturbation before—

“Chad! Raudel!” His mother pounded on the door like there was a fire. “Breakfast in ten. We'll go over today's itinerary after we eat. We have a big day ahead of us.”

Itinerary. I never want to hear that word again.

“Good morning, mijo, ” Raudel whispered. “I hope I can wake up with you in my

arms every morning from now on.”

He said he loved me. Chad swallowed. And I kinda said it back.

“Good morning.” He squeezed Raudel to add an extra something to his greeting because he severely doubted his ability to bring forth any poetic words.

“I don’t ever want to let you go, but your mom seems insistent.”

Chad let out a grunt. “Yeah. Tell me about it. Ruined the whole happy-ending wake-up call I’d been planning.”

Raudel lifted his head, gazing down at him with his gorgeous smile. “You too? See? We’re meant to be.”

Chad laughed out loud before slapping a hand over his mouth. Don’t need to add to the obvious suspicion brewing in Lindsey’s brain.

He wriggled his way free of Raudel’s grasp. “Might as well face the agony ahead. I’m guessing Lindsey will be even more wound up now that a new dawn has arisen, bringing us ever closer to the Big Day.”

Raudel nodded as he rolled to a sitting position. Chad stared openly at his still-hard dick. He figured, what the hell? They were a couple now, right? Staring privileges came with the territory.

“The worst will be the night before the wedding. My oldest sister, Carmen, freaked, then wanted to back out at the last minute.”

“Holy shit. What happened?”

Raudel ruffled his own hair, then stretched.

Yeah. I could totally watch that show all day.

Raudel yawned. “My mom threatened to disown her.”

“That’s harsh.”

Raudel shrugged. “She knew they belonged together and wasn’t going to let my sister ruin everything over some last-minute jitters. My mom has this gift. She can tell when people are meant to be and when they’re not. That’s why my mom went out of her way to break up my middle sister’s engagement, knowing that they were all wrong for each other. But Selena wouldn’t listen. They were together less than two months before they divorced. And everyone else who she’s predicted would either have a happy life together or crash and burn, she’s been spot-on with them too.”

“Wow. That’s intense.” Chad chuckled. “I wonder what she’d have to say about us?”

When Raudel didn’t answer right away, Chad glanced up from where he’d been gathering his discarded clothing from the night before. Raudel locked eyes with him, his expression serious.

Chad straightened. “What?”

“I already know what she’d say.”

They held each other’s gazes while Chad absorbed the meaning behind Raudel’s words.

“Wait. You mean...?”

“Yeah. She told me after I begged her back in high school to help me come up with a way to get you to talk to me. She said we were meant for each other, but you weren’t ready yet. Said I should wait until you were.”

Chad blinked several times, his breathing shallow. Did he really believe in such things? Probably not, but he could tell Raudel did. More than that, he didn’t need Raudel’s mom to know what they were to each other and understand that he really hadn’t been ready at fifteen.

Which meant he already had his answer about whether he wanted to be with Raudel from now on.

“So... this whole time when I’ve been going to your folks’ grain-and-feed store to get Sassy’s food, and I’d be chatting with her, that whole time she...?”

Raudel nodded.

Chad practically jumped out of his skin at his mother’s frantic banging on the door. He swore the framed prints of lush forest greenery had rattled against the wall.

“Boys, now !”

CHAD PRETENDED to be enormously interested in the day’s schedule as he sat discreetly next to Raudel on one end of the sectional couch. They’d made it out of the bedroom as quickly as possible after airing out the small space.

Lindsey had the floor, and she was really working it. Brenda and Shannon sat at the other end of the sofa, listening in rapt attention, pens poised to follow the orders of their fearless leader.

Lindsey announced, “So, we’ve had a few adjustments to the itinerary. Mom has

passed around some Wite-Out for you to use, and you should each have a pen in the following colors—black, blue, red, purple, and green. Everyone check to make sure you have all the correct pens. Each color is a code for a different task. For instance, the black are the main priorities, things such as verifying that the caterers, videographers, photographers, and other essential personnel are set to be here at the proper time.”

Chad raised his head from checking his pens. “What about the minister? Shouldn’t someone verify he’ll be here too? He seems to be more important than all those other things.”

Lindsey stared him down with eyes like laser beams. “Yes, Chad . Of course we’re verifying the minister. I didn’t name off every single thing. I was merely providing an example .”

“Oh. Sorry.” He went back to checking his pens as she continued.

“As I was saying—”

“I don’t have a blue pen. Both of these are black.” He held up the pens in question.

Lindsey sucked in several breaths as she clenched and unclenched her fists. “Duly noted. I will get you another fucking pen in a minute.”

“But you asked us to check—”

“ In a minute !”

The popping sound of a can being opened echoed in the living room. Chad turned his head toward the source of the noise and noted his mother leaning against the threshold of the living area, a can of Bud Light pressed to her lips. She tipped it back,

then took a noisy swallow.

Where'd she get that? It wasn't even ten yet. She'd obviously availed herself of an early-morning beer run.

"Everything going okay in here, sweetie? Do you need any more pens? Wite-Out?"

Lindsey huffed. "Apparently, Chad is going to start freaking out if he doesn't get a blue pen right this minute."

"That's not what I—"

Raudel grabbed his wrist. Chad glanced at him, and Raudel gave a small shake of his head. The sighing returned, and he slumped against the back of the sofa.

His mother shuffled over and handed him a blue pen with a weary smile. He took it with a mumbled thank-you, then went back to his list while Lindsey rambled on. From what he could tell, the groom and groomsmen had a tuxedo fitting at one. Fortunately, Lindsey and Daniel would be having lunch in town by themselves before that, so Chad would be spared having to hold a conversation with the extremely successful businessman who'd swept his big sister off her feet. According to the list, Chad would be on wedding-favor duty while they were doing that, but it didn't seem like he'd gotten the sugared-almond detail.

"What's a lip-balm favor?"

"Oh my fucking God, Chad. Can we save all questions until after I've finished?" She snatched the list from his hand. "They're lip-balm sticks. You know, for chapped lips? I need you to attach them with ribbon and a tiny spray of fake baby's breath to the sugared-almond bags that Raudel will have assembled. Got it?"

Chad experienced a thread of panic. He'd only been kidding about the bow-tying thing when he'd joked about it with Raudel. He was pretty handy in general, but he wasn't so sure about lip-balm-attaching. He hadn't fared very well with the coffee table. Chad gazed up at Lindsey, silently pleading for mercy. "Will I know how to do this?"

Raudel cleared his throat. "I'll show you how. My cousin Arianna had them at her wedding."

"Thank you, Raudel." Lindsey smiled sweetly at him before returning with a glare to Chad. "You think you can handle it now, Chad?"

She's so lucky that I frown upon murder. "Yup. Got it."

Mom gave him a thumbs-up and a boozy wink from where she stood behind Lindsey. Since he no longer had a list to stare at, he peeked over at Raudel's, pretending that the press of his arm against him was unintentional. He couldn't just sit still and listen; it made him nutty. School had been a long, torturous process for him. It was another reason why he admired Raudel so much for what he'd accomplished with his education.

After another thirty minutes or so of itinerary adjustment—and being allowed to have his schedule back so he could copy Lindsey's instructions onto it in the proper pen colors—they were excused to begin their assigned job of favor-making.

Chad was failing miserably at it, however. His fingers were too clumsy to tie the intricate bow required to secure the slippery plastic tube within the confines of the thin, satiny ribbon. He and Raudel sat perpendicular to each other at the family-sized oak dining table. Raudel was at one end with Chad to his right, and all the makings of their craft projects spread out before them. Raudel could assemble ten bags to Chad's one lip-balm tie-off. It was depressing.

Chad pulled two ends of the peach ribbon as tightly as he could, hopeful that the third time was the charm as he attempted to finish his fifth favor. The tube shot from the bag of almonds, flew across the room, then landed with a plop in the potato salad his mom had just finished making.

“Oh shit!”

Chad toppled the chair backward as he burst from his seat. He raced to the large bowl his mom had left on the counter, then dug into it with his fingers, searching for the errant balm.

“Chad! What in the devil’s name do you think you’re doing ?” He lifted his gaze and was met with his mom’s icy stare. “I didn’t raise you to be an animal!”

Since he was currently knuckle-deep in potato chunks and mayonnaise, Chad didn’t think it was the right time to point out that at least he wasn’t slurring his words before noon. “I... didn’t realize how hungry I was until I got over here.”

He reluctantly took his hands out of the gooey mess and accepted the cluster of paper towels his mom shoved at him. Chad glanced at Raudel, who was regarding him in confusion.

He probably thinks I’ve finally snapped.

His mom continued muttering as she took the potato salad away, her arms wrapped around the bowl protectively. After covering it with plastic wrap, she set it in the refrigerator then turned to Chad.

“If you’re that hungry, I’ll fix you some sandwiches. The potato salad is for the barbecue tonight.”

Chad was lost. He could've sworn the barbecue was planned for Wednesday after the rescheduled photo session. "Are there two barbecues?"

His mother rolled her eyes. "Weren't you paying attention at the itinerary meeting? I sure as hell hope you got your color coding right. Brenda and Shannon are having a surprise bridal shower for Lindsey because the first one was only with her work friends, and Wednesday night is the only night that Daniel's sisters can make it."

"But... if it's a surprise for Lindsey, how come she was the one scheduling it this morning?"

"How the hell should I know?"

Raudel froze, a pink almond pinched between his fingers at the opening of one of the tiny net bags.

Chad approached his mother carefully in case she exploded. "Hey. Mom. It's cool. Why don't you go and relax for an hour or two? We've got this." He indicated back and forth between him and Raudel. "Potato salad made, wedding-favor construction underway, tux fitting at one. It's all good."

She nodded shakily, blowing out a puff of air to get her bangs out of her eyes. "Okay, thanks." She opened the refrigerator and pulled out a fresh six-pack. Chad wondered if they grew in the yard.

"If anyone needs me, I'll be in the shed."

Chad and Raudel exchanged glances as she slid the patio door open, then stumbled outside, the beer cans clutched to her chest.

Chad pursed his lips as he surveyed their progress. "Hey. Do you think you could

switch with me? I think I'd be better at almond stuffing than lip-balm tying."

"Whatever my mijo wants." Raudel winked at him, and instantly everything was fine.

"Was that your mother yelling?"

Chad jumped at the sound of his father's voice. He'd forgotten his dad was even in the house. "Yeah. You know, the wedding."

His dad grunted. "Yeah. I know."

He'd always been able to communicate with his dad in short, snappy sentences. They seemed to understand each other without lots of extraneous words cluttering things up.

His father opened the fridge. "We out of beer again?"

Chad didn't dare look Raudel's way. He could already hear Raudel's pained attempts to hold in laughter, and it was likely that if they made eye contact, they'd both lose it. "Gosh, I guess so." His voice wobbled, and he had to bite a knuckle to rein it in.

"Damn. Oh well. I'll have this potato salad instead."

"Uh, I think Mom meant to save that for the barbecue tonight."

"Tonight?" Dad whirled around to face Chad. "I thought that was Wednesday?"

"You missed the meeting this morning."

Dad rolled his eyes with great exaggeration. "Dear God. It's only Tuesday. Already feels like we've been here a month." He ripped the plastic wrap off the bowl before

snatching up the large serving spoon Mom had left on the counter. Then he dumped a big glop of potato salad into one of the bowls he'd grabbed from the dish drainer. Not bothering to get a different spoon, he dug in with the serving utensil instead.

Chad sucked in a sharp breath as his dad brought the food to his mouth. "Dad! Wait!"

His father regarded him with a questioning frown. He lowered the spoon and opened his mouth as if to say something, then paused, eyeing the contents before him. "Why is there a stick of lip balm in the potato salad?"

Page 6

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“I WANT to be alone with you so bad right now.”

Chad knew he was taking a risk by whispering sweet nothings into Raudel’s ear during their tux fitting. However, since Lindsey was doing the exact same thing with Daniel, albeit with a smattering of giggles here and there, Chad figured he was safe. Ever since Prince Charming, a.k.a. Daniel, had entered the shop, it was as if he and Raudel no longer existed.

