







# Phantom Faceoff (Daddies of the League #5)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Reckless. Foolish. Disappointment.

All names Ive earned.

To the team, Im Halefire, the forward with the wickedest slapshot.

To the guy Im sleeping with and most of campus, Im just Zander.

Carefree Zander.

Never met a bad idea I didnt like.

Then, theres Malachi Blanchard. Who exudes danger in a way nothing—and no one—ever has.

He hates me. At least, I think he does.

So why is he bailing me out of my drunk shenanigans at three in the morning? Why is he helping me pass this awful Music Theory class?

Why does he watch me when I'm with his best friend like there's something he wants?

I can't pretend to understand the clashing feelings of security and danger that he evokes, but the longer I'm around it, the less I want to fight it.

It's the way he whispers Wildfire all harsh and demanding—yet wrapped in warmth.

A fitting name.

Im gasoline, and hes the match. We're striking every chance we get.

Its only a matter of time before we burn it all to the ground.

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

## Chapter One

Zander

Heat radiates up my arm from the flicker of the bonfire. It's a cool August night, but between the flames and the way my hands sink inside the jacket of the man perched on my lap, I'm as toasty as a marshmallow.

My fingers find ground over the planes of his slender frame, anchoring onto his shoulders to bring his body closer to mine. Our lips work together in a clumsy tangle, and a puff of laughter hits my face.

"Are you this bad at kissing girls too?" Julian's wide smile obscures my vision for a brief moment before trailing to my jaw.

My own laugh awkwardly bubbles out. "Tongues are weird, okay?"

He hums into the hollow of my throat. "You could do something else with it."

While making out is hella fun—and my dick is definitely geared up for action—neither of us are entirely sober enough for any kind of sex to be a good idea.

My hesitation doesn't go unnoticed, and Julian's lips press back on mine. "Maybe follow my lead this time."

Julian and I hit things off over the summer at the Youth Outreach program we both volunteer with, and while I've always considered my sexuality fluid and ambiguous,

it wasn't until my best friend pointed out the—apparently mutual—blatant flirting the two of us have had going on that I even remotely considered the attraction.

Even still, without a couple of beers flooding my system, I wouldn't have entertained acting on it. I'm the world's biggest sucker for a pair of big green eyes, and when they're trained on me with a warm body on my lap—what's a guy to do?

“Hale.”

I'm no stranger to having my name thrown around with such animosity, but the growl that rolls it out doesn't belong to an opponent on the ice.

No, that right there is danger packed in a pair of ripped skinny jeans and rustling chains dangling from the loops. Very early 2000's pop punk of him.

Fortunately for me, danger has never been a deterrent.

I have no problem wrapping an arm around Julian's waist—grinning as he squeaks and buries his face in my neck while I prop my chin on his shoulder. A very pretty picture for the man standing behind him with fury in his stormy gray eyes.

“Blanchard,” I greet him with all the sunshine he lacks.

The way his eye twitches makes my smile widen. Each time he picked Julian up from the program, I was met with a brooding glare and a world's worth of disapproval.

It's fun to see his tolerance meter shoot into the red.

“Let's go.” His voice dips into an almost throaty growl, and the sheepish way Julian pulls back is immediate.

I throw on my best pout and receive the world's softest kiss in response. "He's only prickly because he cares," he whispers against my mouth.

Overprotective best friend who definitely wants in your pants. Not the kind of messy I should involve myself with.

Julian slides from my lap, and there's barely a heartbeat from the moment he's on his feet to when he's glued to Malachi's side.

I expect some sort of verbal lashing, but all I get is an eye-roll and Julian's apologetic smile as he's ushered away.

That's alright. It's late. I'm buzzed. There were bound to be some questionable decisions if he hadn't stepped in anyway.

Malachi Blanchard. The very definition of "emo bad boy". Who so many girls whisper wants of but who only has eyes for his soft and gooey best friend.

Someone should write a book about that.

My phone pings in my pocket, and I can't help the smile that springs forth from the message.

Julian

Daddy runs a tight ship, but even the captain has to rest sometime

.

I thumb back a quick response and let my ass slide to the ground, head thunking against the log I'd been occupying.

Me

Good luck sneaking out when it's your bed he's resting in.

Julian

Are you mad?

Me

Nah. It's cute. Like he's Mary and you're the little lamb.

More like the lamb and the big bad wolf, but I don't say that out loud.

Julian

I promise, he's a marshmallow. Rain check on the tonsil hockey?

I should say no. That it was fun, but I have to focus on the team, on preparing for a busy season on the ice.

But I remember the hostility in Malachi's stare, and the little thrill that dances in my gut is too potent to ignore.

Me

Any chance you're an early riser?

I'm met with an instant winky face.

Julian

Daddy isn't. Meet at the rink or quad?

There's a fine line between excitement and danger, but life's more fun when they blur together.

Me

Better option. My dorm.

"You are an eternal cock-block."

My roommate—with his shower soaked blond curls plastered to his neck and cheeks and a towel knotted around his waist—gives me the bird as he throws clothes from his drawer into a duffle.

Completely unbothered that he just sent my morning make-out session running for the hills and very likely dying of embarrassment.

"We have to meet Coach at the rink in twenty minutes. You can have ass or ice time. With fresh blood joining the team, I need someone I trust, and unfortunately for us both, that's you, Halefire."

I am one hundred percent capable of having my cake and eating it too, but before I can retort, he throws a balled up t-shirt at my chest.

"Get dressed. Please."

Micky Donovan might appear all hard edges and closed off, but I can read the insecure desperation in his pleading eyes. Hockey is his passion, but it's also his number one distraction from the shitshow of his life, and I can respect that.



Which means getting my ass out of bed and my head where it belongs: on the upcoming season and getting us to the Frozen Four.

My bag is already packed and stuffed under my bed, so I toss on whatever clean combo of clothing is closest and meet Micky at the lobby of the dorm. He shoves a muffin in my hand and ushers me out the door like I'm a child he's babysitting.

"Parker skip your weekly check-in again?" My words are muffled around the fluffy goodness, but by the glare I get in response, they came across crystal clear.

"I'm half tempted to sick his brother on his ass," Micky grumbles with a scowl. He's wound tighter than a jack-in-the-box, and likely just as easy to set off.

"Ah, yes. The pro hockey player you've nabbed as your personal coach since high school."

That at least draws out a thinly veiled grin. "Fuck you. I've only met with the guy a handful of times since joining the Ravens. He did me a favor and helped me round out my weak spots so I could make captain."

Co-Captain with Ellis but still a big accomplishment.

"I'm always up for a road trip if we need to pay the guy a visit."

He doesn't ask for me to clarify if I mean his boyfriend or the brother, just stuffs his hands in his pockets and lets his shoulders slump.

"I hate football camp."

We don't speak again until we're half-undressed in the locker room, Micky sucking a sharp breath through his teeth.

“Jesus Christ, Coach is going to have your ass.”

I have no clue what he’s going on about until another of our teammates whistles loud and cracks a shirt across my back.

“What tree did you fall out of to get a whopper like that?”

I look down and spot the big, purple bruise climbing up my side that gets me a room full of side eyes.

“It’s fine,” I say. “Hardly hurts.”

Micky is right. If I told Coach that I took a midnight four-wheeling trip with some buddies from high school because I was restless and couldn’t sleep, he’d probably relegate me to laundry duty for the entirety of the season.

Which is exactly why I say, “Julian and I tumbled off the bed because someone,” I motion to Micky, “couldn’t respect the sock on the door for five minutes.”

He narrows his eyes because if there’s one person in the world who doesn’t buy my bullshit, it’s Micky Donovan.

Thank god he needs me on the team, or he’d rat me out in a heartbeat.

“You could hook up in Julian’s dorm.”

Like hell.

My roommate might be a pain in the ass, but Julian’s? The man hates my guts and would like nothing more than to use me as a punching bag for his frustrations.

“Might get a peepshow next time.”

Micky rolls his eyes and, thankfully, drops the subject.

That doesn't stop him from lighting my ass on fire during practice, though.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

### Chapter Two

#### Malachi

One would think my “big reputation”—as Taylor Swift would call it—would hold some weight with the local fuckboys.

Judging by Julian’s disheveled appearance for the third time this week, it sure as hell the fuck does not.

“Can you stop glaring a hole in my head? I’m embarrassed enough.”

“No,” I bark because the anxiety in my gut is swirling into something dark and angry. “You aren’t. Because if you were, you’d break it off with Hale and get your head out of his ass.”

Julian purses his lips and focuses on straightening out his long, frizzed, copper hair.

“You don’t have to be rude.”

“And you don’t have to be naive.”

The heavy thrum of a bass guitar and the sarcastic cadence of Set It Off’s vocalist pounds through one half of my headphones, the other muff pushed behind my ear to hear Julian’s tell-tale snuffle as he huddles onto his mattress and starts meticulously braiding his hair.

I'm all of thirty seconds into "Wolf in Sheep's Clothing" before I abandon my bed for his and take over where his fingers tremble.

"I'll never stop protecting you. From yourself if I have to."

He leans back into my touch, a soft, content sigh passing his lips when I open my legs to allow him into my lap.

"It's not like I'm dating him, Mal. We're just having fun. Fooling around."

I might tug his hair a little too hard, but all it draws out is a chuckle.

"Don't you see how that's worse?"

He hums while I work, tying off the end of the braid with one of the many elastics on my wrist.

"You going to The Den after class?" he asks, turning to the side and batting his eyes like a schoolgirl.

"Why? So you can bring Hale back to our dorm without me to scare him off?"

"I want to get laid, Mal. Railed into my mattress." Julian rises to his knees and puts his hands on my shoulders, leveling me with an intent stare. "No one wants to fuck me because they think I belong to you."

I raise my brow, and he rolls his eyes. "You take care of me, but you don't take care of me."

Not that we haven't tried it a handful of times over the years, but the spark has never been there.

“And you think the daredevil jock of all people will?”

“He’s a sweetheart,” Julian says, falling back to stretch his arms above his head.

“Terrible kisser. But incredible with his hands.”

Not an image I need, and one that etches a deep scowl on my face.

“Malachi.” Julian’s voice is soft, eyes even softer, and though I know it doesn’t appear like it on the outside, the brunt of my anger melts away.

Replaced by a flood of worry.

“You are my best friend,” he says like he’s placating a child. “My caretaker.”

The words are spoken with a careful hesitation. Treading a water we’ve barely dipped our toes into.

But when you catch your best friend—a man you’ve known since you were eleven—chatting up strange men online and calling them “Daddy” you’ll practically leap out of your goddamn comfort zone to give them a safe place to explore.

“I’m Little with you because I trust you, but I’m a big boy with Zander.”

“So I’m only supposed to care when you want me to?”

Julian puffs out his cheeks, and I see the change he so often describes to me: He wraps his arms around his middle, curls onto his side, and worries his bottom lip between his teeth.

My own frustration ebbs, and I push a few stray strands of hair away from his eyes.

“Can we set some ground rules? So I can help you without being so ... controlling?”

That was one part of the Daddy/Little dynamic that Julian explicitly expressed disinterest in. He wants support and structure, but not someone to take over his life.

And if I have to put up with Zander freaking Hale, the least they can do is give me some peace of mind.

“Yes, Daddy,” he says softly, and I do my best not to let the discomfort show on my face.

I might be into some shit—theoretically—but other than the word casually being thrown out in the middle of banging, “Daddy” hasn’t been part of it.

I swallow the trepidation and force my tongue to function.

“No adventures with the guy,” I say. “Public places on campus. His dorm or ours—fuck preferably ours.”