Thank God. He’d never been so grateful for Daniel’s presence before.

“You’re next, sir.”

Chad rose, ready to subject himself to professional groping in the quest for the perfectly fitted tux. He’d already changed into the black tuxedo that sported a more modern slim cut and shorter jacket than the traditional variety. All he needed was a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, a checkered shirt, and white pointy Oxfords, and Lindsey could have the perfect hipster wedding. As it was, he’d be stuck with the peach bow tie, peach boutonniere, and the peach pocket square to finish it all off. The presidential fold was on the itinerary for them to practice later that evening.

Once he’d been properly fondled, he went to the changing room to get out of the precious outfit before something horrible happened to it. After the fountain disaster and the lip-balm incident, he didn’t trust himself around any of Lindsey’s wedding accoutrements.

“ Mijo ? You ready?”

“Almost. Come in.”

Chad opened the door a smidge, peeking around the side. “Where is she?”

“She’s out there still. Now she thinks Daniel should wear an alternate bow tie color to differentiate him from us. She has him trying on different ones.”

“Is she crazy?” He opened the door wider, gesturing for Raudel to come in. He shut it, then grabbed his jeans off the floor. “Everything’s already been done in peach and green. He’ll look like a leprechaun if he wears the shade of lime green she picked out.”

“I think she’s looking at the checkered and plaid ones.”

Chad gasped. “I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“She’s going to turn him into a hipster!”

“He’s not a hipster?”

Chad put down the foot he was about to push through the leg of his denim pants, his mind running through the files in his head of what little he knew about his future brother-in-law. “Huh. I have no clue.”

Raudel chuckled. “C’mere. I need to hold you before we’re forced to keep our hands to ourselves again.”

At last.

Chad relaxed into Raudel's comforting embrace, resting his head in the crook of his neck. It would be so awesome if they were in town to have a good time—go to the casino, grab dinner, maybe even go drinking and dancing. He'd never danced with a guy in public. Hadn't done much in the way of dancing regardless, except on a couple of occasions when a group of friends would get together and go out. But it wasn't the same as being with the one you loved.

Yeah. He grinned against Raudel's shirt. The one I love.

“Are you guys done yet? I wanna get out of here, and I need to talk to you first.”

Chad sagged in Raudel's hold, and Raudel patted his back.

I just wanted five minutes. “Yeah. Be right out.”

It took him a bit longer than he expected since he had to wait until his boner waned. When he and Raudel entered the main area of the shop, Lindsey's glacial stare met them. He'd been so certain she was completely wrapped up in lover boy and not paying any attention to them that he'd let down his guard.

“Four hours.”

Chad blinked at her. “Excuse me?”

“Until the tuxedos are ready. He told me on the phone last week it would only take an hour. This fucks up my itinerary, Chad.”

For once Chad wasn't responsible for something going wrong; that honor went to Tuxedo Shop Guy. “Oh. Well, that's no problem. Me and Raudel can come into town later and pick them up.”

“No. That won’t work.”

Chad racked his brain to ascertain why it wouldn’t work. He had nothing. “It won’t?”

She leaned into him, her voice lowered conspiratorially. “I don’t trust him. The shop closes at six, then doesn’t reopen until eleven tomorrow. The photo session at the house, Chad. That’s tomorrow morning! If he doesn’t get them done today, it’ll fuck everything up. I need you to push him. Make sure they’re finished before he closes.”

“Um, okay. But why can’t we come into town later and get them then?”

Lindsey grabbed his sleeve in a death grip while making a rather disturbing growling noise. “I want you guys to come in every hour, friendly and polite, casually inquiring as to whether they’re ready yet. Squeaky wheel, Chad. Squeaky wheel .”

Oh boy.

Raudel interjected. “I think that’s a good idea. We’ll take care of it for you, Lin.”

Chad gaped at him incredulously. “You do?”

Raudel winked before regarding Lindsey again. “You two take off, do whatever you need to do. Chad and I will handle this.”

Lindsey’s lower lip trembled before she threw her arms around Raudel’s neck. Chad was standing so close to him, he had to jump out of the way to avoid being knocked over.

“Thank you so much, Delly.” She held on for a while, then let go, her hands still resting on his arms. “I’m so glad you were able to make it after all.” She turned her attention to Chad. He had to rein in his shock that her expression toward him was one

of fondness as opposed to seething rage. She grabbed one of his hands. “Chad. You’ve been so amazing, helping me all these months. Whenever I ask you for anything, you’re always there.” She let him go, wiping a finger under her eye. “And wow. I’m so proud of you, Chad, for putting whatever was going on between you and Raudel back in high school solidly behind you.”

Raudel barked out a sharp laugh, and Chad’s face heated. That’s one way to put it.

Lindsey pursed her lips, furrowing her brow as the suspicion in her eyes returned. She glanced back and forth between them. Raudel had a ridiculous grin on his face, and Chad used every superpower he’d ever hoped to possess to keep his expression impassive.

“I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s something going on with you two. Are you guys—?”

“Come on, sweetheart, let’s get going. The movie starts in a half hour.” Daniel wrapped a meaty paw around Lindsey’s shoulder. He offered Chad and Raudel a vacant smile. “Thanks, guys. We appreciate your help.”

Chad glared at Lindsey, his mouth hanging open. She at least had the grace to blush and avert her eyes. “Sure.” He made certain to direct his response to her. “No problem. Hey, is the movie going to be out in time for the big barbecue? You know, the one highlighted in red pen on the itinerary? Mom made a shitload of potato salad.”

“Yes, Chad . Plenty of time.”

They exchanged one last set of glares before she left. Then he turned to Raudel. “Can you believe that shit? She has us doing her dirty work while she’s out yukking it up at the movies.”

Raudel let out an easy laugh and hooked his arm through Chad's. "Don't you see, mijo? It's perfect."

Chad huffed. "How is being stuck babysitting the guy who's fitting the tuxes 'perfect'?"

"Because," Raudel said in the sultry voice that always gave Chad shivers, "we have the day all to ourselves now. If we'd gone back to the house, your mom might have us chopping onions or rearranging the lawn furniture. Regardless, we wouldn't be away from prying eyes, and I wouldn't be able to do this." He touched his lips to Chad's, his tongue poking out to lick at the seam.

Chad opened up to him, but Raudel didn't delve deeper. Instead, he took small kisses over and over, tilting his head at different angles as he tasted on and around Chad's mouth. Chad answered when he could, chasing Raudel's lips when they touched him in a different spot.

They moved closer, drawn to each other, Chad sliding his palms up Raudel's back before he even realized what he'd done. The natural ease with which he responded to Raudel physically was unlike anything he'd experienced. He'd always assumed that until he'd been with someone for a very long time, he could expect to be self-conscious and awkward with a lover, the way he typically was.

Raudel ended the kiss with a peck on his nose. "Let's be tourists. Pretend this is our vacation, and we came here to be together."

A thrill coursed through Chad right before it was beaten to death by Lindsey's tuxedo demands. "That'd be so cool if we could."

"Why can't we?"

Chad didn't want to be the guy who always saw the worst side of everything, especially not with Raudel, so he struggled to come up with something positive to say. "Well, we'll have to stick close by to meet our hourly deadlines here at the shop, but I'm sure we could find some stuff to do in between that."

Raudel's smile was worth the effort. "That's fine with me. Harvey's and Harrah's are right down the street. We could play the slots, come back, then play roulette, come back, find somewhere to make out, come back...."

Chad grinned. "Yeah, we could. Or maybe we could rent a room, come back, go to the room again, come back...."

Raudel shook his head. "No, mijo. When we're finally alone like that, I don't want to be in a rush. I'll be taking my time with you."

Chad's cock jumped in his pants.

Yeah. That.

The man who'd done their fittings and given Lindsey the grave news that the tuxes would take four hours mysteriously appeared from behind the curtain that separated the sales floor from the back. He blinked in apparent confusion, no doubt wondering why they were standing next to the sales counter, wrapped in each other's arms. "Was there anything else?" His gaze flitted between them.

The compulsion to step out of Raudel's embrace struck Chad, but he didn't give in to it. Just because he'd never been affectionate with a man in public before didn't mean he had to begin his relationship with Raudel by being worried about what other people thought. It was bad enough they had to hide from his family.

Raudel traced circles on Chad's lower back as he spoke up. "No, thank you. Just

planning our next move until we come back to pick up the tuxes.”

“I see.” He gave them a curt nod, then turned as if to disappear back into his lair.

They shared a look, then Raudel grabbed Chad’s hand, tugging them out of the shop and toward temporary freedom.

“ANY LUCK?”

Raudel’s hand rested on his shoulder as Chad dropped another quarter into the video poker machine.

How can I concentrate when he’s touching me?

Then again, Raudel’s touch was a hell of a lot more important than some stupid game. “Cross your fingers, I’m about to double down.” He winced, then made his play.

“Yeah! Mijo , you won us drink tip money.”

Chad laughed as the coins fell from the machine. He’d never gone to a casino before.

Not that he hadn’t played poker with actual cards that people held in their hands, but he’d still been momentarily perplexed by the electronic version. Regardless, he’d picked it up quickly enough that he could easily see how people with less control and little interest in eating could gamble their lives away.

Chad scooped up his meager winnings from the receptacle, then dumped them into his Harvey’s Casino plastic cup. Raudel plopped down on the poker-machine chair next to him, swiveling lightly on it. Chad shook his change bucket at him. “We’re rich. I can buy us some drinks to go with the tip.” He figured he should have the

complete casino experience.

Raudel caught the attention of a cute, young cocktail waitress wiggling through the aisles of slots and poker machines.

She ambled over. “What can I get you?” She raked Raudel with her gaze, and Chad wondered if she realized how close she was to eye-fucking her way out of a tip.

Raudel turned to him. “Anything you want.”

“A beer’s fine. Budweiser if you have it.”

“Oh no, we can do better than that.” Raudel nudged Chad’s toe with his own booted one. “How about a Long Island?”

Chad barked out a sharp laugh. “Uh, no. You’d have to peel me off the carpet ten minutes after I finished. Beer’s fine.”

Raudel nodded, regarding him with a sage expression. “True. The day is young. Next round.” He returned his attention to the server. “I’ll have a Jack and Coke, and he’ll have a Bud.”

As soon as she’d taken off, Raudel leaned closer. “As long as we’re here playing, they don’t charge us for the drinks. Just tip her good, and she’ll keep us up to our ears in liquor. That’s why I wanted you to get something pricier than a beer.”

“Seriously? I never knew that.”

They’d been at Harvey’s for less than twenty minutes, and already he worried that Raudel would think he wasn’t sophisticated enough for them to be together. Raudel’s words to him echoed in his mind. Just be. Raudel hadn’t given him any cause to be

unsure of his place within his world. If anything, he'd made sure to reiterate how much he wanted him.

"Mijo ? What is it?" Raudel pressed his thumb between Chad's eyebrows, rubbing gently. "I don't like to see you worried. Don't ever hesitate to tell me anything."

Chad shrugged, insecurity working extra hard to elbow its way into their awesome afternoon. "Am I enough for you?"

"Oh, don't ever fear that." Raudel took his hand. "I've waited for you for so long. I spent how long in LA, believing I had everything that life could offer? But it always came back to wishing I had you. That someday we could be together after all." He twined their fingers together. "To have you with me is not enough. It's more than enough."

"Wow." How does he do that?

If Chad lived a hundred more years, he'd never come up with such amazing things to say.

The waitress returned with their order, and before Chad had paid her four dollars in quarters from his winnings, he couldn't help but notice her expression fall when she glanced down at his and Raudel's joined hands.

That's right, baby, he's all mine.

"Here's to us." Raudel grinned, then held up his cocktail for Chad to clink his beer bottle with.

They both took a good swallow. Chad glanced at the bottle in his hand. It occurred to him that the only reason he'd begun drinking beer was because it was what his folks

had always had around the house. Regular for Dad, Light for Mom. He wasn't even sure he really liked it, or if it was more of a case of him being used to it. Chad's only underage, hard-liquor-drinking binge had involved copious amounts of tequila and lots of barfing. He'd stuck to beer ever since.

"Hey. Can I have a sip of your drink?"

"Of course." Raudel handed it over. "There's no point in drinking the beer if you don't want it."

Chad sucked on the two tiny straws, careful not to take too much. The sweet yet sharp taste of the mixed drink wasn't bad, and it went down smooth before hitting his stomach. A slight warmth bloomed inside as he handed Raudel's cocktail back to him.

"Well?"

"Yeah." He kind of wanted more. "Pretty good."

"Here." Raudel held out his hand, wiggling his fingers. "Gimme that."

Chad glanced down at his drink and back up again; then he handed the bottle over. "You want my beer?"

Raudel laughed, shaking his head. "No. And neither do you." He shoved the beer between the two machines where they were seated, pushing it as far back as he could as if Chad might have a sudden beer fit and make a grab for it.

He wasn't sure what mischief Raudel was up to. "Are you trying to get me drunk so you can take advantage of me?"

“Who, me? Not a chance.” Raudel said it with mock seriousness. “Have another sip.” He handed his cocktail back over.

“I didn’t mean to steal your drink, dude.”

“You’re not. I’m giving it to you to finish. I’ll get us two more.”

“Whoa, hey now.” Chad held up a hand. “I’m not that much of a drinker.”

Raudel paused, considering him. “Are you having fun?”

“Yeah. Totally.”

“Do you want another drink, this drink?” Raudel pointed to the half-full glass of Jack and Coke that Chad clutched in his hand.

Chad stared at it. The condensation had begun to build on the glass, and he figured that one of them should finish the drink soon before it got too watery from the ice. He had the sense that the casino stuffed as many cubes into each glass as they could because of the whole comped-liquor thing.

The truth was he did want it. It had nothing to do with getting wasted, more that he’d enjoyed it and simply wanted to relax and have fun with Raudel for the few precious hours they had together. To let go of all the stress and pressure and everything else that’d been crushing his spirit ever since Lindsey’s wedding had gotten so out of control.

He let out a sigh. Can’t blame Lindsey for that.

No, his soul had been dying for quite a while before, and it had been him that allowed it to happen. Lindsey had nothing to do with that part of it.

“We can do something else, mijo . I don’t mind as long as I’m with you.” Raudel reached for the glass, but Chad snatched it back, sloshing a bit of the liquid on his arm.

“No. I want to stay. You can be the designated driver.”

Raudel wagged a finger at him. “Oh no. That’s not how it’s gonna work. We do this together. We can take a cab back if necessary.”

“A cab ? That sounds expensive.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve got it covered.” Raudel laughed, and Chad joined in.

“Cool. Then let’s see who can win more at video poker before our first tuxedo check-in. Winner ponies up the cash for more tips.”

Raudel stole a quick kiss. “Deal.”

Chad grinned. Babysitting tuxedo guy had turned out to be a fucking great idea after all.

“I THINK, for this next hour, we should walk over to Harrah’s. See what the action’s like over there.” Raudel tugged on him, their pinky fingers hooked together.

“Sure. Can we play roulette? I’ve never done that before.”

“Whatever you want.” Raudel gave him another playful tug.

Chad felt pretty good. Pretty damn good, as a matter of fact. Everything had a slightly floaty sensation to it, and it was scads better than the mild beer buzzes he’d had. Raudel seemed rather jolly himself. They kept touching each other as if their bodies

couldn't stand being apart. Everything that happened was a reason to bump shoulders, ghost fingers down the other's arm, or rub the back of the other's neck.

Raudel pressed against him as they entered the resort hotel. "I love you, mijó . So much."

A wave of giddiness rose up in Chad as certainty slammed into his chest. I'm never living in Fallon again. "I love you too, Raudel. I really do."

He grabbed Raudel's hand as they stepped onto the casino floor. It wasn't too crowded, which didn't surprise him for a Tuesday afternoon in April, but that didn't stop it from being an explosion of noise with dinging, whirring, and chiming coming from all sides. A riot of neon signs were tastefully placed in clusters above the groups of slots they corresponded to, elaborate designs of swirls, stars, or flames reaching up to embrace the ceiling. Even the slots themselves were made of neon: the chutes where winner's coins would fall cast in a deep blue glow, the body of the machine embraced in purple. The lighted signs above the group of games they represented were either "Blazing," "Hotshot Progressive," or they simply indicated how much a player could be expected to spend for each play.

It was both gorgeous and bizarre. The atmosphere of the casino promised an experience far removed from any other experience in a person's daily life. A fantasy where someone could get lost and the rest of the world would fall away. It was perfect.

The slots on the far end of the main room separated the roulette wheels from the rest of the casino floor, so he pulled Raudel toward them.

He had no idea what he was doing, but he didn't care. It would undoubtedly be a nice change for him not to overthink things the way he normally did. Raudel trotted behind him, laughing. They reached the tables, but only two had dealers running

them. Chad guessed things would pick up later.

They climbed onto the nicely padded black vinyl chairs surrounding the play and betting area, the wheel at the far end to their right. A guy significantly advanced in years sat across from them next to a man and woman. The couple were probably mid-to-late thirties, and Chad noticed that she had a floral corsage attached to her wrist and wore a pretty pink dress. The man with her had a boutonniere pinned to the lapel of his dark suit. With all the weird neon colors glowing all around them, Chad wasn't sure if it was black, navy, or possibly a charcoal gray. What he was sure about, though, was that they were newlyweds.

Raudel jostled him with his elbow. "Aww, sweet. Just married." The couple glanced up from where they'd been playing with their chips. "Congratulations!"

They smiled, the joy clear in their expressions. "Thank you. We've been married for—" He glanced down at his watch. "—one hour and forty-seven minutes."

The grizzled old man held up his glass. "I'll drink to that."

Chad turned his attention to the jolly, inebriated drinker. When he caught Chad's eye, he winked and licked his lips.

Yikes.

He scooted so close to Raudel that he almost pitched off his chair.

Raudel placed his hand on Chad's knee, laughing some more. He'd already thrown down a twenty, and the dealer pushed a pile of chips in their direction. "Okay, mijo . Red or black?"

The ball was already in play, so Chad had about twenty seconds to make up his mind

before the next round. His PTSD from the itinerary pens hadn't completely subsided, but the red had been the least traumatic, so he called that.

They picked numbers each round based on ridiculous reasons. One pass was dedicated to their dick sizes. After forty-five minutes of laughing until their sides hurt and Chad ignoring the lecherous stares of the drunken, dirty old man betting across from them, they'd managed to lose thirty-eight dollars and consume two additional Jack and Cokes each.

Raudel bit his shoulder, which made Chad strangely hard. Raudel ran his palm along Chad's thigh as he spoke into his ear. "Let's play the next round, then it's time to head back to the tux shop."

Chad groaned. As much as he hated most of the things associated with Lindsey's wedding, the tuxes had begun climbing the ladder and were poised to knock the fountain off its throne.

Raudel clasped Chad's hand. "We still have at least another hour after that, maybe one more if the tuxes aren't done until closing."

Chad almost knocked him off his chair by planting a firm kiss on his mouth. Raudel grabbed the edge of the roulette table with one hand and Chad's waist with the other. Newly emboldened, Chad kept control of the exchange. He ached to share everything with Raudel. Kisses, drinks, body.... His life.

"I'll drink to that!" The moment was broken by Chad's grizzled admirer raising his drink with a thumbs-up and a lunatic grin. Chad and Raudel gave a thumbs-up in return, and even the newlyweds joined in.

"Raudel. I want to go with you. In two weeks, when you go back to LA, I want to go with you." His words tumbled out breathlessly, his heart pounding harder than it ever

had.

Raudel's eyes glittered, his smile wide in clear joy. "Then you should."

"It's okay?"

"Don't you remember? I love you and want you in my arms every morning from now on. That will never change."

"Cool. Let me call the yogurt shop."

Raudel sputtered out a laugh. "Right now?"

"Yeah. I mean, I'm not a jerk. I have to give my boss two weeks' notice. It's only fair."

"You're a good person, Chad. I'm a very lucky man." Raudel gave him a wistful smile punctuated with a soft kiss.

"I'M GETTING whiplash from going back and forth between the casinos and that damn tuxedo shop." Chad playfully swung Raudel's hand between them as they strolled back to Harrah's.

"I think he's onto us too. Lindsey might be right. Politely harassing him seems to be working. I bet the tuxes are done the next time we go in." Raudel sighed, a sound Chad was surprised to hear coming from his boyfriend.

"Hey." Chad stopped them. "We don't have to go back to the rental, even if they are done. We can still come back for the last hour." The hope in Raudel's eyes melted him. "And... we could always skip the barbecue."

Raudel arched his eyebrows. “Are you serious?”

“Sure. Why not? My dad’s probably eaten half the potato salad anyway. We’d be doing them a favor.” Chad reached around in his fuzzy mind for more pearls of barbecue-dodging wisdom. “Plus, what’s the most important thing Lindsey wanted out of today?”

“Besides the tuxes?”

Chad frowned. “There was something besides the tuxes?”

“Pocket square folding.”

Shit. The woman’s relentless. “Well... we can miss lunch tomorrow and practice folding instead.”

“Yeah?” Raudel’s infectious smile was back.

“Yeah.”

Raudel sucked in a big breath, then let it out as if all his cares had been released. “Then what’s next?”

“I say more video poker. That roulette wheel kicked our asses.”

“Lo sé ! It really did.” Raudel pulled him closer, then put his arm around Chad’s waist. “What about something to eat? You hungry yet?”

“Actually, yeah.” Chad let out a chuckle. “I think I might need to soak up some of this alcohol.”

Raudel kissed his neck as they walked along, occasionally stumbling. Chad loved the closeness, but he was also grateful for the warmth. A healthy breeze had kicked up across the lake, and all he had was his hoodie.

“No more drinks, then?”

“I didn’t say that .” He grinned up at Raudel. “The night’s young, right?”

Raudel gazed down at him with an expression Chad had never seen anyone give him before. He could be mistaken, but to his eyes, it looked like adoration.

“And the night belongs to us, mijo .”

Page 7

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“MAN, THIS view is sweet .”

Chad stared at the lake and surrounding snow-covered mountains from the eighteenth floor of Harrah’s. The relatively cozy bar next to the fancy buffet had turned out to be a nice choice. They hadn’t wanted to gorge themselves, so the hostess had suggested they avail themselves of Happy Hour and the six-dollar appetizers. While they snacked on egg rolls and chicken wings, they also indulged in the two-for-one drinks.

Win-win.

Raudel leaned closer. “Open up.”

Chad took the last bite of egg roll that Raudel offered him from his fingers. Romance wasn’t something he’d spent much time pondering over in his life. It was more about finally getting properly laid and finding someone good to enjoy life with. He had one and the promise of the other, but the day he was spending with Raudel went beyond that. Raudel cherished him, and he knew it. Sharing food, drinks, and laughter with the man he loved while being treated to a gorgeous view was romance, pure and simple.

“You ever have a Fireball shot?”

Chad let out a boozy chuckle. “Reformed beer drinker, remember?”

“Ah, yes. Well, it’s about time you did.”

Chad grabbed his arm before Raudel could slide off the stool. “It’s whiskey, right?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry. Lindsey told me about the tequila incident.” Raudel kissed his temple. “I’ll take care of you.”

“Gah. That woman.”

Chad watched Raudel stroll to the bar with the barest hint of a sway to his hips. Chad bit a knuckle. Raudel’s ass was so fine, round and perfect. He wanted to sink his teeth into it.

He swiveled back around to take in more of the view. What he wouldn’t give not to have to go back at all that night. To do what he’d fantasized about, go somewhere nice to eat, go dancing. Maybe even get a nice room instead of a cheapie motel. Give his virginity to Raudel when it was romantic. The night before he hadn’t given a shit. The bears could’ve been sitting there watching them by the side of the road for all he cared, but now? He did want it to be special, after all.