At least then I don’t have to worry about who else might show up. Given Hale’s track record I wouldn’t put it past him to talk Julian into an all out orgy with his puck buddies.

“Text me when you’re out with him. Every hour. If I have to call you to check in, I might murder him.”

A peek of Julian’s smile is enough to appease the pit in my stomach filled with worst case scenarios.

“Don’t have too much fun,” he says. “And keep you in the loop. What if I’m mid-blowjob or taking it up the ass?”

There's a playful note to his words, and I lightly tug his braid, eliciting an honest-to-god giggle.

"Smart ass," I grumble and hop off the bed. "And yeah. I'll be at the Den, so if he gives you any trouble ..."

Another blinding smile. "I'll be safe, Daddy."

There's a distinct flutter in my chest, one that makes my face feel warm.

This is going to be a long day.

"Malachi. Do you want to stock the new shipment while I man the front?"

There's some early 2000s soft rock song playing through the shop, with only the occasional soft scuff of shoes across the carpeted floor. A little rustle of vinyl sleeves as deft fingers flip through haphazardly.

One of my coworkers—some hockey jock because I can't seem to get away from them—leans against the counter while his eyes take a sweep around the room. His fingers tap out the rhythm of the song. Slow. Meticulous.

When I grunt my approval, he holds out a pair of headphones. Thick. Black. Corded. Something lent to us by the owner to make the busy work more bearable.

We don't banter or chat more than absolutely necessary.

I take the headphones and loop them around my neck, popping the cord into my phone jack.

There are dozens of playlists on my Spotify, ranging from moods to soundtracks,



collections from artists or songs I haven't listened to in God knows how long.

I'm feeling restless today. There's a tired ache in my eyes that burns, an unsettled feeling eating away at my insides.

Melancholy Autumn Vibes sounds fitting.

Cue the entire Evermore and Red albums, starting with 'tis the damn season.

An hour passes organizing CDs and vinyls, special requests stocked neatly under the front counter with names and numbers sticky noted to the covers. It's quick work, and when I'm down to the final handful, I slow down.

Autopilot makes my brain function in overdrive, and with the lack of messages on my phone giving me heart palpitations, I need to drag my wandering mind back to Earth.

Julian thinks I'm a sap for listening to Taylor Swift as religiously as I do. Says it's an 'odd juxtaposition' to the 'rock band groupie' vibe I give off. Because the way I choose to present myself is dictated by my taste in music.

In reality, I'll listen to anything if I connect to it. I'm not some one-dimensional story book character. I have layers.

Like an onion, but they're there.

The slow piano accompaniment of All Too Well dampens momentarily for a quick chirping to play through the headphones, and somehow I'm both relieved and filled with a new sense of anxiety.

Jules

Going for a walk with Z. Promise to be on best behavior.

That stupid tongue emoji doesn't instill a great deal of confidence.

Me

I don't want to hear about you bunny humping Hale.

Jules

Is that a threat or 'don't tell me about it'?

Me

Julian.

Jules

Don't worry, Daddy. Just a walk. Maybe kissing. Will report if we fog up the dorm.

Me

Touch my bed and Hale won't have a dick to fuck you with.

A slew of cheeky emojis comes through, and even though the one I send back is a ping pong paddle, it gets the message across.

Me

Be safe. Don't make me hurt anyone.

It's nearing ten by the time I lock up the shop and head back to the dorms. Almost eleven when I slot my key in the door and spot Julian lounging on his bed with the lights off.

He's got a coloring book in his lap and a box of crayons beside him.

When he looks up, he smiles and waves, but quickly goes back to his activity.

These are the moments I feel I'm best at. Offering support. Comfort. Just being a safe place for him to openly be himself. To ... regress, I think is the word?

I don't want to bother him, so I go about settling quietly. My clothes hit the basket at the foot of my bed, and I tug my hair free of the little rat tail I've been sporting.

I put my headphones back on the shelf that houses all of my music—CDs, vinyls, various merch items—and pull off a pair of wireless earbuds.

Sleep has never come easy. The nights are too quiet, even with a fan and air conditioner running. There's static and blank spaces; my brain refuses to shut off.

So, I cue up another playlist—something beat heavy—and spare Julian one last look before getting into the thick of my routine.

In the five minutes since I've been back, Jules has dozed off, the coloring book sliding off his lap and colored pencils dangerously close to the edge.

With a sigh, I gingerly pack up his things and place them on his desk. The comforter is bunched up at the end of the bed, and when I drag it over him he turns onto his side and hums contently.

"Dork," I mutter, but my smile is automatic.

I love Julian as deeply as humanly possible. It makes me a crabtastic jerk face at times, but even before finding out about this age play dynamic thing he's into, Jules has always been a little too trusting and open.

We spent a lot of time in the same group home, and protecting him came naturally to me.

It still does. Maybe even obsessively at times.

Is that a flaw? For his potential partners, maybe, but they can suck it. Julian was mine first, and they'll have to prove themselves something damn special for me to pass the reigns.

As I'm climbing into bed a bit later, sleep finally feels close at hand. A pop punk band I haven't heard in a while is drowning out the myriad of internal thoughts I can never turn off, but somehow my brain still stutters a few coherent ones out.

Like why the hell are there bright red boxer briefs—ones who's stink I am immediately assaulted by—on my mattress?

Ones that I know don't belong to Julian and sure as hell aren't mine.

I'll admit I can be a little unhinged at times, and this—quite frankly—might be one of them:

Taking Julian's phone, sifting through for a contact very uncreatively labeled "Z", texting the number to my phone, taking a picture of the godforsaken underwear, and smashing out a not-so-very-thought-out message to a certain boundary crossing hockey player.

Satisfied with myself, I sleep like shit.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

### Chapter Three

Zander

Unknown

Shove your cum-soaked underwear up your ass.

Blanchard.

In all fairness, I thought I'd tossed them in my bag, but Julian rushed me out so suddenly, I must have dropped them.

My fingers hover over the keys, and I could one hundred percent be the bigger person here: write out a genuine apology and smooth things out.

However, that's not very fun, and my day is wide open for entertainment.

Me

Would rather see a pic of it covering yours. Wearing another dude's cum is hot.

I don't expect an immediate reply because it is the ass crack of dawn, and I'm about to shred some ice, but I can't help myself when the little notification icon pops up.

Buzzkill

You're disgusting. Keep your nastiness away from Julian.

I cover my burgeoning smile with my hand, a sort of giddiness rising within me. The nickname is fitting. Good choice, me.

Me

Didn't hear any complaints last night. Dude is pretty nasty himself.

Buzzkill

Do you call all of your playthings 'dude', asshat?

Me

Nope. Some are gals. Pals. Buddies.

Buzzkill

Fuck off.

Me

You texted me, remember?

That's the end of that conversation apparently, and good thing, too, because Micky is giving me some serious murder eyes.

Whoops. Looks like I'm the only one not dressed yet.

I'm a winger, and though I didn't get much ice my freshmen year and only saw game

time a handful of times last year, I give practice my all each and every time.

At first, it was a desperate need to prove myself, to be seen by the team. By coach. But that desperation has faded.

Now, it's one hundred percent the adrenaline.

It's fucking fun squaring off with these guys. Even more-so when I get to play the other teams. Micky keeps me on my toes, forces me to stay engaged, and while everyone else is groaning through their buckets of sweat, I'm already stripped down and plotting out how to spend my afternoon.

I don't have class until eleven, so I've got two hours to kill.

"Hey."

Micky's hard tone cuts through my bubble of excitement.

I cock my head, and his stone-eyed stare softens. "Coach wants to have a chat with you before you leave."

With a roll of my shoulders, I give my roommate a thumbs up, which earns me an eye roll.

My track pants are comfy and my hoodie is cozy, and I'm all set to go out and do something when I step foot in coach's office and feel every individual drop of blood in my body dip toward freezing.

Coach Archer has an air about him. Something stern and dangerous, but not the kind of danger that I like to straddle. The man is akin to an entire den of vipers.

Usually that energy is tightly caged off the ice, but right now I'm sensing some neon flashing warning signs.

What the heck could I have done? Haven't missed practice. Haven't been late. Okay, I've been a little space-casey thanks to my texts with Julian and Blanchard, but still. I'm present and working my ass off.

"Wanted to see me, coach?"

If looks could kill, I would be six feet deep in a heartbeat.

"Why is this the first I'm hearing about an academic probation?"

The quick slash of words makes me wince.

Probably because I got the letter in the summer and stashed it as far back in my dresser drawer as possible in hopes of forgetting it exists.

And I kind of did.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," I say, holding my hands up in as placating of a manner as I can. Friendly, easy smile. "My GPA just dipped a little close to the cutoff line."

Coach's nostrils flare, and I don't think I'm making this any better for myself.

"I've got it under control."

He raises his brow. Wrong answer apparently. "Do you?"

Hockey is all I'm really here for. Not because I see a future in the majors, but because it's one of the few things in life that brings me joy. That excites me.



My first year, I was able to float by on required courses. Second year, I was really big on my undeclared major status and ‘playing the field’.

This year, my counselor said my scholarship would be on the line if I didn’t pick a degree.

A pretty simple Creative Arts degree sounded easy enough. I had a couple miscellaneous courses under my belt already.

Turns out the Music Theory class I’d taken and flunked last semester did bad things for both my GPA and my degree plans.

“Two things I don’t tolerate on this team are lying and secrets,” Coach says. “Your teammates and I need to be able to trust you when I send you out to the ice.”

“I didn’t want to worry anyone.” Which is partially true. ‘Anyone’ was just mostly myself. Thinking about losing my spot is a real bumner. I don’t like being bummed if I can help it.

“Unfortunately for you, Hale, that’s exactly what a team does. I’ll be grabbing bi-weekly progress reports. If you don’t have passing marks, you don’t play the next game.”

My groan is mostly internal, but the piercing stare tells me it was at least a little bit external, too. Not that he isn’t being totally reasonable, but c’mon. Just let me flunk and flail in peace.

I end up spending most of my dead time in the quad.

There’s a big ole willow tree between two of the buildings—and I mean big like a D&D monster in disguise—that calls to me.

Lying beneath it and listening to the every day chatter, the rustle of leaves and scuff of shoes, feeling the wind roll across my face, it's all the perfect recipe for a much needed nap.

Only I'm halfway to dreamland when my phone buzzes in my pocket.

Julian

Save me from the boredom that is English Composition.

Me

Sadly. Can't. Music Theory is about to kick my ass for a second time. Music is supposed to be fun.

When my phone lights up a minute later, the smile that sprouts wilts in an instant.

Buzzkill

Why am I not surprised you'd fuck up something as simple as enjoying music??

First of all, rude. I can enjoy music. I just don't enjoy analyzing it.

Second, double rude because I sent that text to Julian. Not his nosy, bossy roommate/boyfriend-lite.

Me

What are you? His shadow?

Buzzkill

I'm the friend keeping him from losing marks over texting in class.

Me

Oh, but if you get marks, it's fine?

Buzzkill

I can ace this class with my eyes closed. Trouble or not. Now fuck off. I've confiscated his phone.

Me

Wow. That is some unhealthy lack of boundaries you've got there. Gonna keep him by the balls while you're busy riding his ass?

Several minutes pass with no response.

Okay, Hale. Too far.

Or he just really has no interest in talking to me.

Not that it should matter, because he wasn't who I set out to talk to in the first place.

I tip my head back and close my eyes, letting the breeze roll over me and wipe the day's frustration away with it.