“Here you go. One shot before we go back to the two-for-ones.”

Chad let out a hearty laugh for no other reason than he could. Raudel joined in, and Chad assumed that his motivation was similarly driven.

“Okay. On the count of three, slam it down.” Raudel raised a tiny glass filled to the brim and some of the whiskey splashed onto his hand.

Chad was overcome by the urge to taste it off his skin.

Pour that shit all over his body then lick it right up.

“Chad.” Raudel shook with laughter. “Your glass?”

“What?” He dropped his gaze to discover that yes, indeed, there was a shot glass in

his hand. Huh. “Well whaddya know? Should probably drink it.”

“On the count of three.”

Chad snorted. “Good thing you’re the one doing the counting.”

Raudel couldn’t control his laughter. Then again, he couldn’t either, so at least they were on the same page. Raudel was taking in big gulps of air in what Chad thought was a decent effort to get himself under control. “Okay, ’kay. This time’s for real. Here we go.”

“What are we doing again?”

Both Chad and Raudel sputtered out laughter, more of the liquor spilling out and coating their skin. Raudel didn’t take his seat again. Instead, he moved closer to Chad and stood between his legs.

Chad gazed at him intently. “Let me get that for you.” He swiped his tongue over Raudel’s hand. The cinnamon-sweet flavor mixed with Raudel’s salty flesh brought his dick to life. Raudel groaned.

“Ay Dios mío .” Raudel put a hand to his forehead, still chuckling. “ Ando bien pedo. Y caliente .”

“Oh man, I’m sorry. I only caught part of that.”

Raudel tilted his head. “Part of what?”

“What you just said. I understood some of it, but my Spanish isn’t so great.”

“Oh!” Raudel dissolved into laughter again. “I lapse into Spanish sometimes with too

much alcohol.”

Chad inhaled Raudel’s scent. “So, what’d you say?”

Raudel’s eyes sparkled. “Shot first.”

Chad snorted out a laugh. “Oh my God. Duh .”

“I’m counting. Ready?”

“So totally ready. Go.”

They finally had their countdown and a mouthful of cinnamon whiskey.

Chad coughed, his throat burning as his eyes teared. “Jesus. Are you trying to kill me?”

Raudel caressed the top of his thigh. “Never. I only want to love and take care of you for the rest of our lives.”

Chad sucked in a sharp breath as more water filled his eyes. He felt oddly emotional all of a sudden but swallowed it down. “That’s....” He cleared his throat, his mind racing madly for something equally as beautiful to say to Raudel. However, he wasn’t eloquent when sober, let alone filled with Jack Daniels and Fireball. “You never told me what you said.”

Raudel blinked a few times, then laughed. “Oh, I was basically saying that I’m drunk and horny.”

Chad grinned. “Then you read my mind.”

They shared another laugh, Chad stroking the hand that Raudel was using to rub his thigh. He glanced around surreptitiously. He'd sorta forgotten they were in a public place. But it was still too early to be busy, and the majority of the patrons were together at the bar with their backs to them instead of at the long counter where he and Raudel had been eating and drinking while enjoying the view.

"No one's watching."

Chad gave him a lopsided grin. "I've never been so wild in public before."

Raudel leaned in, his heated breath fanning across Chad's neck. "What about in private?"

"Oh God." Chad's heart picked up a rapid pace. "I.... Not like with you last night. I swear. I can't imagine it getting any wilder."

"I'll show you."

Chad bit his lip, sweat forming on his brow. He had a vague memory that he was supposed to be doing something. Something for Lindsey...

"Oh shit! The tuxes."

"We're okay, mijo . I'm keeping track."

Chad exhaled. "Oh good. Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Me neither. I never want to be without you." Raudel's gaze bore into him. "Ever."

Raudel's voice had dropped to the sultry tone that made Chad want to drop his pants.

“Same here.”

“Do you mean it?”

Chad nodded shakily. “Very much. I love you, Raudel. I think... I think your mom is right about us.”

“I do too, mijo . Will you marry me?”

The world stopped, and so did his breathing. He tried to make his mouth move but couldn't.

He's not serious, right?

Suddenly, he was terrified that Raudel really wasn't serious, that he'd take it back and he would lose out on the best man who'd ever lived.

“Yes!” He choked on some of his own spit, then fell into a fit of coughing.

Raudel smacked him on the back, offering him some of his water.

Chad caught his breath. “Yes. More than anything, yes. I want to marry you.”

Raudel broke into a wide grin. “Then let's go!”

Chad almost started choking all over again. “Wait. What? Go where?”

“To get married, my love .”

Chad's jaw dropped. “ Now ? As in right now?”

Raudel kissed him—hard. Chad let himself go, let Raudel have him. The passion of the kiss was real, but so was the love.

Like us. Me and Raudel. We're real.

Their exchange ended with him as breathless as ever.

“Well, mijo ?”

“Yeah. We should totally do this.” Raudel took a step away and Chad grabbed his sleeve. “Hold up. I don't want to get married in my Batman T-Shirt.”

Raudel furrowed his brow, then widened his eyes. “The tuxes! And there are dress shirts for sale at the shop too.”

The Batman tee is still pretty new. It might be all right. Maybe I could wear it inside out. “I sorta just quit my job.”

“You'll get another one in LA. In the meantime, it'll be my wedding gift to you.”

Oh shit, that's right. A wedding gift. And rings. We'll need rings.

More sweat broke out. He needed to get a grip. Already the groomzilla virus threatened to take hold.

Raudel rubbed between Chad's brow the way he'd done earlier. “I want to forever take this away from you.”

“You're so awesome, Raudel. I promise I'll make it up to you, that I'll do my part.”

“Shh. It's not a competition. When you need my help, I'll give it. And if you can help

when I need it, I'll gladly accept."

"Damn, Raudel. You're gonna make me cry before the ceremony."

Ceremony. Wow.

"We can't have that." Raudel winked. "Come on." He grabbed Chad's hand, then pulled him over to the bar. "Excuse me. Where do we go to get married?"

The bartender had no reaction as he wiped a glass with a white towel. "Have a marriage license already?"

Chad's heart plummeted to his feet. Damn .

"Oh. No, we don't." The sorrow in Raudel's voice mirrored his own feelings.

The bartender reached up to replace the glass on a shelf behind him. "Then you'll have to get married on the California side. It's about ten minutes farther away. The Chapel of the Bells' location over there will have everything you need, including the license."

"Thank you." The excitement had returned. "Thank you so much."

The ride down the eighteen floors to the lobby seemed to last a lifetime, but they never stopped touching, their shared laughter keeping the momentum going. Once they'd made it to the lobby, Raudel fished his phone from his pocket.

"We've got thirty minutes to get the tuxes, but there's no way I'm driving."

"Pffff. I'll drink to that."

They both doubled over with laughter again.

“Okay, stop!”

Raudel attempted to get his snorts and chuckles under control while he called for a cab. Within minutes, the taxi arrived and whisked them away to their first stop. Chad had some cash on him, so he insisted on paying the fare. It wasn't much, but even though Raudel reassured him that it was okay and he didn't need to worry about it, he couldn't help himself. He'd always done his fair share. It was important to him that they begin their married life working together as a team.

Married life.

“Look. There's a jewelry store across the street.”

Chad turned his head in the direction Raudel indicated. He'd almost forgotten. At least all the adrenaline and excitement had sobered him up a bit. “I wonder what time they close?”

Raudel chewed his lip. “I'm betting it's the same as the tux place, six o'clock.” Raudel grabbed Chad's shoulders. “I wear a size sixteen and a half, thirty-four, thirty-five dress shirt. Get whatever color you want.” Raudel gave him a lopsided grin. “Except peach. Add it to the wedding account, and I'll pay it back later. What size ring do you wear?”

“Are you kidding me? I don't even know my blood type.”

“Hmm, let me see your hand.” Raudel examined Chad's third finger, pinched it between his thumb and forefinger, and then nodded. “I think I can figure it out.” Chad certainly hoped so, because he didn't have a clue when it came to jewelry. “Something simple, huh? We can get them engraved later.”

Raudel offered Chad the warm smile he adored, and that alone made him want to say yes to Raudel all over again. “That sounds perfect, Raudel.”

Raudel gave him a quick smack on the lips, then took off in a jog.

It was time to face the dreaded tux shop.

We’re not wearing any bow ties, or ties, or anything like that, right?

He wasn’t sure which was worse, the long-drawn-out agony of preparing for a wedding or the sudden jolt of frantic confusion that went with an insta-ceremony.

“Hey. I’m back.” He figured his flushed, sweaty skin and out-of-breath words weren’t endearing him any further to Tux-Shop Guy.

“Did your friend give up?”

“Oh no. He had to run across the street and get us some wedding rings before the jewelry store closes. So, I’m gonna get us the shirts.” Chad cleared his throat. “You know. To go with the tuxes?”

“So... you need three shirts, then?”

“Only two. The other tux is for the groom, and he’s already.... What I mean is that that groom has a shirt back at the house... well, actually, so do we, but those are for the wedding this Saturday, but what I need right now is two shirts for our wedding tonight.”

“Our wedding?”

“Mine and Raudel’s.”

“Who’s Raudel?”

“He’s the one getting the rings across the street.”

“For the wedding this Saturday?”

“No, for our wedding tonight.”

“Then who’s getting married on Saturday?”

Oh boy. “My sister and the hipster guy who was in here earlier are getting fitted with Raudel and me.”

“Ohhh, I understand now. So they’re getting married on Saturday with both of you gentlemen in the wedding party. But you and your friend across the street are getting married tonight using those same tuxes, but you need two dress shirts to use for your own wedding, correct?”

Chad ran it through his mind. “Correct.”

“Well, then, why didn’t you say so? What are your sizes, and what color do you want?”

Holy crap. I’m so sorry, Lindsey. I totally get it now. I would’ve also picked peach faced with this kind of pressure. “What do you think?”

“Let’s see. Did you want something more traditional or something modern? Why don’t we start from there?”

“Uh...” The most amazing idea ever came to Chad. “Blue. A deep blue. Like the lake.”

Tux-Shop Guy nodded in seeming agreement. “Very nice choice. I think that would complement you both very well.”

Chad gave him Raudel’s size, then went through another slightly less intimate grope-fest to get measured for his shirt. Next, he waited by the front door, anxious for Raudel to return. He couldn’t explain it, but he really needed him at that moment.

“You’re in luck. I have both of these shirts in your sizes. Which shade of blue would you prefer?”

That’s it. It’s Raudel’s turn when he gets here. I got the ball rolling.

As if on cue, the door chime buzzed and in walked his fiancé.

Fiancé. Crazy. Chad’s gaze landed on the small silver-foil gift bag, and his heart tripped. Our rings.

Raudel winked, then held up the bag. He strolled over and handed it to Chad. “Here they are.”

Chad accepted it with a shaky hand. He peered into the bag that held two blue velvet ring boxes. Dizziness threatened. He thought he might need to sit down, so he stumbled back and fell onto the unnecessarily ornately carved, brocade-covered side chair.

Raudel rushed to his side. “Chad?”

Chad took in a deep breath. “I’m okay.” He glanced up at Raudel, a happy grin spreading his lips. “Booze and excitement.”

Raudel stroked the top of his head. “Yeah. Me too.”

The sound of a throat clearing brought them back to the present. “Sorry to intrude, gentlemen, but the store closes in five minutes.” He regarded Raudel. “Perhaps you’d care to offer your opinion as to what blue you prefer?”

Raudel considered one shirt, then looked at the other. He turned to Chad. “They’re both nice. Which one do you want?”

Chad groaned. Really? Then a thought struck him. He pulled one of the little boxes from the bag. It was a dumb idea, but since they weren’t making any progress with decisions, it was as good an idea as any. “Which one matches this the best?”

The need for matching shit had never been something he’d indulged in. T-shirt, jeans, another T-shirt, another pair of jeans... yet more T-shirts with more jeans. Rinse and repeat.

They conferred for a couple more minutes before they made a final decision. After they’d asked the shopkeeper to add the items to Lindsey’s account, they grabbed the hanging tuxes encased in flimsy plastic bags, with their shirts folded neatly inside yet another plastic bag. Chad clutched the shiny paper one that held their rings for all he was worth.

They stepped outside in the brisk air, the chilly breeze doing wonders to cool Chad down and eliminate some of the sweat.

Raudel placed his cell to his ear. “I’ll call for another cab. Can you Google the address?”

Chad reached into his pocket, but his phone wasn’t there. He had a moment of panic, then remembered he’d left it in Raudel’s car because he’d been answering Lindsey’s incessant texts she sent every two minutes wondering when they were going to be at the tux shop.

“Damn, it’s in your car. Give me the keys, and I’ll run across the street and grab it.”

Raudel held up a finger, then spoke into his cell. After he’d finished ordering a taxi, he regarded Chad. “Don’t worry about it, I’ve got mine. The cabbie is right around the corner, so he’ll be here in less than a minute.” Raudel snaked an arm around his waist, then tugged him to his side. “It’s not as if we won’t be together the whole time.”

Chad let out a soft chuckle. “Yeah. Good point.” He leaned his head on Raudel’s shoulder, a thread of peace coursing through him. It occurred to him that he should have prewedding jitters, should be worried that he was making a bad decision, that it was all happening too fast, and he’d eventually regret it. But that wasn’t what he felt at all. Everything about marrying Raudel was right. Everything about them was right.

The cab pulled up, and they excitedly clambered into it as the giddy laughter returned. It turned out that Googling had been unnecessary—the driver knew exactly where to take them. They clutched each other’s hands while he tried to keep from bouncing in his seat. They arrived less than ten minutes later, just as the bartender promised. The white chapel was cute and nicely maintained, with a small lot in front for the presumed guests to park. Chad had a momentary pang of wishing his family could be there, but then he remembered.

Special time for us. Party with everyone else later.

After paying the cabbie, they marched with singular purpose into the reception area. A bell chimed, and a minute later, an attractive middle-aged woman greeted them.

“Hello, gentlemen. How can I help you today?” She actually appeared as though she did want to help them.

Raudel spoke up, his voice sure and steady. “We’re getting married, and we were told

that everything, including the license, could be handled here?”

She gave them a happy smile. “Congratulations to you both. Yes, we can. Were you looking to get married right now, or did you want to look over our various wedding packages and reserve a date for later?”

They both answered at the same time. “Now.”

She smiled again. “Wonderful. My name is Cathy, and if you’ll step over here, I’ll get you started on the paperwork, discuss some options for your ceremony, go over prices, and so on.”

More decisions. Chad whispered to Raudel, “I think I can fill out my name and address, hand over my ID, and such, but if we have to decide on candles or ring pillows or flowers or anything like that, do you think you could handle it?”

Raudel gave him a squeeze. “Whatever you want, mijo .”

Everything happened in a daze, Chad half listening, but when they got to which ceremony and vows they wanted to use, he had to intervene with his opinion. He wanted simple. Under the circumstances, he wasn’t sure how eloquent he’d be, so shorter and to the point was better. If they had more time, he could’ve practiced, maybe even written his own vows.

Yeah, right.

Upon further reflection, he decided it was just perfect the way it was.

Cathy led them to some changing rooms. It was obvious that the much larger one was for the bride, the smaller one for the groom. They shrugged, and together they took the larger one.

“Oh shit. I forgot about the whole bow tie, necktie thing.”

Raudel shook out his shirt and tissue paper fell from the inside. He’d had to help Chad get the million straight pins out of his. “We can wear them with the collars open.”

Chad grunted. “That’s probably for the best. You know me. There’s not the slightest chance I could’ve tied one of those things. As it is, I have no idea what I’m going to do for Lindsey’s wedding.”

“Don’t worry, mijo . I’ll help you.”

Chad glanced over at Raudel who’d just gotten his arms in the sleeves and was buttoning it up. If he knew how to whistle, he would have. The blue was amazing on Raudel.

They completed their ensembles, which meant it was go time.

Raudel smiled at him. “Ready?”

He smiled back. “Totally.”

They clasped hands, then peered out into the hallway. Cathy had obviously been waiting close by because she popped up from nowhere.

“Don’t you both look wonderful? Reverend Jameson will meet you in the chapel. I’ll direct you there and serve as your witness.”

He leaned over to whisper to Raudel. “Isn’t Jameson a whiskey?”

Raudel snorted.

Cathy glanced over her shoulder before smiling, then looking forward again.

Suddenly, Chad was standing in front of a podium, facing Raudel and holding his hands. Nausea threatened.

What the fuck am I doing?

He lifted his eyes, his gaze locking on Raudel's the moment Reverend Jameson intoned, "Love is the reason we are here today."

And Chad knew exactly what he was doing. A few short comments from the reverend, and after a brief reciting of the vows, he directed them to exchange rings. Chad reached into his pocket to retrieve the plain gold band, then placed it on Raudel's finger.

However, Chad's ring wasn't as cooperative.

"I wasn't very good at guessing, my love. I'm sorry."

"It'll fit." Chad licked his finger—which maybe wasn't the classiest thing to do, but there wasn't the slightest chance he was going to get married without his ring. He assisted Raudel in pushing it past his knuckle. "There. Perfect." He still seemed to have circulation in his finger, so he figured as long as it didn't turn purple, he'd be fine.

Once they completed that task, the reverend announced, "You are now forever joined as husband and husband." He shut the small book he held and smiled at them both. Apparently, that signaled the end of the ceremony.

Chad blinked repeatedly, stunned. He wasn't sure what to do next. "Isn't there supposed to be a kissing part?"

Raudel laughed. It was the same soft laugh Chad had heard when he'd been cringing and hiding behind his dad's Suburban, terrified to see Raudel, his ex-crush. But in less than two days, Raudel had gone from "could never happen" to "always will be."

He grinned against Raudel's lips, so filled with joy he could hardly stand it. They clung to each other, the kiss gaining in fervor. At last, they broke away from each other's mouths, but still held on.

"I'm your husband." Chad's words were tinged with awe, and he couldn't stop smiling.

"And I'm yours, mijó. Forever."

Chad relaxed into Raudel's embrace.

Forever.

Page 8

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RAUDEL SLID the key card in and out of the lock of their Deluxe King room at Harrah's. He'd insisted that should be where they spent their wedding night, as it was the place where he'd proposed. Chad couldn't agree more.

After the wedding, they celebrated. But first, they checked in at Harrah's to have a place to dump their rumpled street clothes, which they'd shoved into the tux bags. Then they headed back to Harvey's because there were other slot machines they'd meant to try before the whole let's-get-married thing.

Their next stop was an elegant steakhouse where Chad couldn't look at the menu prices. Raudel kept whipping out his credit card like he'd just made the top-ten list of the wealthiest men in America, and Chad hoped the jobs in LA paid better than the yogurt shop.

But Raudel had insisted they do it right. The white rosebud boutonniere at the chapel, the champagne while they played slots, the wedding dinner at the steakhouse, their first dance at the hotel's huge nightclub—Raudel made sure he had the full experience.

As Raudel pushed his way into the hotel room, Chad waited for him to clear the threshold. Chad held the package of six cupcakes they picked up when Raudel needed to hit the store for lube and condoms. Raudel sent him to get whatever he wanted from the bakery for their wedding cake while he grabbed the other stuff. Chad decided cupcakes were the best option since they didn't have a knife or plates. It also meant he didn't have to decide on vanilla or chocolate since he didn't know which kind was Raudel's favorite. The container had three of each.

“Don’t move!”

Chad froze in panic. “What’s wrong?” If a spider was on him, he’d scream like a little girl. He fucking hated spiders.

Raudel took the cupcake container then set it on the bed before scurrying back over. He moved the safety latch to prevent the door from closing the whole way and stepped into the hall. As soon as Raudel extended his arms, Chad realized what he was about to do.

He chuckled. “I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

Raudel winked. “I’m strong.”

Chad didn’t doubt it.

The ground fell away as Raudel hoisted him into his arms. Chad laughed and grabbed hold of his neck out of instinct. “Whoa! Don’t drop me.”

Raudel tossed him onto the bed, and Chad narrowly missed smashing their mini wedding cakes. He shoved them off to the side to prevent any more potential pastry mishaps. Raudel launched himself into the air, landing on the other side of Chad. They rolled together, kissing, the mood light and happy.

He pulled away from Raudel just enough to see his face. “Hey, I need to take a shower.”

Raudel pursed his lips and made a pouty face. “What? But I need you now, mijo. I’m so hard.” He rubbed the evidence of said hardness against Chad’s hip.

“Hold that boner. I’ll be quick.” Chad wriggled free of Raudel’s grasp while they

mock fought, pinching and tickling. “Stop! The sooner I get in there, the sooner I’ll be out.”

“I’m going with you. You’re not the only one who gets to smell good.”

Chad paused to take a sniff of Raudel, burying his nose in the crook of his neck. “You smell awesome to me.”

“That’s what I thought about you too.”

“Come on, dude. Fastest rinse ever.”

He remained true to his word, proud that he’d controlled himself as well as he had during his soapy exploration of Raudel’s body. It was more of a challenge not to come when Raudel’s questing hands slid over his own skin, but he’d bitten down on his lip hard enough to distract him from going off like a rocket.

They hadn’t bothered with towels after drying each other. They’d set the thermostat earlier when they dropped off their clothes—the room had been rather icy. But while they were gone, it had warmed up nicely.

“Cake first.” Raudel gave him a quick peck on the tip of his nose. “Then I’m going to make love to you, mijo.”

Chad swallowed hard. His dick twitched in response to Raudel’s words, Raudel’s mouth curling into a smile as he glanced down at his erection. He grasped it, and Chad hissed.

“Bad idea. Won’t last.”

“I think it’s a wonderful idea. The night is ours. I can make you come twice.”

“Oh lord.” Chad groaned. “Okay. Don’t let me discourage you, then.”

Raudel bit his ear, stroking him from base to right below his tip. “But we still have to have cake first.”

“Huh?” Why is he talking about baked goods at a time like this?

“Stay right there.”

Chad watched, transfixed, as Raudel ambled over to the almost-smashed cupcakes, stiff cock bobbing. Fuck yeah . It was a beautiful sight.

Raudel popped the lid on the loud, crinkly package, and then lifted a cake overloaded with giant swirls of white frosting out of the container.

“There’s a choice of vanilla or chocolate for the cake part. I didn’t know which one you liked better.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Raudel approached him with the frosted treat. Chad ran through the files in his mind in an effort to recall what the cake-sharing protocol was for the couple at the reception. It escaped him why there would only be one and not two pieces.

When Raudel reached him, he dropped to his knees. Chad cried out at the sensation of the soft frosting pressed to the head of his dick. His knees almost buckled from the teasing licks Raudel used as he removed the globs of icing then encased only his cockhead with the warm, wet cavern of his mouth. Raudel continued to torture Chad with gentle suction, pulling with his lips then pushing his tongue into Chad’s slit.

Chad whimpered, unable to stop himself from clutching fistfuls of Raudel’s thick hair

or thrusting his hips. Raudel pulled off with a pop, and Chad gasped. He gazed down at Raudel, frantic in his desire.

“Fuck my mouth, mijo.”

Raudel took every inch of his length until he'd buried his nose in Chad's blond curls. He sucked him hard, hollowing his cheeks before descending again.

Chad took over. He thrust into Raudel once, then twice more before picking up a swifter pace, pushing past Raudel's gag reflex, face-fucking him hard. Raudel swallowed around his cock, working it insistently with his throat as Chad's climax barreled through him. He yelled out his release as he emptied his balls into Raudel's mouth. His body sagged, all the strength gone from him.