There's nothing I can do about any of it now except do better going forward. Ace my class—err, well, pass it at least. Don't engage in idle banter with someone who surely wants me to conspicuously fall off the edge of a cliff.

Relax. Keep my head down. Make it through one mini disaster at a time.

In all fairness, this was not my fault.

Not directly.

Okay— yes —I was probably— definitely —more careless than I intended to be.

I was doing my due diligence and trying to be semi-prepared for class. Not like I was trying to culture myself because a certain someone insinuated I knew jack all about music.

So what if I was skipping through the CD at record speed. All the songs were boring, and I just wanted to find one that didn't suck. How was I supposed to know the damn thing would jam and break and I'd have to ask a store clerk for help?

There was also no way in hell for me to know that the exact store clerk I'd get would be Malachi freaking Blanchard .

Fool around with his best friend and suddenly I can't escape the guy.

How many people are going to look at me today like they want me to eat shit and die?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

### Chapter Four

#### Malachi

It's been one day, and I'm already sick and fucking tired of Zander Hale's existence in my life.

From his god awful flirty texts to getting yelled at by Julian for interrupting their conversation, I've had my fill of the man for one lifetime let alone just today.

Yet here he is, standing by one of the store's CD players with the mechanism smoking and stuttering. He's got wide eyes like a deer caught in headlights, holding a pair of headphones in one hand and repeatedly jamming the stop button with the other.

"I didn't realize there were over thirty tracks," he says. "I figured it'd reach the end and loop, but it didn't, and I got a little ..."

"Carried away?" I supply as the vein in my temple pulses.

"Bingo." He aims finger guns of all things at me, and never more have I wanted to add 'murderer' to my resume.

Not that the CD player is a big deal. They're a dime a dozen and easy to replace.

Doesn't make his presence any less annoying.

I walk over and open the compartment, pulling the CD out to see the back scratched all to hell. With a heavy sigh, I place it in the pocket of my apron to take it to the buffer in the back and see if it's salvageable.

We have display records for a reason, but it's still disheartening.

"Did you listen to any of them all the way through?" I find myself asking as the irritation forms an itch in my throat.

"Um ..." Zander picks up the jewel case, tracing a finger along the track list until his face breaks out into a smile. "But Daddy I Love Him."

There isn't a deadpan strong enough to hide the infuriating headache this man is causing me.

"Oh, I liked Fresh Out The Slammer. I Can Fix Him was good, too. I didn't listen to more than thirty seconds of any of the others, honestly. Felt a little monotonous."

"Monotonous?" I'm supposed to be on my best behavior at work, but would anyone blame me if I laid him out right here?

He's looking at me with a wide grin that doesn't fit the situation, but his expression morphs as his brows dip.

"Don't tell me Mr. Doom and Gloom is a Swiftie?"

I cross my arms, feeling my skin prickle. "I can't enjoy excellent songwriting?"

He seesaws his hand. "I feel like 'excellent' is a stretch."

"No wonder you failed Music Theory. You have the taste of a caveman."

Zander gapes, but his grin quickly returns. “You are a Swiftie.”

“And you are a disaster on legs.”

A sharp bark of laughter pierces the room, and my coworker—the hockey player—walks past me and claps Zander on the shoulder.

“He isn’t wrong, Halefire. Haven’t you ever owned a CD player?”

“I have had an iPhone for quite literally my entire life.”

Listening to the two of them bicker sets off the dinging bell in my brain that of course they’re friendly with each other. They play on the same damn sports team.

“I didn’t know you and Blanchard worked together, Micky.”

I pop back into the conversation as two sets of eyes turn to me.

“Yes, because I should know you have some kind of hate-boner fetish for a guy I speak a handful of words to a day.”

I quirk my brow. Hate-boner ?

Honestly, Micky and Zander could pass for brothers. Both blond. Similar fit builds. Zander is taller, almost an entire head above Micky. Different eyes. Micky’s are blue. Zander’s are a rich hazel.

“Blanchard is Julian’s roommate.”

Micky’s eyes flicker to mine with an air of understanding. “Ah. The underwear incident.”

Is that what we're calling it now? The offending material is in the back of my dresser drawer, washed and ready to be returned because I'm a decent human being.

"Come with me to my dorm after shift," I say before the gross weight of the words makes me rethink them. "Grab your nasty jock so I don't have to touch them again."

"Will Julian be there?"

"Probably." Unfortunately.

He shifts his weight from side to side, like he's weighting his options. Which only pisses me off more.

"Yeah, I'll stop in." Another face-splitting grin. "Might kidnap him, though. Micky has a virtual cafe date, so I could use the company."

I've been told I wear my aggressive emotions on my face, and the way Micky chokes back a laugh and squeezes his eyes shut, I'd say I probably look downright murderous.

"One condition," I say, stepping forward and forcing Zander's attention on me. "You're going to listen to all thirty-one songs on TTPD and write up a thorough analysis of the lyrics and storytelling."

That overconfident grin falters.

I hold my ground. "Good practice for your class. Which I aced as a first year."

The little gears in his head appear to be working so hard into overtime that there's nearly visible smoke coming out of his ears.



“You are diabolical.”

I’m a fucking masochist is what I am.

If there was an award for eye-fucking, these two numskulls would be tied for it.

I have never in my life wanted two people to kiss and get it over with more than I do watching Zander’s eyes shift to Julian’s flirty smile every ten seconds.

They’re only pretending to acknowledge I’m still here, when I can guarantee they’re both thinking about much dirtier things.

How the hell did I become a third wheel in my own damn room?

I fish the underwear out of my drawer and chuck them at the oaf, the material hitting him in the chest just as his eyes wander again.

“Wha—Oh. Thanks.”

That’s only the entire reason I invited you over in the first place.

It’s the time of night that Julian usually curls or huddles under his covers watching anime.

I can see that part of him—the Little that thrives on routine—warring with the side that very blatantly wants to get laid.

They’re talking now. Zander rests his hip against Julian’s bed-frame. Julian leans closer from his perch on the mattress.

There’s the slightest flutter of Julian’s eyes mid-conversation. A glance in my

direction. His fingers play with a loose string on his pajama bottoms. Repetitively. Anxiously. Another look thrown my way.

He wants permission. To break routine.

I don't pretend to understand the appeal of this dynamic, but even I can't deny the swell of emotion that fills my chest.

It almost feels like ... pride? Relief? Not just that Jules trusts me with this part of himself, but that he actively wants me included even in situations that don't call for it.

"You know the rules," I say softly. Calmly. Firm in a way that draws Julian's undivided attention.

He stares back. Blinks. Nods almost imperceptible. Shifts his focus from me to the man failing to appear as if he isn't just as desperate for my best friend as said friend is for him.

It's honestly quite difficult to watch.

So, why haven't I stopped?

Julian climbs to his knees, pulls his long hair back into a messy ponytail, and grabs Zander by the neck until their lips connect.

I'm sure I've got papers to write and tests to study for, but my feet are rooted. My eyes won't slide even a millimeter away from the scene before me.

Zander secures his arms around Julian's waist, eyes falling shut almost in slow motion. His shoulders rise and fall with each swipe of their tongues into each other's mouths.

He grips the hem of Julian's over-sized t-shirt, fingers curling beneath and latching onto his skin. The shivers that break out are all too visible, a full body shudder.

"Getting better," Julian pops away with a laugh. "D—Mal says he'd prefer if we hooked up here. So ..."

The look he sends me is pure feigned innocence.

Not that he's lying, but he's ... teasing? Pushing the perimeter of our boundaries?

"By all means," I say, uncrossing my arms and forcing my feet toward my own bed. "I'll drown you out with Sleep Token."

There's brief recognition in Zander's eyes, and maybe for a second I think his taste in music isn't completely abysmal, but it's there and gone when Julian steals his focus back.

I turn away, grab my earbuds off the shelf and shove them in ... but I don't connect them to my phone. In fact, I stand there listening to the rustle of clothes and hushed voices until my body aches from the prolonged position.

Under the covers, I squeeze my eyes shut tight. In my makeshift darkness, Zander's bare back heaves as he drapes across Julian, pinning him down. Each rock of his hips makes the bed creak and groan.

There's hitched breathing, and my mind supplies the image of large hands wrapping around his partner's airway. A pressure but not a restriction.

My body responds. Flushes. My boxers tighten and dampen.

I'm not embarrassed to admit that it's been ... a while since I've had anyone in my

bed. Since anyone has looked at me with heat in their eyes and unbridled arousal in their touch.

I am embarrassed to admit I touch my cock to the sound of their gasps and grunts. Julian's high-pitched pleas that he tries to muffle behind his palm. Zander's ragged pants as the slap of skin rings unabashed through the otherwise silence of the room.

Shit. I forgot to turn my fan on. I never lay down without it.

Just have to hope Julian is too lost in the pleasure to notice or care. To realize I'm listening.

To my best friend and his fuck-buddy have sex.

Christ, I'm pathetic.

I'm hard and wet and fucking throbbing with each garbled moan that comes from Hale's throat.

They could be doing any number of things beneath the sheets. An endless sea of possibilities as vast as my imagination.

"Gonna come." Hale's voice is crystal clear. Spoken just above a whisper. Deliberate.

Or maybe that's just what I tell myself as my own orgasm washes over me. As it crests so hard and fast that I bite down on my lip to draw blood. That I tense every muscle in my body so the tremble that rocks me isn't as apparent.

Not that anyone is paying attention to me.

I don't let myself bask in their afterglow. In the buzz of my own sweet release.

I switch on my playlist, some hard rock song by SkyDxddy . God of War .

It drowns out whatever is happening behind me. In a bed I had no business eavesdropping on.

Guilt gnaws at the edge of my consciousness.

Sleep has never claimed me easier, and that only makes it worse.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

### Chapter Five

Zander

Holding two cock's in my hand, I couldn't help but feel like I was being watched. And not by the bright eyed, handsome man lying beneath me.

A quick glance to the side just shows a lump beneath Blanchard's covers. Still.

I'm imagining things.

The thrill that shoots up my spine as the feeling returns—as there's a moan too deep to come from the man I'm frothing against—is all too real.

It hits me at an incredible rate—the orgasm that is—and I end up using my own cum as lube to finish Julian off.

I should be more focused, but something about this entire night has me jumbled. There's something in the air, some unspoken energy charged between Julian and Malachi that piques my curiosity.

There's a challenge in the mystery.

And I'm a sucker for a challenge.

“Babe,” Julian whines as my fingers brush his inner thigh. He wiggles in my hold, pressing closer.

I flex my hand across the outline at the seam of his jeans, heat blooming across his sweet, pale cheeks.

“Hey now. Let’s keep it PG in the quad.” Micky whacks my ankle with the back of his hand, eyes firmly focused on the notebook in front of him.

He’s got these thick, plastic frames sitting on his nose that keep sliding down and reminding me of one of those grumpy librarians from high school.

“And I assume what you’re writing on that paper is PG, hmm, Donovan?”

His ears turn pink, and this time he punches me in the chest. Micky could lay me out if he wanted to, but instead he just knocks a bit of the wind out of me.

Michael Donovan—The North Haven Ravens’ co-captain—is a secret smut writer. I came across his fanfiction pen-name when he forgot to log out of his AO3 account while letting me borrow his laptop last year.

Not that I’d ever out him, but teasing? That’s fair game.

“Ooh, do we read dirty fiction in this circle?” Julian turns to face me, lacing his fingers through mine where they rest on his shoulder.

“Can’t say I have of my own free will,” I say, and Julian’s face falls a little. “Nothing wrong with it, though.”

The smile returns. “Mal has a couple fandoms he dabbles in—reading and consuming, not so much writing.”