Before he could collapse onto the carpet, Raudel gathered him in his arms and laid him on the bed as he settled across Chad's body. He stared into Chad's eyes briefly before descending on his mouth, pushing his tongue past the seam of Chad's lips, the kiss salty sweet. The exchange remained languid, even though the throb of Raudel's erection pressing against Chad's belly told him that Raudel was very much in need.

“I want to make you feel good, too.”

Raudel's lips held a soft smile as he brushed Chad's sweaty bangs off his forehead. “Soon. But you still haven't had your cake yet.”

Raudel reached across the short expanse of the duvet to pluck another cupcake from the package. He brought it to his mouth, then licked up a ridiculous amount of the icing. Before Chad could wonder what would happen next, Raudel had painted Chad's lips with the frosting then pushed the rest of it into his mouth.

Chad sucked Raudel's tongue greedily until Raudel took over, taking back the control

as the kiss built in intensity. He sought out as much of Raudel's naked flesh as he could, questing with his hands, then grasping the gorgeous backside he'd admired ever since Raudel arrived.

Since he came back to be with me.

His husband was right; Chad had stiffened right back up, and he didn't see any reason why he couldn't come a second time with proper motivation.

Raudel's dick in my ass seems like an excellent option.

As if reading his mind, Raudel paused their love play. With one quick peck on his lips, he rolled off Chad. "Let me get you ready."

Chad nodded shakily, his body thrumming with excitement and nerves. "Should I...? Uh, what should I do?"

Raudel fetched the necessary items from the grocery bag. He glanced at Chad. "We'll start on your stomach with a pillow underneath you. I can peg you better that way."

"Oh. Okay." Chad moved to get in position, then paused. "Start?"

Raudel approached the bed. "I want you on your back when you come so I can see your eyes."

He's gonna kill me with adoration . Chad only hoped that he could somehow express his love to Raudel half as well as he did to him.

Once he'd turned onto his belly, Raudel helped Chad stuff a pillow beneath his body. His ass tilted higher, and he started when Raudel grabbed his cheeks, parting them. He curled his toes and fingers, biting his lip as Raudel swiped his tongue up his

crease, teasing his hole with the tip. Embarrassing mewling sounds poured out of him from the overload of new sensations.

The first press of Raudel's finger to his entrance made him clench involuntarily.

"Let me in, mijo . I'll be very careful with you, I promise."

"I know. I trust you."

The sound of the condom package tearing made him jump, and he mentally chastised himself. Relax. His breath hitched at the cool sensation of lube as it drizzled onto his sensitive skin. Raudel rubbed the slick around his opening, gradually increasing the pressure until he'd popped past his rim.

Chad hadn't used the dildo in years, not entirely giving up on his quest to get laid but not seeing the point until there was a decent prospect. But he'd fingered himself on occasion to get off, so what Raudel had done so far was in keeping with what he was accustomed to.

Raudel pushed in farther, the touch deeper than Chad had achieved on his own. He gasped as Raudel skated over his gland, another thing that had been very awkward to accomplish for himself. He'd been somewhat successful with the dildo, but it wasn't the same as this. Not even close.

Raudel added a second finger, pegging him again. Chad whimpered and groaned, writhing on Raudel's fingers, the burn and stretch better, more pleasurable than he remembered. Raudel pulled his hand away, leaving him empty and aching hard as he rutted against the soft pillow covering. The fabric gave him a zing with each pass, but he wanted the feel of Raudel's hand instead.

He tensed. The soft steel of Raudel's cock as it nudged his hole was both welcome

and frightening. His rim stretched, spreading impossibly wide as Raudel slowly pushed his way in. One hand grasped Chad's shoulder as Raudel used the other to guide his long cock deeper inside him. He opened him up, speared him until their bodies touched.

Raudel stilled, resting on top of him. "Are you okay, my love?"

Raudel whispered it against the back of his neck, curling his body around Chad's torso, pressing his forehead to his skin.

"Totally okay." His heart raced. The sensation of being joined with another human being—joined with Raudel—was almost too much to bear. "I love you."

"Love you, mijo. So much."

Raudel reached up a hand to twine his fingers with Chad's. He clasped them tight, then moved his hips, slowly exiting Chad's body before pushing back in. With each stroke, he moved faster, fucked harder as he placed small bites and kisses across Chad's shoulders. Chad rocked with him, not only accepting the intrusion but encouraging it, meeting Raudel with each punishing thrust.

Chad yelped at the sudden loss of Raudel's cock inside of him. Raudel rolled him forcefully, the pillow snatched from beneath his body and tossed across the room. He quickly spread Chad's legs, then lifted them to his shoulders, shoving his cock back into Chad's hole almost simultaneously.

A deep scarlet flushed Raudel's face, his expression twisted in the struggle of pleasure and need as he plunged repeatedly into Chad's pliant body. No longer able to meet each of Raudel's thrusts, Chad lay on his back, impaled and helpless, desperate for release. Drops of sweat fell on him as Raudel reached between them, tugging harshly on Chad's dick. A pulsing in his ass, along with one final twist of

Raudel's hand, was all it took for him to come hard.

Cum pooled between their already slickened bodies, and before Chad passed out, one more declaration of love from his husband reached his ears.

"I love you, mijo. With all my heart, I do."

CHAD FOUGHT the rising panic threatening to render him helpless as they drove back to the rental. "Shit. Shit, shit, shit."

"Love, I promise you, everything will be okay."

Chad clutched Raudel's hand for his very life. "I should've called. Why didn't I call?"

"I'm sorry. It's just as much my fault." Raudel squeezed his hand back as if in reassurance. "I was lost in you, lost in us. But I don't want you to worry. I'll do the explaining."

"Explaining ? How can we explain that we disappeared—with the precious tuxes, I might add—for almost twenty-four hours?"

They couldn't tell anyone the real reason. He didn't want to deal with the nuclear-sized fallout if Lindsey discovered that he'd not only stolen her thunder but her best friend. He couldn't even begin to imagine how everyone else would react.

"We'll tell them we had too much to drink while waiting for the tuxes to be ready, so we decided to stay in town."

"So we weren't able to sober up enough after six o'clock to make it back last night? We had the early-bird dinner special, then went to bed?"

Bed. Oh boy. No way to hide that.

Raudel's lips curled up in a sly grin. "I doubt they'll think we went to sleep."

Chad groaned. "Lindsey's going to be so pissed."

"You're right, she will. But we'll get there in time for the photos, and we can spend the rest of the week making it up to her."

"She'll torture me because of this for the rest of our lives. I'll be in the nursing home, and she'll hide my bedpan. Then she'll steal my tapioca pudding and make me eat the broccoli."

Raudel laughed. "Then I'll sneak in chocolate pudding for you."

Chad turned his head, observing Raudel. Light crinkles decorated the corner of his eyes, and he sported an easy smile. His body wasn't tense in the least, his shoulders relaxed as he drove with one hand on the steering wheel, the other clasping Chad's. It was odd, but he could picture it. He could totally picture Raudel making sure he had chocolate pudding if he was a bedridden senior.

"Okay. I can do this."

He had to keep telling himself that. He also had to make sure he ignored the seventeen increasingly frantic texts and five phone calls that had popped up on his phone once he plugged it into Raudel's car charger. Raudel had shut off his own cell before the ceremony and then didn't turn it back on. As soon as Chad had seen the messages and finished having a meltdown, he'd texted that everything was fine, and they'd be back soon. Then he shut off his phone again.

No reason to get ripped to shreds via text when I still have the in-person shredding to

look forward to.

“So, we were drunk and lost our phones. That’s our story?”

Raudel shrugged. “Misplaced. But in general, yes.”

“Right.” Raudel really would have to do all the talking. Chad couldn’t say that excuse out loud with both his mother and Lindsey staring him down. He glanced at the gold band on his finger. “Double shit. We need to hide our rings.”

“The bag from the jewelry store is on the floor in the back.”

Chad turned to locate it, and Raudel sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Chad worried that Raudel had decided they were both screwed after all.

“I don’t want to take it off.”

Chad considered his ring again. He didn’t either, but he also didn’t see any way around it. They could tell everyone they’d gotten married after Lindsey’s wedding day had passed, but not before. After all the trauma she’d been through to get to the finish line, it simply wasn’t fair.

After popping open the little blue box, Chad accepted Raudel’s ring, kissing it before he placed it in the tiny slot.

“I saw that.”

Chad flushed hot, but he’d heard the pleased tone in Raudel’s voice. He twisted the band on his own finger, but it barely moved, pulling harshly on his skin instead.

“Ow.” He tried again with the same result. “Ow . Damn.” It wouldn’t budge.

“Is it giving you trouble?” Raudel kept flitting his gaze back and forth between Chad and the road.

“Fuck. This is beyond trouble. This is...” my final doom. “Remember how you wanted to get our rings engraved? Mine will have to be done on the outside of the band.”

“Ah, mijo . A jeweler can get that off for you.”

“Know any between here and—” Chad gulped. “Hell?”

Raudel turned right onto the dirt road leading to the rental. Raudel gathered up Chad’s hand, the one with the wedding ring embedded in the flesh of his third finger. He kissed the band before setting Chad’s hand down again, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“In that case, could I have my ring back, please? You can put it on my finger before we get out of the car.”

Yup. Let the shredding commence.

CHAD’S FIRST act upon entering the rental to face the Wrath of Lindsey was to step on the bottom of the plastic bag that contained his still partially pressed tux. He face-planted as it ripped open, his balled-up blue wedding shirt spilling out at the feet of his family, who’d lined up in the entryway. They appeared united in their intent to interrogate him upon his arrival.

Raudel gasped loudly as he grabbed Chad’s arm, helping him to his feet, then exploring his body as if checking for broken bones or spurting arteries. “Oh, my love.

Are you hurt?"

Subtle. That whole wedding ring issue seems to be a moot point.

"Love ? Did you just call him 'love '?" The force of Lindsey's gasp put Raudel's to shame. "And what's that ?" She pointed at Chad's dress shirt as if it were a snake. She then lifted her gaze, her eyes widening as she stared at their hands.

Chad shoved his hand behind his back, but Raudel gently extricated it before lacing their fingers together. His stomach clenched as he took in everyone's slack-jawed, bug-eyed expressions.

"Oh. My. Fucking. God ." Lindsey threw her hands in the air before letting them drop to her side, tears glittering in her eyes. "Those... those rings. Did you...? Are you guys...? Did you...?"

Chad almost pissed himself as Lindsey's piercing scream filled the room. She'd undoubtedly cleared entire flocks of birds from the neighboring woods with the sheer force of her outcry. Chad reached for her, opening his mouth to beg her forgiveness, but she recoiled. Without another word, she whipped around, then ran from the room.

"Knock, knock." Everyone turned their heads to the source of the voice. "I believe I have an eleven o'clock appointment to shoot some wedding photographs?"

CHAD STOOD alone in the kitchen as he stared mindlessly at the digital display on the built-in microwave. He clutched an unopened can of Bud Light, knowing he didn't want to drink it, but somehow feeling that he should. Something Raudel had said the day before came filtering back to him. Something about having what he wanted.

He pushed himself off from the counter where he'd been leaning, then opened the

refrigerator door.

“I’ll take that.”

His dad’s voice made him jump right as he was about to set the beer on one of the glass shelves. Without looking his way, Chad handed it to him, then reached for the milk jug. After kicking the door closed, he sighed the sigh of the damned and retrieved a glass from the cupboard. He still couldn’t make eye contact with his father.

As he poured his milk, his dad popped the tab of the beer then took a noisy sip. “Seen your mother?”

“No. But she’s probably in the shed.”

“There’s a shed?”

“In the backyard.”

“Oh.” His dad took another noisy slug of the beer. “Haven’t been out there since the first day.”

Chad considered the remark. Other than the stealth-ninja fountain mission in the middle of the night, he hadn’t been back there either. It was probably gorgeous. That thought sparked the memory of the day before when Raudel had proposed to him as they sat eighteen stories up with the beauty of the lake as a backdrop.

“So.” His dad set the can on the tile of the counter with a clink . “You’re really married, huh?”

Chad wondered if he could grab Raudel from where he sat in the living room

entertaining Grandma by playing Go Fish, jump in the Honda, and disappear with him forever. All he wanted was his husband by his side and for his family not to hate him. If he couldn't have the family thing, he at least wanted Raudel.

With another agonized sigh, he faced his dad. "Yup. I really am."

"Are you happy?"

"That I married him?" Because he wasn't so happy with anything else. "Extremely."

His father nodded, then took another healthy swallow of beer. "Always thought he was a good kid. Smart, too."

"Yeah. I'm really lucky."

"You love him?"

"Yes, sir. Very much."

"And you guys had a wedding with a ceremony, wore your tuxes, got the rings, had cake...."

Chad's face heated. He didn't want to be reminded of frosting with his dad standing right there. "Yeah. We didn't want to go through anything like—" He swallowed. "—you know."

"Yeah. I know." His father finished off the beer, then almost crushed the can in his fist, wincing in pain before giving up. "What about the honeymoon?"

Chad snorted before he could stop himself. "Oh, we.... Well, no trips to Hawaii or Caribbean cruises. We might hang out here or maybe drive through Yosemite and

take the long way home when we leave to get my stuff before I—” He paused. There hadn’t been much talk about the future with his family. So far things had fallen more under the heading of damage control. “I’m moving to LA to be with Raudel.”

“I figured. You married the kid.” His dad reached into his pocket, then pulled out his checkbook. “Here. I have something for you.”

“Dad, you don’t have to. We sprung this on everyone, even though that wasn’t our plan, but I don’t want you guys to feel like—”

“Shut up, Chad. I’m not upset. I’m glad you’ve found someone who makes you happy, and I’ll be eternally grateful to you for not forcing me to relive this fucking nightmare.” He waved a hand around in the air as an indicator of said nightmare, then ripped the check from the pad and handed it to Chad. “This is what your mother and I saved for your college education. You’ll be needing it to start your new life with Raudel.”

Chad sucked in a sharp breath as he gawped at the amount. Ten thousand dollars. How many beers has he had? “B-but... I’ll never be able to pay you back.”

His father had the fridge door open and was rooting around it. “It’s not a loan. It’s a gift.”

“B-b-but....”

“You sound like a motorboat. Now where the hell is the beer?”

Chad couldn’t stop staring at the check. “In the shed.”

His father growled. “I knew it.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:26 am

“IT NEEDS to be you, mijo.”

Raudel nuzzled his neck, taking occasional nips at his skin as they sat together on the bed in their room. The bed he’d been so terrified of only a few days ago.

“She hates me.”

“She loves and needs you.”

“No. I’m pretty sure the stink eye directed my way during the photo session yesterday was hatred.”

Fortunately, they’d been able to reschedule the photographer to give Lindsey’s swollen, red eyes a chance to recover from the crying jag induced by Chad and Raudel’s unintentional marriage announcement. It still hadn’t made up for the complete annihilation of the itinerary, however, and no amount of Wite-Out in the universe could repair the damage of his betrayal. They’d merely taken care of the most essential things: Lindsey’s drunken bridal shower, the photos, and the rehearsal dinner they’d just returned from. He frankly couldn’t understand why they hadn’t simply done that in the first place and spent the rest of the time enjoying the fucking lake.

“I think Daniel’s parents hate me too.”

“That’s called homophobia, honey. In which case, I qualify for their list as well.”

Chad plucked at the hairs on Raudel’s naked thigh, which was draped over Chad’s

leg. It was the position they'd ended up in after coming back from the tense, awkward dinner and then racing to their room to rip off their clothes and jack each other off.

"Why would she need me ? I'm the cause of all her troubles."

"She's getting married in a few hours, and you've been there for her ever since she got engaged a year ago. Whenever we talked on the phone, she'd tell me everything you helped her with. You're a good person, Chad. So we threw a wrench in the machine in the eleventh hour? Everything's turning out okay. I helped your mom re-verify all the players, took the tuxes to the cleaners—" He laughed. "—mowed the lawn."

Chad traced circles with his finger on Raudel's skin. Everything about the man he'd married fascinated him. "I should've done that."

"You were mopping the floors."

Chad shrugged. "I should be doing everything."

Raudel jostled him with his elbow. "Don't be silly. I was just as much—if not more of a participant in our wondrous wedding escapade."

That pulled a chuckle out of Chad. "Yeah. It was pretty wondrous, wasn't it?"

Raudel licked the side of his neck. "Not was, mijo. Is."

Chad took a deep breath before slowly exhaling. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"I'll go try and talk with her."

“That’s all you can do is try. But I have a feeling she’s ready.”

They shared a kiss before Chad steeled himself in case she blew his ears back when he showed up at her door. He didn’t realize he was tiptoeing until he reached her room. He lifted his hand to knock.

Please let me live.

“Mom?”

Chad cleared his throat. “Uh, no, Lin. It’s me.” He cringed.

After a brief pause, she responded. “Fuck off.”

“Lin, please. I need you to hear me out. I understand if you never want to have anything to do with me again, but for your own sake, you don’t want to be upset on your wedding day. I don’t want that either. I want it to be one of the happiest days of your life, the beginning of many more to come. Don’t ruin it because of something I did.”

He waited for her to say something, anything—even if it was to tell him to fuck off again.

The door flung open, and he jumped back.

“Then why did you do it, huh? Were you jealous? Couldn’t stand that I had all the attention?”

“God, no . That had nothing to do with it.”

Tears shimmered in her eyes. “Then why, Chad? Why did you disrupt everything?”

Mom was so upset that something bad had happened to you guys that I thought she was going to have to be hospitalized.”

She’d hit the guilt button that his mom had only deactivated that morning. Scaring Mom half to death was what both he and Raudel had felt the worst about.

“And you’re absolutely right, Lin. But it wasn’t intentional. Not particularly well thought-out, but not intentional.”

She narrowed her eyes, her expression only slightly less disgusted than it had been all week. “What about stupid ?”

Chad shook his head. “No, Lin, not stupid. I can’t say that about marrying the man I love, the one I want to build a life with, who I can’t imagine being without now that I know how amazing it is to be with him.”

Her features softened, some of the tension lessening as a slight crease formed between her eyebrows. “Oh.” She looked him firmly in the eyes. “That’s how you see him? How you view Raudel?”

“Yeah, Lin, of course. You know me better than that. I wouldn’t have married him unless I did, no matter how drunk I was.”

Lindsey chuckled, and he joined in. She glanced over her shoulder. It seemed as though Shannon and Brenda were asleep, but he wouldn’t put it past Shannon to be pretending so she could listen in. Brenda probably had her hand in a bowl of warm water, so he wasn’t too worried about her.

Lindsey turned back to him. “Is there still any of that cookie dough ice cream left?”

“I thought you weren’t eating anything that didn’t sprout directly from the ground

until after the wedding?”

“Shut up, Chad. Do you want to have some ice cream with me or not?”

“I could be convinced.”

She hooked her arm through his and let him lead her to the kitchen. “So... no regrets? You know, you and Raudel?”

He paused, taking a moment to see his sister, really see her as a woman. When had they gotten to this point? How had the years gone by without him noticing they’d changed in ways he never could’ve imagined? They were brother and sister—playmates as children and then sworn enemies as teenagers. Now, neither of those roles belonged to them. New ones had to be formed because no matter what, they would always have each other’s backs, and that would never change.

“No, Lin. No regrets.”

“CHAD, I need you to keep an eye on Grandma and make sure she doesn’t fall in the lake.”

“Yes, Mom.”

He was actually more concerned about his mom pitching into the water as she teetered up and down the lawn on her high heels. She’d switched from beer to champagne for the ceremony, promising Chad that she was never drinking again “if I can just survive this last, awful day.”

She gazed out at the lake and let out a sigh that, for once, didn’t have melancholy, frustration, or sadness attached to it.

“What is it, Mom?”

“It really did all work out, didn’t it? Just like you said. Lindsey is so beautiful and happy, and here we are, a gorgeous, sunny day, and we were so worried it would rain.” She regarded him. “Lindsey even believed the story that the new fountain was the same one she originally chose.” Mom tucked his hair behind his ear. He couldn’t remember the last time she’d done such a thing. “I know this has been hard on all of us, you included. Don’t think I don’t realize how diligently you worked to help make Lindsey’s day very special.” She took a large gulp of her champagne. “And I’m so thrilled about you and Raudel, I really am.” She patted his cheek. “But no reception. I’ll need about a decade to recover from this one.”

“It’s a deal.”

His mom gave him a peck on his forehead and then returned her gaze to the scenery. “Chad! Quick!”

Sure enough, Grandma had her sights set on the pier.

Chad took off at a fast clip, dodging Daniel’s mother and a toddler who belonged to one of Daniel’s sisters—Chad couldn’t be sure which one. He reached his grandmother before she’d set one foot on the long slatted-wood structure extending out over the lake.

Haven’t lost my speed.

As a kid, Chad’s nervous energy in schoolrooms had always translated into a lot of tearing around the playground during recess.

“Hey, Grandma. Wanna come have a seat with me? I was going to get some more of those puffy things with the cheese and brown stuff in them. They’re really good. I’ll

fill up a plate for both of us.” He tugged lightly on her arm.

Grandma wrenched it away. “Let go of me!” She flailed for a moment.

Chad’s heart jumped into his throat as he made a grab for her. He wrapped his arms around her waist, dragging them both away from an undoubtedly icy bath.

Grandma let out a yell so loud and piercing she drew the attention of all sixty or so guests in the yard. Even the band stopped playing.

Sure enough, Daniel’s parents had a particularly steely gaze trained his way.

Raudel rushed over to them, Chad’s mom and dad not far behind—although his mom was doing a weird tippy-toe dance in her heels as she struggled to move quickly over the uneven ground. Raudel planted himself between the lake and Chad, who still held on to his struggling grandmother.

Chad had to give the woman credit—she was a feisty one.

His mom finally caught up to the show. “Mother Barton, calm down! You’re making a scene at Lindsey’s wedding!”

“Lindsey?? She grunted. “I thought this was Chad and Hottie’s wedding.”

Chad loosened his hold on her. There seemed to be enough of them surrounding Grandma that the chances of her falling into the lake had diminished greatly. “No, Grandma. Raudel and I got married a few days ago.”

She grabbed a healthy pinch of cheek flesh and did her signature shake. “Then why the hell wasn’t I invited? Don’t expect any gift from me, young man!”

“That’s okay, Grandma. We would’ve invited you, but we eloped.”

“Bullshit.” She regarded Raudel. “Are you keeping him satisfied?”

“Mom!” His dad shook his head, frowning.

Chad caught Raudel’s scarlet-tinged face and had to laugh. He wandered over to his husband since his dad had apparently taken over Grandma-sitting duty.

His dad’s words drifted back as he led her away. “I’ll fix you a plate with some of those nice pastry things with the cheese and brown stuff in them.”

Grandma made a retching noise. “Why is everyone trying to pawn that shit off on me? They taste like they’re filled with cat food.”

Chad’s eyes widened. Was that what it was? He’d thought they tasted pretty good, but now all he could think about was Purina. Time for a palette cleanser. “Hey, I think we deserve to try out that chocolate fountain, don’t you?”

Raudel slipped his hand into Chad’s, then took a soft kiss. “I do.”

“That’s odd.” Chad feigned seriousness. “Didn’t you say that to me just the other day?”

“And I’d say it all over again.”

Damn. He really is good. Chad grinned. “Me too.”

They strolled over to the object that had forced them to be stuck in a car together, an event that, at the time, seemed to be the end of his world. Instead, that ride into town forever changed his life for the better. He couldn’t begrudge the grotesquely ornate,

bubbling fountain that honor.

Chad considered the enormous strawberries displayed in yet another obscenely elaborate bowl.

Raudel picked one out and handed it to Chad before taking one of his own. Raudel winked. "I'd love to feed this to you, but it would make me unbelievably hard, and wouldn't that give Daniel's parents an eyeful?"