Ah. It isn’t very often we go long in conversation without the roommate being mentioned. It’s what happens when you’re that close to someone, I suppose. A lot

like how Micky brings up Parker.

“So, you and Blanchard,” I hedge, stroking Julian’s arm in slow, even circles. “The two of you ever been ... ya know ... intimate?”

Julian looks up at me and blinks slow, resting his cheek on my shoulder. “When we were teens we’d kiss and touch here and there, but it was never sexual. It was more like wrapping up in your security blanket. A safe place away from all the hurt.”

“Were things that bad for you?”

He shakes his head. “Not as bad as it was for Mal. We basically grew up together in the group home, and Mal sort of took on a parental role to the rest of us.”

A brief hint of discomfort clouds his expression, and he pulls his knees to his chest, tucking himself into my side.

“He took the brunt of every beating, every punishment. I honest to god thought they’d left him for dead once.

I dragged him to the bathroom on my own and nearly drowned him trying to clean him up. ”

He chuckles, but it’s humorless.

“I know he comes across abrasive,” he says, squeezing our joined fingers. “But that’s who he always had to be. To survive. He’s secretly a puppy dog. I promise.”

Now I feel a little bad for feeding into the rumors that go around about him.

Malachi Blanchard is bad news.



Blanchard is a hot-head.

Dangerous delinquent.

“But no,” he goes on. “We’ve never dated. Or been romantic. Or slept together. Or even hooked up in a traditional sense. He takes care of me, and I make sure he doesn’t self-destruct.”

I catch Micky’s smile out of the corner of my eye. He must be thinking about Parker, who was his best friend long before they were boyfriends.

“Sorry to bring up bad thoughts,” I say and place a kiss on Julian’s temple.

He shakes his head. “They aren’t. Mal needs more people in his corner. He has trouble letting anyone in, and if sharing our story makes you a little more inclined not to hate his guts ... I’ll take it.”

I bury my nose in the mess of hair at the top of his head. “I don’t hate him.” If anything, I’ve always found him intriguing, but a little out of reach.

Micky taps his pencil on my shoe. “Hate-boner.”

Julian giggles into the crook of my neck. “That’s exactly how I would describe their pissing matches.”

“Let me clarify.” I playfully pinch his side, and he pouts up at me with his bottom lip puffed out dramatically. “Blanchard hates my guts, but I don’t have anything against the guy. Other than he’s fun to rile up.”

“I’m fun, too, right?” Julian smiles and places an open-mouthed kiss to my collarbone. His fingers feel around for the hem of my shirt and slip beneath.

What were we talking about again?

The bark of the tree we're sitting against digs into the exposed skin of my back as Julian tugs my shirt up. Not off to make me indecent—we are in public after all—but room for his hands to splay across my shoulder blades.

There's the sound of rustling grass and a muttered, "that's my cue" followed by retreating footsteps.

But I'm laser focused.

Julian and I are ... having fun. We haven't labeled whatever this is.

A relationship?

Casual sex?

A friends-with-benefits situation?

We do what feels good, and right now his weight hovering over my lap feels phenomenal.

"I think," Julian whispers against my lips. "He might actually like you."

"Who?" I'm too zoned in on the way our mouths move together, on Julian's tongue stroking my own, to follow his train of thought.

He chuckles. "Mal."

We separate, but Julian keeps close like he doesn't plan for us to stay that way.

“The way he huffs and puffs when I bring you up, and the way you bicker about Taylor Swift of all things. Bold, by the way. Daddy is serious about his music.”

My libido is still in charge of my brain, so I shake my head to clear some of the fog.

“I’m not sure if I want to question you on Blanchard liking me”—which he absolutely does not—“Or the fact that you just unironically called him Daddy .”

Julian presses his lips together, brows dipping down. “Don’t worry about the second part,” he says with a dry chuckle. “It’s an inside joke.”

“Which brings us back to Blanchard liking me is about as likely as Ellis winning a face off against Micky. Which is statistically improbable, alright?”

“Malachi,” Julian says, extracting himself from my arms and planting himself back on the ground, “wants to believe that he’s better on his own. That if he doesn’t give anyone the power to hurt him, then they won’t.”

Julian is earnest. Caring. Fiercely loyal.

Safe.

“What I’m trying to say is,” Julian huffs out an exasperated breath. “He’s a great guy to have in your corner. If you ever get in a bind ... Mal will protect you. Even if he thinks you’re annoying and hogging his best friend.”

It’s sweet. The way he wants us to get along.

“I’m pretty sure if I took a puck to the face he’d just stand there all broody and refuse to call an ambulance.”

Julian rolls his eyes and pushes at my chest, climbing to his feet and offering me a hand. “Stubborn.”

“Seems you have a type,” I say with a wink.

That’s all it takes to turn us back into a tussle of tongues and teeth, ravishing each other against the willow like the rest of the world ceases to exist.

These are the moments that I thrive in.

Messy. Passionate.

Wild.

Asher Roth can drink me under the table on his worst day, and while he may have called me out to fight a case of the blues, this is far from one of them.

With my first Music Theory paper due and my spot in pre-season on the line, I could use a little black out mind numb.

I’ve lost count of how man shots I’ve downed, but I know Asher is at least double. There’s a voice in the back of my mind telling me that he’ll be in no condition to get us back to campus.

Another voice tells me that the girls at this party are really fucking pretty, and I should see how many flavors of lip gloss I can rack up.

Spoiler alert, I forgot to count, but my mouth currently tastes like blue raspberry watermelon.

And I have completely lost sight of Asher.

His phone goes straight to voicemail, and I'm not surprised because he leaves the thing chronically uncharged.

Me

Ash is AWOL. Booze and Babes.

Two seconds later.

Ellis

This is why I have him air tagged. Thx. Need a ride?

Yes.

Me

Nope. I've got it.

I most certainly do not, but my feet are already in motion, so why not let them say their piece?

I have not a damn clue where I am, but I know that it's almost 2AM and the street lamps are all starting to blur together.

Thanks to the nighttime air and the solid hour on my feet wandering the city, most of my inebriation has cleared.

I'm still buzzed all to hell, though. I can't hold a single thought for too long without feeling the beginnings of a migraine.

Eventually, my steps come to a halt, and a familiar heaviness settles on my shoulders.

Find a safe place to crash.

There's an alley tucked into the side of a building to my left, and it looks as safe as any other spot to wait out the effects of the alcohol.

Normally—and I say that meaning maybe two or three times in recent history—I'd curl up in the deepest recess of the alley until I'm able to get my bearings.

However, as I'm lowering myself to the ground with spectacularly uncoordinated movements, a ladder attached to the side of the building draws my curiosity.

It happens in the span of seconds, a blink and miss it moment. First, I'm looking at the rusted, janky metal, then suddenly the rough bite is scrapping my palms and my feet come into contact with patchy roof paneling.

The wind whips at my face and chapped lips—still holding the faint taste of a fruit whose name I can't place—and I close my eyes to focus on the light caress.

When I open them, my legs are dangling over the edge. The roof is slanted, and I'm sprawled on my back staring up at the star-speckled sky. My vision swims, floaters as a precursor to what is bound to be one nasty as shit hangover.

There's not a chance in hell any of my limbs obey my commands to get back to the ground.

Dozing off here wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. At least as long as I wake up before morning when the shop owner most definitely calls the cops.

A sign a few feet away captures my attention. Black, white, and sprinkles of orange.

The Den.

Why does that sound familiar?

A sea of records pop up behind my closed eyelids.

The record store.

Blanchard.

I bet he wouldn't hesitate to push me right off this damn roof.

Julian.

Seeing me up here would scare the shit out of him. That is one thought I am one hundred percent certain of.

I know where I am. I should call Micky. Sure, he'll yell and lecture me. But at the very least he won't let me fall.

Or push me.

My thumb hovers over my contact list, drawn to one name.

If you ever get in a bind, Mal will protect you.

My heart pounds as I glance over the edge of the roof.

Fifty/Fifty he scoffs and leaves me to my own natural consequences.

My eyes close, too heavy to hold themselves open anymore.

I put the phone to my ear and listen to the line trill.

My mind is lost to the haze of exhaustion. I'm seconds away from losing my grip on the phone and listening to it smack against the pavement.

Someone grunts.

Silence.

My imagination.

A throat clears.

“Hale?”

I try to open my mouth, but a pained sound through my teeth is all I can manage.

Who let me get this hammered?

My concentration falters.

Why was I trying to stay awake again?



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

### Chapter Six

Malachi

Insomnia has its advantages, I suppose. If one of those advantages is a call from a human wrecking ball during the witching hour.

I wasn't going to answer, but if the jackass were in trouble and Julian found out I ignored him? What a pain in the ass that would be.

"Hale?" I'm met with repeated silence, and isn't that just what I need? A middle of the night butt dial.

That's when I notice the breathing. Heavy. Rapid.

Because that's somehow better? Let me add listening to this man get off for a second time to my spank bank.

There's a sharp intake of breath, a pained hiss.

"Zander?" I bolt upright and swing my legs to the side.

What little bits of sleep had collected at the corners of my eyes gets hastily swiped away.

He doesn't reply, only groans, and my first instinct is to wake up Julian. But I don't know what kind of trouble this knucklehead has gotten himself into.

Surely nothing Julian needs to be involved with.

“C’mon, jackass,” I mumble, fumbling around as quietly as possible for a pair of pants and a t-shirt.

“Fuck you,” his words come out in a slur, and I can practically smell the alcohol through the phone.

I should have guessed. Classic jock.

I’m sure calling me was a mistake. A slip of the thumb in his inebriated state. I’d call someone who most likely gives a shit about him on a personal level, but short of Julian I don’t have that kind of contact with anyone in his circle.

There’s Micky, but we barely exchange words at work, let alone phone numbers.

“Fuck you, too,” I whisper as I shove my feet into a pair of sneakers and snag my keys off the hook by the door. “Tell me where the hell you are.”

“Rude shop.”

“That makes no sense.”

Zander makes a gurgling sound, and I think he might puke, but then all he does is clear his throat and take in a deep, audible breath.

“Record shop,” he says slowly. “You’re rude.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“The silver streaks in your hair are pretty.”

I pause, a foot catching on a crack in the concrete, and absently run my fingers through the strands of red and silver.

“You are wasted.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“Look at us agreeing on something.”

His response is a quiet hum followed by a stretch of silence.

“Zander.”

“Hm?”

“Making sure you didn’t pass out on me.”

A low chuckle through the line causes a warmth to bloom in my chest.

“Let’s hope not,” he says. “That would be a painful fall.”

I’m still a few minutes from the shop, and a warning tingle in my brain has me picking up the pace.

“I don’t think your coach would like you breaking any bones.”

He scoffs. “Coach is ready to bench me for the whole damn season over that stupid music class.”

“If it’s so stupid, why are you taking it?”

Sometimes I can be pushy and snobby when it comes to music, but I know not everyone shares my obsessive passion for it. Especially people like Zander Hale.

There's no answer, and just when I think he might have passed out, he lets out a quiet huff.

"Because I thought it would be easy," he says, voice laced in disbelief. "Art is subjective, right? Wrong. Turns out I'm just not deep enough to understand it."

Normally, I'd agree. In my experience, most jocks are pretty one dimensional in the creativity department, but I've seen Zander put in the effort. I've caught him with Julian in our dorm more than once with headphones in making chicken scratch notes in a journal.

"You just need to find something that speaks to you. Deconstruct it. Boom, you'll learn how you connect to art and how to go about interpreting something else."

A long pause. "That is a lot of words, and my head is spinning too much to understand them."

Right. No philosophical teachings for the drunk hockey player.

The Den is dark, locked, and void of company when I arrive.

"Where are you?"

Something rustles over the mic, a smack of lips and a groan. "Told you already."

"Unless you're invisible, you aren't here."

He grunts. Huffs. "Look up."

I pinch my brows. “What—Fucking shitsticks, Hale!”

There he is, perched on the edge of the roof above the entrance, gaze locked on mine with a lazy salute.

“Could you lend me a hand?”

“I can lend you a foot up your ass.”

“Hm. Not my kink. But if you help me, I’ll try anything.”

After this, we’re having a serious discussion on how to hold our liquor and to not accept random sexual propositions from people when we are too blasted to give consent.

I might have no interest in banging him, but that doesn’t mean someone else who could come across him wouldn’t.

Removing a drunk-off-his-ass hockey player from a roof in one piece is no easy feat. It involves a lot of strength and nimble maneuvering, but we manage all the way up until we’re climbing down the ladder.

As soon as I get a foot on the ground, the metal ladder creaks, followed by a curse as Zander misses a rung. I reach out to steady him at the same time that he decides to give up on the slow and steady and fucking jumps the rest of the way down.

Not with any warning, because what kind of decent human being warns someone before dumping all of their body weight on them?

I grab onto his waist so he doesn’t fall flat on his ass—or on top of me—but the force has us both stumbling until my back hits the brick wall behind us.

“Fuck.” I drop my hands to grab the back of my head, which took a pretty good bounce on the brick.

Zander turns—clumsy and off-center—and crowds into my already minimal space. He leans his face close to mine, smacking his palm on the wall to keep from falling over.

“Shit. Sorry.” When he tries to push off, his body sags in response, and I latch onto him again to keep him upright.

“Dammit. Stop moving for a minute.”

He drops his head to my shoulder, and we both take a moment to catch our breath.

The pain in my back is just enough to distract me from the warmth of Zander’s breath dancing along my neck and his fingers digging into my sides.

“Are you okay?” I rasp once I find my voice.

His pained moan hits my skin, followed by a slurred, “not even a little.”

Despite how badly I want to move, I keep us both still.

“You’re going to need a hospital’s worth of Tylenol and water to get through tomorrow’s hangover.”

“Honestly,” he grumbles, slow and quiet, “I’m surprised you’re letting me see tomorrow.”

“I’m feeling generous.”

He laughs, and it shakes his whole body. “Thanks, Daddy.”

My skin prickles, then lights on fire. Heat rushes through my body, filling my cheeks and other parts of me.

What the hell?

Awkward as it is, I always get a hit of satisfaction when Julian addresses me like that.

But this? Zander’s ragged voice and full body weight on top of me?

Something stirs in my chest, and I use all of my will power to bury it down as deep as it will go.

“Shut up, puckhead.”

I don’t know what Julian has told him, or if he overheard us sometime, but he’s drunk enough it likely won’t matter in the morning.

“We need to sober you up.” I slip a hand between us to press on his chest, not hard, but a nudge to get him into motion.

He grunts, plants his hands on the wall above my head, and pushes himself up. With him hovering over me now we’re no longer touching.

The cool, night air brushes my heated skin, and with each breath it slowly returns to normal.

The lack of contact clears my head of all the nonsense the last few minutes filled it with, and as Zander regains the balance to stand without the support of the wall, I hold my hand out.

He stares at me with an unfocused gaze and frowns.

“Phone,” I say with a sigh. “So I can call you a ride.”

His mouth opens in a silent “Oh”. He pats his pockets, fumbles to grasp and pull the device out, and sets it in my hand.

It clicks open upon contact, and I’m glad I don’t have to struggle getting the passcode out of him.

“Who has a car and would be able to come get you?”

The cogs in his brain turn, and a multitude of emotions play over his features, difficult to read in the dark.

While he puzzles it out, I scroll through his messages for an obvious choice, and pause at a familiar conversation.

Buzzkill

TSMWEL is a masterpiece. I refuse to accept this slander. Try again.

The jerk had left me on read with a laughing emoji, and I hadn’t bothered to follow up because someone who calls a deeply emotionally cutting song “boring and repetitive” doesn’t deserve acknowledgment.

Buzzkill? Really?

I’ll be sure to give him hell about that once he’s sober.

His roommate’s name pops up, and one look at Zander tells me he’s losing his fight



with the alcohol. So, I tap the name and hit the call button.

It rings five or six times, and when I'm sure it's going to go to voicemail, a tired voice comes through. "Zander? It's like five in the morning. What the hell?"

"Um, hey Micky. It's Malachi."

"Malachi? Did Z pass out with you and Julian? Need me to come drag him back?"

He doesn't sound surprised. How often does Hale act out like this?

"Yes to him needing a ride. No to the location. We're at The Den."

"Of all places?"

"Ask your friend once he can think straight. He's fucking wasted."

Micky groans, and I can hear him shuffling around while cursing under his breath.

"Shit. I can be there in five minutes. You okay to stay with him until I do?"

"Yeah, I've got him."

As soon as the words pass my lips, Zander's eyes land on me. He droops a bit to the side, but the wall catches him, and now his chest brushes my arm as he watches me.

"I don't promise he'll be in once piece, though," I say, but even I can tell the threat falls flat.

Micky hangs up so he can drive, and when I hand the phone back, Zander wordlessly slips it back into his pocket.

We both watch each other in the darkness, Zander's eyes hazy and unfocused. He frowns and wets his lips, dragging the bottom one between his teeth.

"If you've got something to say, just say it."

His eyes drift away from my face, seeming to gaze off into his own thoughts.

"Thank you," he says after a few minutes of struggling to find his words. "I'm sorry."

I shake my head, unable to draw up any anger or frustration.

"Don't worry about it." I look up, and even though Zander is barely a couple inches taller than me, I'm slouched, so he seems bigger than normal.

"Can I be in on the joke?"

The words throw me off hard. "Huh?"

"Julian. He said the Daddy thing is an inside joke." A little half smile spreads across his lips. "Can I call you Daddy too?"

Absolutely the fuck not.

My heart nearly pounds out of my chest, and for what reason?

When Julian says it, it's sweet. When Zander says it ...

Fuck. It turns me on.

I fix him with a glare and curb us in another direction. This conversation is getting red taped.

“Why did you call me and not Micky in the first place?”

He doesn't seem phased about the change in topic, just leans forward until I grip onto his bicep afraid he'll fall.

“Julian said that you're safe,” he whispers the words across the top of my head. “I needed that.”

We spend the rest of our time in silence. Me steadying him. Zander still and breathing slow until I realize he's asleep.

When Micky comes, I help get him into the passenger seat, and once the door is shut Micky turns to me and thumbs to the back.

“Need a ride?”

No. I need time to clear my head. To remind myself that the last thing I need is to find a single fucking thing about Zander Hale attractive.

“I think I'll walk,” I say, stuffing my hands in my pockets. “May as well get some coffee while I'm out.”

Micky smiles tight and gives a curt nod. “Thanks for looking out for him.”

When they drive away, I find myself sagging against the wall and screwing my eyes shut.

Why?

Why does it have to be Zander Hale—of all people—to awaken something like this inside me?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

### Chapter Seven

Zander

The world comes into focus littered with little black spots. I turn my head to clear dream from reality and—yup—vomit rises in my throat as my vision swims.

“Welcome back, sunshine.”

I know that sarcastic deadpan anywhere.

“Tess,” I groan, keeping my eyes firmly sealed shut. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

She hums, the sound a little more animated, and something cool and wet touches my forehead.

“Got into town last night. Micky invited me over. Asked me to make sure you don’t choke on your own vomit while he’s in class.”

Oof. That tracks.

My memory isn’t entirely shot, but because of the pounding pain in my head I can only really access snapshots and audio tidbits. Once I get the hangover under control, the rest should come back to me.

“I’ve got some migraine relief and the mother-load of water waiting for you once you

feel up for it.”

I press down on the rag draped over my eyes. “I’ll take it now and get it over with.”

Tessa helps me prop up on a couple of pillows, and with my eyes still avoiding the light, she hands me some pills that I promptly down with the entire glass of water.

“Fuck me,” I grumble and pull the covers up over my face.

I need to sleep this damn shit off.

“Did you know you talk in your sleep?”

C’mon, Tess.

“Do I? I’m sure the pancake monster dreams were a joy to hear about.”

Another hum, this one more melodic. “No pancake monsters as far as I’m aware.”

Why does she have to sound so entertained?

“If you’re going to accuse me of something, I’d like to point out that I was too drunk for anything I said or did to be incriminating. I was quite literally out of my mind.”

The bed dips beside me, the blanket gets pulled away, and Tessa’s fingers card through my hair.

“It sounds like drunk you might be a little kinky.” Her voice is light and playful, but it immediately triggers a memory of last night.

Malachi’s hard, gray stare and how it set a kaleidoscope of butterflies free in my

stomach.

I asked if I could call him Daddy.

I yank the comforter back above my head, and Tessa's bright laugh fills the room.

"Oh, you sweet, goofy, airhead."

I blindly smack my hand out from beneath the covers, but that only makes the laughter worse.

"How about I run down to the kitchen and find something you can stomach? Let you marinate in your misery?"

I would glare if I didn't think it would make me puke.

Left to my own devices, every embarrassing detail of the previous night comes back to me, and I don't know how I'm ever going to live it down.

Julian is going to be pissed I let it slip that I know about their little joke. Blanchard is going to have ammunition on me for as long as Julian and I are hooking up.

He'll be insufferable.

When my head clears enough that I feel I can look at my phone and not lose all the acid in my stomach, I feel for it under my pillow and turn the brightness all the way down.

A few messages from Ellis and Asher. A very threatening "shut up and get well" from Micky.

It's Julian's name that makes me smile, even if it irritates my headache.

Julian

Mal told me you aren't feeling well. Take it easy. Maybe if you're up for it, I'll stop by after class.

Me

Do I get a magic, feel better kiss?

Julian

Look who's alive! Idk. Depends on if you've been acquainted with a toothbrush.

Me

I'm not contagious. And I'll empty a whole tube of toothpaste and a pack of gum if it gets me your company.

Julian

Classy. We'll see. You might have to settle for some cuddles.

Me

Sounds perfect. It's a date.

"You look like shit," Micky says when he comes back to the room a couple of hours later.

Tess and I are sitting on my bed, scrolling through TikTok, and I give him my best deadpan expression.

“You left me to the wolves.”

Micky chuckles and throws his bag down by his desk. “That wolf knows more about hangovers than any college student known to man.”

“When you’ve got three musicians crammed into a camper van, you learn to deal with the post-show booze fest,” Tessa quips.

Ah, yes. Band Manager Tess. Don’t ask me how she managed to fall into the roll of babysitting an indie punk band playing dive bars around the country, but she’s made it her personal mission to “keep them on the right track.”

It’s fitting, I suppose. She gives off major Mama Bear vibes.

“Well thank you for saving me from a day of living in a bathroom full of jocks with no aim.”

Tessa laughs and taps her phone on her thigh. “I needed a break from Haven and the boys anyway.” She says it lightly, but there’s an obvious tension in her smile. “What I need now is for my favorite boy to get his ass over here and give me a hug.”

She opens her arms wide and smacks me in the face accidentally on purpose, and the next thing I know, the three of us are huddled on the bed as a full blown tangle of limbs. Micky and Tessa’s arms are around each other, but both of their legs are a mix of on top of and under mine.