Chad snorted out a laugh. "No shit. I almost popped a boner when they brought out the cake."

Raudel lifted his strawberry as if in a toast. "Well, let's find out what is so amazing about a chocolate fountain that it almost tipped the world off its axis."

Chad rolled his eyes. "Seriously." He swirled the berry in the liquid chocolate, then held his hand underneath the fruit as he brought it to his mouth. The first bite was a revelation. Rich and sweet, tart and juicy, the flavors combined together perfectly. It was a complete and utter foodgasm.

"Holy shit."

Raudel nodded. "Pretty amazing."

"We should totally get one of these for our house one day."

The smile Raudel offered him went to his eyes, a satisfied, happy smile that gave Chad the shivers. He swiped a finger at the corner of Chad's mouth, then sucked it into his own before licking it clean. "Whatever you want, mijo. Whatever you want."

* * * *

I hope you enjoyed Chad and Raudel's swoony romance and their surprise forever after! If you haven't started the Uniform Encounters series yet, it's complete and features hot men in and out of uniform searching for the one who was meant for them. You can expect more swoon—but also spice, suspense, and mystery. Get started with *Secret Fire* , a grumpy/sunshine, opposites attract romance between a cop and fire marshal [HERE](#) . Read on for a peek at Chapter One:

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“You mean birthday boy? The one with the perpetual frown?”

Zach couldn't believe that Tom Sherwood—one of the firemen who played against him on Mesa's cop versus firefighter softball league—was suggesting he approach Daryl Richards to see if he might be interested in getting together on a date. The dude was known by all public servants as the crankiest man on the planet. Fire Marshal Daryl made curmudgeons seem jolly.

Zach, on the other hand, liked to have a good time. Share some laughs. Enjoy life. With that in mind, hooking up with Daryl didn't sound like such a great idea. Even if he only wanted to get laid, he didn't see the appeal. However, Zach's former, more carefree outlook on the dating scene wasn't what he sought anymore. One and done was no longer on his dance card.

“He's actually a really nice guy.” Tom cleared his throat. “Once you get to know him.”

Zach smirked at Tom. “Uh-huh. I'm sure he is. Except I'm not into those sadomasochistic types of relationships.”

Tom frowned. “I don't think that's fair. He's been without anyone for a long time. I heard he really got his heart broken and hasn't been the same since.”

“That's shocking.”

“That he got his heart broken?”

“No. That he has one.”

Tom crossed his arms with a scowl. “Fine. Be that way. But you’re the one who sounds heartless right now.”

Zach sighed and bent down to pluck a soda from the cooler that Tom and his partner, Eric, had brought to the park. He straightened, then popped the can open and took a noisy sip of the cola. The sounds of kids playing, the happy laughter of families and the sizzle of barbeques surrounded him. The October day was warm, and a slight breeze blew the leaves around, keeping the tablecloths fluttering. Cover from the trees in the section of the park they were in made the ever-present Arizona heat tolerable. What right did he have to complain?

“Okay.”

Tom had also helped himself to a soda. “Okay what?”

“I’ll...go talk to him.”

Tom shrugged. “Whatever. At the last softball game, you were bitching because you said that trying to find someone to get serious about is next to impossible.”

Zach snorted. “Yeah, get serious about. Not someone who was serious.”

Tom rolled his eyes and popped the tab on his drink. Zach wasn’t trying to be a dick about the whole thing, but when Tom had said he knew the perfect guy for him, Zach had gotten his hopes up. He couldn’t imagine being in a long-term relationship with someone who looked like he wanted to spit on him every time he was near. Zach didn’t take it personally. Daryl looked at everyone like that.

It really was too bad in other ways because Daryl was one fine male specimen. The guy was a little rough around the edges, which only made him hotter. His nose had

obviously been on the receiving end of someone's fist at one point in his life and there was a small stripe of missing hair at the edge of an eyebrow that was likely from a cut. His cheekbones were defined, chin strong and his honey brown eyes were set deep in his face.

Daryl also sported a scruffy moustache and close-trimmed beard which was the same chestnut brown as his hair and also accented with streaks of gray. Of course, that just happened to be another tick on Zach's hottie checklist. Not to mention that Daryl's hair was the perfect length for him to hold onto for cock-swallowing purposes.

Damn.

He hadn't even had a chance to dwell on Daryl's well-built body yet, and already he was about to make an ass of himself by getting a chubby at the combination softball and birthday barbeque.

"There you are, Tom."

Speaking of well-built men.

Eric Anderson—Tom's boyfriend and West Mesa's Fire Chief—approached Tom and casually draped his arm on his hip. He leaned over and whispered something in Tom's ear, and the young firefighter laughed. They looked so happy together, so unconcerned about what others may think.

Zach couldn't deny his envy.

Everyone knew of Tom and Eric's relationship—it had been plastered all over the news the previous year when they'd been outed during an arson investigation. But Tom and Eric hadn't let the decision to come out as a couple being ripped from their hands to lessen their bond. Zach was glad. He lived openly as well, even when it had been difficult for him at the police precinct when he was first starting out.

“Isn’t there someone you need to go talk to?”

Zach shook his head in resignation. “I can see you’re not going to let this go.”

Eric appeared confused. “Talk to who?”

Tom lowered his eyes as he shifted from foot to foot. “No one.”

Zach scrunched his eyebrows together. “No one? I thought he was going to be the fucking love of my life?”

Eric sputtered out a laugh. “Oh, now I gotta know.”

“Tom wants me to put the make on Daryl over there. Mr. Happy Birthday Boy.”

Eric bent over laughing, slapping his knee. He straightened, wiping a finger under one eye. “Oh, my God. You’re killing me.” He turned to Tom. “Babe, what on earth made you think Zach should get together with Daryl of all people?”

Tom slammed his fists on his hips. “You’re both asses. Just because a guy’s not laughing it up all the time doesn’t mean he might not be a good prospect.”

“Yeah, a good prospect at ripping my dick off,” Zach muttered.

“Fine. Screw you both.”

“Ah, babe, c’mere. I’m sorry.”

Eric grabbed Tom by the waist and tugged him closer, chuckling. Tom playfully pushed him away then seemed to forgive Eric as he leaned against him, the hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

Zach thought of Tom and Eric as two of his closest friends, but sometimes he wanted to punch them. They were so damn cute and cuddly all the time.

Jealousy sucks.

He sighed, deciding he might as well get it over with. After downing the rest of his soda, he tossed the can into the recycling bin then wiped his hands on his jeans.

“Okay, cover me. I’m going in.”

Eric grasped his shoulder and squeezed, an overly grave expression on his face. “Should it all fall apart, I’ll be sure to notify your next of kin.”

Zach snorted and Tom pressed his lips together, frowning. No doubt, Eric would be at the receiving end of more ire from his partner. Zach nodded and clasped his hands as if in prayer, shaking them at Tom and Eric. Eric laughed and Tom glared.

Daryl stood by the table that held the party food located near the softball diamond. There was a second game going that had started after the cake had been brought out and Daryl had been serenaded by everyone. Or rather, Daryl had tolerated being serenaded.

I wonder if it’s like what my mom used to say when I would cross my eyes. Maybe Daryl’s face really will stay like that if he keeps on frowning.

Fortunately, there was no one else around. The stragglers who hadn’t left the party already were either watching the game or playing in it. Zach had planned on leaving as well, but Tom had thwarted his exit by suggesting he approach Daryl. It would just be the two of them.

Awesome.

Zach sighed. Right as he was about to reach where Daryl stood, he was reminded of how hardcore sexy the fire marshal was. He wasn't sure how old Daryl might be, but he guessed the guy probably had at least a decade on Zach's thirty. Not that it mattered one way or the other. As soon as he checked Daryl off his list as a romantic prospect, he'd go sign up for an online dating service.

Arriving at the picnic table, he experienced a moment of awkwardness where he felt as though he had no idea how to start a conversation. Typically, he was a laid-back, social kind of guy, so it unnerved him a bit. Zach cleared his throat. Daryl turned his head slowly, regarded him, then turned back to the game, a can of soda in his hand.

"This cake any good?"

Cake. That's brilliant.

Daryl shrugged, not even bothering to glance his way. He took a swig of his soda.

Zach pursed his lips. "So that means what exactly? It was okay? You've had better? You don't give a shit?"

Daryl whipped his head around, angling his body towards Zach.

"The last one."

A snort of laughter burst out of Zach. His reaction seemed to garner some interest from Cranky Pants. Daryl looked him up and down so quickly that if Zach hadn't been paying such good attention, he would have missed it. Daryl also had the slightest curl at the corner of one side of his mouth.

"Yeah. I guess this whole birthday thing caught you off guard, huh?"

"I don't get caught off guard."

Zach resisted the urge to frown. And possibly throw cake at him.

“So, you showed up anyway to prove to everyone you aren’t frightened of birthday celebrations?”

Daryl faced Zach. He made a sound that Zach could almost interpret as a chuckle. Either that or he was in pain—it was hard to say.

“Zach, right?”

“Yeah. Daryl, right?”

“Well, we know each other’s names. Why aren’t you playing today?”

“Oh, I fucked up my shoulder last week chasing a suspect. Asshole ran off with the cuffs on, and when I tackled him I hit the ground the wrong way. It’ll be all right. I just need to take it easy for a couple weeks.”

“Too bad. You’ve got the best pitching arm between the two teams.” Daryl kept his gaze trained on Zach.

Not sure. Could be flirting.

“I’m resilient. I’ll be throwing balls again in no time.” Zach had to work extra hard to keep a straight face.

Daryl tipped his soda back and finished it off, while continuing to stare at Zach. He set the can down on the table, then crossed his arms in front of him.

“Good to hear.” He glanced in the direction of Tom and Eric. “But I doubt you came all the way over here to ask me about cake. I saw you speaking with Tom.”

Zach coughed a little. “What’s Tom got to do with anything?”

“You tell me. All I know is that he’s always on me about going out with this guy or that guy.”

Zach arched his eyebrows. “How devastating. I thought I was the only one Tom was willing to sacrifice to the dating gods. So much for feeling special.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re special enough.”

Daryl quickly glanced away, rubbing the back of his neck and acting as if he had suddenly become immersed in the game again. Except for the part where they were between innings and no one was playing. He sighed then turned back to Zach.

Zach forced himself to conjure up a reasonable facsimile of a smile. “Good to hear. I guess sometimes Tom gets a little insistent, but he means well.”

Daryl grunted. “Just because he’s a walking advertisement for a gay Hallmark card, doesn’t mean he has to torture the rest of us with it.”

Zach’s jaw dropped. “Whoa, wait a minute. Where’d that come from? You know, Tom’s a nice guy. He’s only trying to help.”

“Yeah, well I don’t need anyone’s help.”

Zach couldn’t hold back his irritation. “What’s your problem, huh? This wasn’t supposed to be a big deal. I came over to say hi, see if we might like to hang out sometime. So what if Tom gave me a little push? It’s all good.”

Daryl averted his gaze. “Whatever. He acts like I’m supposed to go along with every suggestion he makes. I’m an adult. If I decide I like a guy enough to chance being treated like shit again, then I’ll go after him myself.”

Zach marveled at his ability to keep from throwing all the cake at Daryl. “Wow. You are one hostile asshole. You’re right. You don’t need anyone’s help. It’s obvious you can alienate people all by yourself.”

There had been one millisecond where Zach thought a little spark of something had passed between them. Then Daryl had taken whatever that was, smashed it on the ground then pissed all over it. Zach didn’t wait for any response from the dickhead, he simply marched off. He was so infuriated by the whole exchange he considered forgetting about dating for a while. Possibly for ten or twenty years.

Deciding he’d had more than enough of the park for the day, he went to say his goodbyes to Tom and Eric. It was likely they could tell from his expression that the dating mission had failed.

Tom winced as Zach approached. “Well?”

Zach shook his head grimly then regarded Eric. “Call my next of kin and tell them there’s nothing left to bury.”