“I missed your face,” she says. “What are the chances we can convince Parker to drive up?”



The smile on Micky's face falls, and he lays his head on her shoulder. "He can't. Coach Taylor is riding him hard."

From what I've gleaned sharing a room with him, the boyfriend is on the football team over at Tennessee U, and their coach is a total hard-ass.

"I'm sorry, sweets," Tessa says, resting her cheek on the top of Micky's head. "Do you want to road trip down to him?"

He groans, and I pinch his thigh just to earn a swat. "No. I don't want to bother him." He grumbles and presses his face into her neck like a child.

"We could have a party?" I suggest. "Like get some of the guys together and play Truth or Dare or some shit. Could plan it for a day he could make it up this weekend?"

"At the end of the week, he's too tired to make that long of a drive. It's fine. We've each planned a trip when our breaks hit. I'm just mopey."

"That you are," Tessa says, patting his shoulder. "But Zandy is right. We should have a good, old-fashioned, high school-level maturity party."

Micky snorts and ducks out of Tess' hold, moving to a free spot beside her on the bed. "Hale just wants to get a certain someone buzzed and in his bed."

I know he means Julian, but Malachi's face is what pops up in my mind. The way he looked at me all soft and gentle—such a juxtaposition to his usual jagged edges.

I'm just curious because he's definitely off limits.

Tessa's smile turns devious, and I know it's going to be a long couple of days

keeping her from giving me away.

I don't even know why I found the "Daddy" thing appealing. Julian said it, and for some reason it got stuck in my head like a bad record. Which made me think of record shop, which brought my thoughts all the way back around to Malachi.

He kinda seemed into it . But I was honestly too shit-faced for my memory to be reliable. Every little indication that he maybe doesn't hate my guts could be entirely in my head.

That doesn't mean I won't be asking Julian over, or subtly suggesting he drag Malachi along.

Not at all.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

### Chapter Eight

Malachi

Should I be getting my insight on this whole Daddy kink thing from fanfiction? Probably not. But am I starting to get the appeal after nearly twenty-five chapters of KiriBaku fucking like bunnies?

Judging by how flushed my body feels, I'm going with yes.

"Ooh what are we reading?"

I peer over my shoulder at Julian with his big ass grin as he scans my screen. The excitement sobers slightly into a more genuine smile.

"Doing some research?" he asks, flopping his arms over my shoulders and draping himself across my back.

Jules is tall and lanky, a fact he uses to his advantage every chance he gets.

"Just wanted to understand better." I set the laptop on the bed in front of me and lean back. Julian takes the cue and climbs onto the mattress, fitting himself behind me.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Daddy."

It doesn't supply the same thrill as when Zander said it, but it fills me with a warmth

I'm starting to become comfortable with.

"This dynamic ... it's important to you?"

He nods, resting his cheek on the back of my neck. "It feels like I've finally found a piece of myself that was hidden away. Tucked neatly in a drawer collecting dust."

His arms tighten around me, and I hold onto his hands with my own. "I like it. Seeing you happy."

"You're such a sap."

"Shut up." I squeeze his hands, more curiosity bubbling in my brain. "I have another question."

"Shoot."

I heave out a heavy breath, weighing my choice of words.

"Do you ... I mean, is there ..." I drop his hands and press mine to my eyes. "Is this kink sexual for you?"

His quiet for a minute, still except for the rise and fall of his chest on my back.

"With you? No. You make me feel safe. To let this part of me out." He sits up straight and takes his hands away. "But yeah. There's a sexual aspect I want to explore. Eventually. Just have to find a Daddy I feel safe and sexy with."

I chuckle at the teasing note in his tone. "You'll have me until then."

He hums a happy sound, and then throws himself sideways to lay across my bed and

grin at me.

“My turn.”

“Oh boy.”

“While you were reading,” he says, and I know immediately where this is going.

“Did it turn you on?”

It takes me a second to answer, to put my findings into something coherent.

“Not the age play bits. I’m not sure I could be intimate with someone in that way. No offense.”

“None taken. It’s different for everyone.”

“I like the trust. The ... deferring to one partner for permission.”

“Which partner do you want to be?”

My face flames in an instant, and I look away as Julian breaks out into a fit of giggles.

“Oh, you hush. I like—I like being Daddy, alright? It works for us, and it’s ... it’s hot to think about someone calling me that in bed. Are you happy now?”

“You’re so cute, Mal.” He sits up and yanks my computer into his lap. “You’re more of a soft dom. Under all the prickles that is.”

“Fuck you.”

“No thanks. Love you, though.”

We sit in a comfortable silence, just enjoying each other’s company until Julian shifts and meets my eyes.

“Mal? How long has it been since you’ve been with someone?”

I lean back on my hands, counting the specks of dirt on the ceiling. “Like sex or ...?”

I can feel his stare, the silent reply.

“There hasn’t been anyone since Mack.”

Julian abandons the computer to wrap his arms around me.

“Oh and I’m the sap?”

But it feels nice. Being held. Knowing that no matter how fucked up I am at times, I’ll always have Jules.

I don’t know how I ended up getting dragged into a party at Zander and Micky’s student housing unit, but here I am sitting in a circle of very few familiar faces playing Never Have I Ever.

Seriously.

There are beers sloshing about, bags of chips ripped open and haphazardly tossed onto tables and cushions.

Julian sits across from me with Zander’s arm around his shoulder, laughing into the crook of the other man’s neck. Micky is lounging with his phone in his face—a video

call to his boyfriend I'm told—while his friend, Tessa, sits with his legs in her lap munching from a bowl of M&Ms.

There's a few other hockey players in the circle. No one I recognize. Some stoners in heavy make up having a drag. It's not populated enough for me to call it a party, but the diversity feels like a Netflix production.

"You're up, Moody." Tessa holds out her hand, and I open mine to accept the candy she drops in my palm.

I sigh and toss a few in my mouth. "Never have I ever ... slept with anyone in this room."

Julian gives me the face of perfect fucking innocence as he tips back his shot. And so does every single person in the circle. Some grumble and groan. Some laugh.

Micky takes the smallest sip of his beer. "Y'all are nasty." He lifts his phone and pans it around the room. "I've got Parks. You can have each other."

The room explodes into laughter and chitchat. I take a couple sips of my own beer, but soon lose interest in the bustle.

Being hockey players, they have one of the nicer student housing units: two stories with a large living room and kitchen at the bottom and a slew of bedrooms up top.

I wander into the kitchen to procure a glass of water—more accurately a solo cup filled from the tap—to ease the slight buzzing in my head.

The lights are off, and this corner of the house is quiet compared to the living room, so I savor the moment with my head resting on my folded arms propped on the counter.

I've done enough parties and mixers over the years. More often than not at old barns or abandoned buildings. Places with more colorful crowds.

That's not to say I wasn't pleasantly surprised to find that several of the NH Ravens fall under the queer umbrella, but their interests all still scream "Single-Minded Jock".

Something brushes my side, and I instinctively bolt up and jam my elbow back into something soft and firm.

"Fuck!"

I twist around to find a person behind me bent over gripping their side. As they straighten, the light from the living room catches on their blond hair creating an image of a golden nest. Hazel eyes beam down at me.

"What the hell, Blanchard?" Zander still rubs at his side, brows pinched and lips tucked into a tight line.

"Anyone ever tell you it's a bad idea to sneak up on people in the dark?"

"I wasn't sneaking." He rolls his eyes hard. "I was reaching around you. There's snack cakes literally above your head."

"How the hell was I supposed to know either of those things?"

He drags a hand over his eyes and presses his fingers to his temples. "There is not enough alcohol in my system to deal with you."

His tone strikes me as odd. I don't think we've ever had a conversation where he sounds outright hostile.



I cross my arms and press my back against the counter. “One would think you’d avoid drinking in my presence,” I say, watching his eyes narrow. “Might feel me up again.”

Zander groans. “I didn’t feel you up,” he hisses through clenched teeth, but it’s here that I realize he isn’t angry.

The pink on his cheeks I can barely make out in the darkness gives it away.

He’s embarrassed.

“You thought about it.” I can’t help the twitch of a smirk that tugs at my lips.

He stuffs his hands into the pockets of his sweats, shoulders slumping with the weight of his sigh.

“Did you say anything to Julian?”

Just like that, I’m reminded of the Big Bad Wolf stereotype dangling above my head. Of course I would antagonize him with my best friend’s feelings simply because I disapprove of them seeing each other.

“I get that I’m a buzzkill or whatever,” I say, and his eyes widen in the dim light. “But I don’t start drama for the hell of it. Nothing happened. No reason to wind him up.”

Zander visibly relaxes, dragging a hand through his hair. “Thanks. I have enough shit to worry about without Julian being mad at me.”

“Jules is a force. But I wouldn’t sick him on you unless I had a damn good reason.”

He pulls open the fridge and tosses a bottle of water over the door in my direction. I barely manage to catch it, throwing him a glare in response.

A dimpled smile forms on his face. “Here’s to not giving you a reason.” He takes a swig of his own water. “Is failing your little Swiftie Analysis Course a reason?”

“No, but you lose serious credibility points for taste in music.” A stretch of quiet follows Zander’s chuckle, darkness engulfing us with the closing of the refrigerator door. “How’d your test go?”

Zander clicks his tongue. “I got a B.”

That shouldn’t make me smile, but damn it, it’s hard not to be a little proud of the guy.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

My grin widens. “Like what?”

“Smug bastard.”

The laugh tears its way out of my throat, and it’s so loud and absurd that it draws company. Julian teeters into the kitchen a little closer to wasted, so I immediately hook an arm around his waist and thrust my bottle of water at him.

He’s uncoordinated and giggly, but he manages a few sips before pushing it away.

I sure hope Hale didn’t plan on getting lucky tonight, because like hell am I letting Julian get laid with his head this much of a mess.

“Getting along?” he asks, reaching an arm out toward Zander, who hesitantly slides

in and accepts the broken triangle of a hug chain we've got going on.

"Not killing each other," I say. "It's a start."

Julian presses his lips to my cheek, brushing my ear as he pulls away. "Thank you, Daddy."

A warm flush falls over my cheeks, and Zander's stare is like a laser pointer.

Swallowing a lump in my throat, I keep my attention on Jules. "I think someone needs to get home and have a shower."

He pouts and tugs the both of us closer.

Zander cups his hand over Julian's cheek and guides their eyes to one another. "Malachi is right."

A thrill shoots up my spine, and my body responds in ways I refuse to acknowledge. All he said was my name for fucks sake.

When Julian pouts out his lip again, Zander kisses him. "How about you hop in the shower here, and I'll make you both up a place to sleep on the couch?"

I open my mouth to protest, but our close proximity gives Zander the bright idea to sling his free arm around my waist and close our circle.

"No funny business. The others will likely crash, too."

I want to argue, but Jules is already bearing his weight on me, so I suck up my pride and give in.

“Fine. But I’m not responsible for any damage done if someone looks at him wrong.”

Zander laughs, and I’m too fucking aware that he hasn’t let me go.

It’s well into the night by time the house settles down. Most have scurried off to bedrooms, a few out the door, but Julian and I are downstairs on the couch.

More accurately, Julian is bundled on the couch, and I’m settled on the floor in front of it. He tried to argue that we could share, but Julian is an active sleeper, and I’ve learned to keep a safe distance.

Jules was far from sober enough to wash himself up without turning the bathroom into a slip ’n slide, so we showered together and are both stuffed into clothes from the various house inhabitants.

Julian was able to borrow a t-shirt and pair of shorts from Micky while I got tossed a hoodie and sweats from Zander.

“It’s not fair,” Julian grumbles, pressing his face into one of the couch cushions.

“If you had asked, I’m sure Zander would have loaned you something, too.”

He sticks his tongue out, and I fight back a laugh.

“Mean, Daddy,” he whispers, and I wonder how much of his attitude is the alcohol and how much is the regression.

“Get some sleep, love.”

His bright copper locks fly about as he rubs his face into the fabric. “Can’t.”

“Why not?”

He curls tightly in on himself, bright eyes piercing me in the darkness.

“Jules.” I roll onto my side, matching his stare. “Honesty time.”

In the pocket of silence that follows, Jules drops his hand down, and I catch it in my own.

“I don’t want to be alone.” The words are whispered and wet, though I can’t see the tears in the dark.

“I’m right here.”

The moment brings me back to nights in the group home when I’d camp in front of Julian’s bed while he slept. Deter some of the nastier boys from giving him trouble.

“Can I lay with you?”

Another moment where I’d wake up half propped on the mattress to green eyes watching me, curled beside me.

Sleeping together—in the most platonic sense—has been reserved for those nights when the past catches up to us faster than we can dream it away.

Resigning myself to being even more sore than I was already going to be, I open up my other arm and nearly choke on the laughter as he scrambles down into my hold.

Julian is still clenching my hand even as he buries his face in my shoulder and scrunching up the hoodie in his fists.

A pang of sadness hits me. “If you want, I’m sure Hale would let you sleep with him.”

The head shake is instant. “I want you, Daddy.”

I smile and kiss the top of his head, then find a comfortable position for my neck and try to get some sleep.

It’s quiet other than the sound of our breathing, and just as I think I might go under, Julian shifts, and his lips brushing my ear thrusts me back into full consciousness.

“You know,” he says with a low giggle. “I bet Zander would let you sleep with him, too.”

My body practically goes into shock, which only makes Julian’s giddiness worse.

“I think you like him,” he teases, and I’m confused how my best friend went from cuddly to menace so fast.

“I barely know him,” I hiss and gently pinch his side. “What has gotten into you?”

“Zander. Multiple times.” He sits up, propping an arm on my chest and grinning down at me. “Maybe you don’t feel the tension, but the rest of us do.”

“Tension?”

“Yup.” He pops the ‘p’ hard. “Sexual tension. You, Malachi, desperately need to get laid.”

I can’t do anything but gape at him.

“Am I wrong?”

“You’re a brat.”

Still, he smiles wide and leans down so his nose presses to mine. “Come to the rink with us tomorrow. I’ll show you.”

“Show me what?”

Julian wiggles beside me until he’s lying down again, a puff of air sliding across my neck. His breathing lightens, and his voice goes from playful to soft and sleepy.

“That I think he likes you, too.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

### Chapter Nine

Zander

It only cost me a week of taking over the equipment manager's duties to get access to the rink over the weekend. We've got a few weeks until our first game of the season, and until then I've got to prove to Coach I'm not going to flunk this music course again.

It'll be good practice for if I end up having to ride the bench. I might as well get used to cleaning up after everyone.

"So what was the plan here given that neither of us own a pair of skates?"

Ah, right. Malachi. Because Julian gave me puppy eyes and a morning blowjob to let his friend tag along. Not that the latter was needed.

I don't hate Malachi's presence. He just makes me feel weird. Like I'm being judged. But also like I kind of want the judgment? Weird.

"Well it just so happens Micky has a spare pair of practice skates that should fit Julian alright. You on the other hand..."

There's the look of judgment.

"I'll check the equipment closet. Might be some extras lying around."



I swear, I'm not trying to piss the guy off, but yeah, when I hand Julian the skates, maybe I kiss him and let it linger. Might earn me a glare and an aggressive cough, but we both laugh when we pull away.

Malachi's eyes say anger, but the color in his cheeks says something else.

"Question for you," I ask under my breath as I sit down beside Julian to lace up our skates. Malachi is half inspecting the place, so it's as good a time as any. "Your friend. Does he ever, you know ... wank one out?"

Julian stops mid-tie and stares, then cracks up laughing. Malachi looks over, but rolls his eyes and continues on.

"Hey now! I'm serious." I wait for Julian to get a hold of himself, finally wiping a stray tear from his eye. "That guy is wound tighter than a competition yo-yo. I just want to know if he even knows how to relax."

He smiles and bumps his shoulder on mine. "Maybe you could help him relax."

"I think he'd rather eat gravel."

Why does everyone keep rolling their eyes at me?

"I mean it. I want the three of us to have fun. Be your natural, charming self, and Mal will fall in line."

I think he is massively overestimating the charm, but he's smiling at me all excited, and you know? Why not.

What is the worst Malachi Blanchard could do to me?

The worst—it so happens—is distracting me.

Julian takes to the ice beautifully. A little wobbly but a quick learner. Malachi on the other hand?

“Do I need to get out the pads? I do not claim responsibility for whatever bruises you acquire from sucking so bad. ”

The man has fallen on his ass more times than I can count, and as someone who is shoved, smacked, and tackled to the ice on a regular basis, that’s saying something.

“Shut it.” Malachi’s glare should instill some sort of fear in me. Instead, it lights a fire of excitement.

“Hey, Julian. Wanna see how many laps we can do around Blanchard before he gets to his feet?”

There’s something on the tip of his tongue. I can see it, but he bites it back and grins, looping his arm with mine. “Skate away.”

I don’t ask, because whatever is going on between the two of them is none of my business, but that doesn’t mean I’m not filled to the brim with curiosity.

Remember that tidbit about being distracted? Well ...

“Oh my God, will you slow down?” Julian’s voice is filled with laughter as he shouts across the rink.

Years of conditioning and training put me at a bullet on ice, and even a casual skater would fall behind. Much less a newbie.

Maybe I'm showing off a little. Maybe I like how impressed Julian is by something that I sometimes feel mediocre at surrounded by other players.

And then I catch a look on Malachi's face that throws me completely off kilter.

Soft and sweet Malachi is strictly reserved for Julian. So much so, that I've never even met the guy. Seen bits and pieces in passing, but never the real thing.

At first, that's what I think I'm seeing. But as I lap, I notice his gaze is tracked on me.

Gray eyes follow my every move, and yeah—okay—I admit that I let my concentration slip. I stop being aware of what's around me because my heart is pounding so hard there's blood pumping out a heavy bass in my ears.

I'm still skating, still playing carefree, maybe being a little extra brazen because Malachi is nowhere near as easily impressed as Julian.

I don't hear Julian call out to me. I don't notice him holding his arms out, struggling to stop.

We collide, and any other time, I'd laugh it off. The ice is hard and unforgiving, and I'm going to have a couple good bruises to explain away to Coach. Still, a little humor always saves the day.

But Malachi shouts, and suddenly the scene that's been playing in my head like a reverbed record bursts into crystal clear sound.

"Jules! Fuck, are you alright?" Halfway across the rink, Malachi is tossing his skates off—he still hasn't gotten the hang of moving without holding onto the wall—and skidding across the ice in his socks.

I snap my attention to Julian, face contorted in pain as he holds his hand over his forearm, streams of red leaking through his fingers.

Shit.

There's blood on the bottom of my skate.

"It isn't that bad," Julian says on a choked up laugh, but as someone who has had a handful of skate injuries over the years, even the minor ones sting like a motherfucker.

My instincts finally kick back in, and I yank my t-shirt over my head. Twisting it, I place it over Julian's hand, covering the wound, and gently have him pull away as I tie the shirt around his arm.

"Put pressure there," I say, and when Malachi finally reaches us, I pull Julian's good arm around my shoulder. "Grab around his middle, and we'll walk him to the boards."

For once, Malachi has no retort, though I can feel his glare the entire way off the ice.

Once we make it to the benches, I start by taking my own skates off, followed by Julian's. His expression is tight and pinched, and when I peak beneath the t-shirt, it's not a pretty sight.

But it's not as bad as it could be.

"Gonna need stitches for sure," I say, and his face pales. "I'm sorry."

Julian shakes his head. "Nope. It's fine. Accidents and all."

“Don’t do that,” Malachi’s voice booms so loud even I jump. “You have to go to the hospital, Jules.”

“I’m okay.” The wobble in his voice isn’t convincing.

I snatch my keys from the duffle bag on the floor. “Repeat that after you see the needles involved.”

His eyes shoot wide, and I place a quick kiss to his temple. “Sorry. Poor joke.”

I pretend not to notice the daggers Malachi shoots my way the whole drive.

Several hours—and sutures—later, the three of us are in my pickup truck, driving back to the dorms.

It’s late. The sky is dark, and the air is a comfortable warmth as it comes through the rolled down window. Julian is in the center seat, bandaged arm held protectively to his chest. Beside him, Malachi stares out the window.

The man is quiet, almost eerily silent as the only times he’s spoken have been in whispers with Julian in the waiting room.

It’s mildly unnerving, but I’ve avoided running into Malachi’s Big Bad Wolf for a while, so I’m not going to push it.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, giving Julian’s thigh a gentle squeeze.

“A little icky from the pain meds,” he says with a pained smile.

Guilt gnaws an uneasy trail through my nerves. My fingers tap insistently on the steering wheel.

I should have been paying attention.

I know how dangerous the rink can be.

But I just had to show off. Because Malachi was watching me. Some part of me wanted him to have irrefutable proof that I'm good at something.

Which was a total fucking bust.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Julian leaning on Malachi's shoulder, see him holding their joined hands in his lap.

I should spend the rest of the drive in silence, drop them off, and hide out in my room for the rest of the weekend.

But should is such an ugly word that my brain rejects it immediately.

"Do you want to come over?" I ask, meeting Julian's tired, green eyes as we come to a stop sign. "We could binge those Digimon movies you've been talking about. Add in a bowl of ice cream?"

I barely catch his emerging smile before I have to return my attention to the campus road.

"I think I'd like that. You'll come too, right, D—" Julian abruptly stops and clears his throat. "Mal?"

I would love to be in on the joke. Even if to just ease Julian's mind that he doesn't have to hide that I know from Malachi. Every time he has to cover, he becomes flushed and flustered.

“I can’t exactly say no, can I?” Malachi’s voice is gruff and reluctant, but Julian’s giggle confirms his participation.

We stop by their dorm so they can grab whatever they need, but while Julian runs in Malachi stays behind.

“Shouldn’t you help him?”

Malachi scoffs, and I frown. That sounded like a reasonable question.

“Jules is a capable man. Don’t infantilize him.”

My brows form a heavy dip. “I wasn’t. He literally just got his arm slashed open.”

“And you’re so busy thinking about getting laid that you didn’t notice, I offered to be the one to go inside, and he refused.”

“I’m not thinking about getting laid!”

“Then what the hell are you thinking?”

Malachi turns in his seat, eyes a menacing glare that I can’t pull away from.

“Do you have any idea how bad this could have been?”

Of course I do. This is half of my life.

But my tongue is thick and stuck in my mouth.

“The season starts soon, doesn’t it?”

The shift in questioning takes me off guard. “Ah, uh huh,” is the most coherent collection of sounds I can make.

“What if you had gotten hurt? Your coach would have been pissed. And your teammates? Does anything at all run through your head before you just jump into reckless behavior?”

Me? Who the hell gives a shit if I take an L?

“There’s still a few weeks,” I manage to croak out. “I’d be fine.”

The bulging vein along his neck pulses with the strain of his clenched jaw.

Have I ever seen him genuinely upset before?

At the bonfire, perhaps.

Back then, I thought it was challenging—entertaining even.

Right now? An odd, icky bout of shame coats my skin.

“You need to think , Zander. Especially if you’re seeing Jules.”

“We aren’t seeing each other.” I feel the need to interject, the words making me shift in my seat. “Not dating. Just hanging out.”

I didn’t think his glare could get any worse or be any more targeted.

“He cares about you. Whatever the hell you call it, if something happens to you, he’ll care. And if he cares, I care .”



So it's you who's worried about me, Blanchard? Using Julian as a scapegoat?

Something happens to me in that moment. A chasm of want deeper than I've ever felt.

Oh.

I shouldn't want to kiss him right now. That isn't a thought I should even entertain, but there's that word again.

Should. Shouldn't.

The way Malachi's gaze tears me apart, like he's searching for the deepest parts of me to dig his claws into—it makes me want to sprawl across this bench seat and drag his body on top of mine.

It's a treacherous desire.

Being with Julian these last few weeks has been fun. Comfortable. But the itch for adrenaline under my skin is finally bubbling to the surface.

It's like my blood is made of gasoline and Malachi Blanchard is the match that ignites me. I've done my time licking my wounds, now my body aches for the burns of spontaneous danger.

This is bad.

I've never ran from a bad idea before, but as Julian swings the passenger door open and shoos Malachi into the middle—as Malachi's arm brushes mine and his body stiffens like a board—I shove the desire burning through me as far down as I can reach.

Now isn't the time to go burning everything to the ground.

But I know me.

Eventually, I'll torch it all.

### Chapter Ten

Malachi

Why do I let my best friend talk me into these things?

Crowded rooms are in my top five least favorite places. Doesn't matter how big the room is. Actually, I'd say the bigger it is, the worse it is.

The most awful part of all?

It's filled to the brim with sports maniacs.

The last place I want to spend my afternoon is an ice hockey rink. But Julian: sweet, sensible, wide-eyed Julian insists we need to be here for Zander's first game.

A game he gets to play—mind you—because he's spent the last several weeks bugging me at work and arguing about his truly awful media literacy.

Julian's arm is healed up well, and he looks genuinely happy, bouncing in his seat as the players circle each other below. I couldn't tell you a single thing about what's happening other than lots of shouting and a surprising amount of fist throwing for a school sanctioned event.

“Which one is Hale?” They all just look like multi-colored blurs. Helmets. Pads. If I didn't already know this wasn't a co-ed sport, I couldn't even tell if they were boys or girls.

“Number sixteen,” Jules answers without hesitation, way too into a game I don’t think he’s ever seen played a day in his life before now.

Sixteen. Right. Okay ...

Even if I don’t understand the plays or calls or any of the words out of the announcers mouth, I keep my eyes zeroed in on number sixteen.

Sometimes he’s on the ice. Sometimes he’s pulled to the bench.

Every time he takes his helmet off and wipes at the gallon of sweat pouring off of him with one of those rinky dink towels, I get a strange sensation in my chest. Not just the unfortunate attraction, but something akin to ...

concern. Which is absurd, because he has the most ridiculous smile on his face eighty percent of the time.

For the amount of time elapsed, the scoreboard is abysmally low for both teams, and when half of the crowd stands and shouts, I have no idea who scored.

By the grin on Julian’s face, I’m guessing us.

“How do you follow this?” I ask, trying and failing to make any sense of the game.

Julian shoves his shoulder into mine and chuckles. “Hot, sweaty men, Mal.”

If only it were that easy. If only I could look at a man, spot my attraction, and just go for it. That’s one of the things I admire about Julian. He’s friendly. Outgoing. Knows what he wants and isn’t afraid to search it out.

It’s how he ended up on that kink site. And it’s how I ended up being his stand-in

Daddy.

I only know the game is over when a loud buzzer sounds, followed by Julian jumping to his feet and dragging me with him. The arena is packed, noisy, and I have no clue which way will lead me outside, but eventually that's where we find ourselves.

The sky is bright blue littered with perfectly white clouds. Julian must have taken us out a side door, because the foot traffic has nearly disappeared. I lean against the side of the building, catching my breath.

Large crowds make me lightheaded. It's one of a few reasons why—even with my love of music—I've never been to a concert. It's on my bucket list, but I haven't felt like chancing the panic attack.

With my eyes closed and face tilted toward the sky, I can almost forget where we are. Can almost imagine I'm on my lunch break at the record store. If only I had my earbuds, but I didn't want to risk them getting dropped and crushed.

Julian's high-squealed laugh draws me out of the daydream, and I open my eyes to see him with his legs around Zander's waist, and the other's hands on his ass.

Lovely.

They exchange a hurried, flurry of kisses before breaking away and Zander glancing at me over Julian's shoulder.

"Enjoy the game?" His blond hair is damp and tousled, and I can't tell if it's from sweat or a shower.

My deadpan expression only makes his grin widen. "You're a smug bastard."

“A smug bastard,” Julian cuts in, “who is about to get laid.”

I hate the way my heart twinges at the soft expression on Zander’s face. At how he cups the back of Julian’s head so gently to meet his lips in another kiss.

I’m happy that Jules is happy, but I think I’ve had my fill of people for the day.

“Why don’t you two take it back to the dorm? I’ve got some class work to catch up on, so I’ll hit up the library.”

Julian’s reaction is one of gratitude, while Zander’s is ... something else. Curiosity?

“Just don’t get jizz on my bed.”

That makes him crack a smile, and Julian jumps down from Zander’s arms long enough to engulf me in a bear hug before dragging the hockey player off toward his own truck.

My best friend certainly has a one track mind.

The library thing was a total lie. Instead, I take up space at one of the on-campus coffee houses in an unoccupied corner surfing a kink forum not unlike the one I found Julian on.

It’s more lurking than interacting on my part, though I did have to create an account to have access. Only a few pages in, and I realize I may have stumbled too hard into the dynamic. Bitten off more than I can chew.

As my head starts to spin trying to understand all the terminology, I come across a post promoting another site. It’s ... colorful.

There's pictures akin to what you'd find in a children's picture book with clearly labeled pages with their own illustrations. Despite the cutesy look, the information is very blunt and obviously geared toward adults.

I've been inferring a lot of information from my talks with Julian and the fanfictions I've read, but having it laid out plainly ...

I don't feel like I'm a Daddy in the full sense of taking care of a Little, but at the same time, I feel a deeper connection to the idea than just a kinky bedroom phrase.

I enjoy the domesticity of taking care of someone, but not to the point of micromanaging or punishing.

Taking care of someone is comforting; that's something I've learned over the years with Julian and that's only been reinforced since trying out this new dynamic. I feel a sort of possessiveness over the well being of people I care about.

It's something I feel toward Julian, but in the case of the skating incident, I also felt an inkling of it for Zander.

Not an inkling. An inferno.

I was so overcome with rage for his lack of care about either of their safety that I didn't dare speak for the duration of the hospital visit lest something come out wrong.

Because I was angry, but that anger was deeply overshadowed by worry. Worry that this is the kind of shit Zander gets himself into all of the time, and he doesn't seem to have the same level of care for himself that he exhibits to Julian.

I know I come across as harsh and demanding, and I didn't want to upset Julian or

bark anything out until I could get my thoughts together.

Which they still aren't. I want something. It's just under the surface. But I can't name it.

Staring at the screen for so long starts to make my head hurt, so I decide that I've spent an adequate amount of time fucking off. Now that the sky is tinted shades of pink and orange, all I want to do is crawl into bed with my music and shut my brain off for a while.

It's not a long walk back to the dorm, but it's a nice day out, so I take my time enjoying the sunshine and warm breeze.

If it weren't for Julian, I never would have applied to NHU in the first place. It's a smaller school in a relatively small town in terms of housing a college. I was ready to pack my bags and step foot out of the group home the day I turned eighteen without a hint of a plan.

It didn't matter if I had a place to stay, a job, money for food; I was ready to be out. But Julian is a couple of months younger, and I wouldn't leave him there alone.

He's the one who filled out the applications. Who dealt with transcripts and scholarships. For once, being foster kids came in handy, because the state paid for our first two years.

And now? It's comfortable. Safe.

I don't know what either of us is going to do after.

Despite the walk being relaxing, my head is filled with too much gunk not to be exhausted by the time I walk up the too-many flights of stairs to our dorm room.



Maybe next year we should push for one of the student houses. Though, the funding for that is trickier.

The door clicks open without resistance, and I'm prepared to beeline for my desk and get huddled away as soon as possible, but the universe hurls me one final curve ball.

Zander Hale, naked as the day he was born, sprawled out on Julian's bed with one arm folded behind his head and the other pressing on the back of Julian's head over his lap.

My first thought is: they're still going at it?

The second? Zander's sex sounds are entirely too arousing. They're wet and wanton, like he's never had to hold himself back a day in his life.

His eyes slide open slow and hazy, but it doesn't take half a second for his attention to drift from the man sucking his dick to the doorway where I'm still standing. It's like the first night they fucked with me in the room; I'm too stunned and turned on to look away.

He opens his mouth like he's going to call out, but when I take a half step back, all that comes out is a long, drawn-out moan.

Fuck.

The room sounds and smells like sex. It's in a state of disarray that I can only assume is from their total lack of consideration.

"Deeper, baby," Zander groans, wrapping a fist in Julian's hair, hips rocking off and on the bed in a hypnotic motion.

He's still looking at me. Panting. Moaning. Growling out "fuck yes" and "good boy" as his eyes roam from my face to the hard on tenting my pants. Tight jeans are a poor choice when you've got an erection.

Zander lick his lips, and when his eyes start to flutter closed, he snaps them back open.

I have enough self control not to touch myself behind my best friend's back. Literally. Especially not to the sight of his fuck-buddy getting off.

Some lines we don't cross.

But holy fuck do I want to.

I want Zander Hale, and the amount of shame burning through me does nothing to stamp out that desire.

I am undeniably, horribly attracted to him.

There's no warning when he comes, but goddamn does he make a show of it. Entire body going taut, hips bowing off the mattress, and the most cock-achingly obscene moan slips past his lips.

All the while, his hazel iris's bore into mine.

No matter how much I want to take myself in hand and get off to the image of his orgasm rocking through him, I finally gain control of my limbs—just as Jules pops off and I risk being noticed—and back as quietly out of the room as I can.

I don't know where the hell I'm going to go, but for once in all of my time living with my best friend, home isn't an option.

Not unless I want to blow that up like all the others.

### Chapter Eleven

Zander

I'm an asshole.

Here I am, in the bed of a man who gives incredible blowjobs, and mid said incredible blowjob, my mind wanders straight to the one place it shouldn't.

Thinking about Malachi scolding me is one hell of an odd orgasm chaser, but what's even worse?

Nearly choking out his name and looking up to find the object of my twisted affections is watching me get blown.

To make matters ten times worse, I come with those wide eyes on me, watching the uncomfortable way he shifts as if there's any hiding the hard on in his pants.

But the douchiest thing of all is that when Julian smiles up at me with cum dribbling down his chin, he has no idea that he was the farthest thing from my mind.

When he sits up, I can see his hand cupping his own softening erection—and the puddle of cum in his palm.

Yup. I'm an asshole.

Malachi is gone. Quietly escaped just as stealthily as he'd arrived. Even as Julian

leans forward to smack a wet kiss on my mouth, I can't keep my eyes from wandering to the doorway, almost willing him to reappear.

We make out until Julian pulls away with a yawn. "Mal isn't back yet," he says with a frown.

I rub a hand down the length of his spine. "He probably doesn't want to walk in on us naked." I throw on a charming smile, and Julian giggles.

"Respecting my privacy like a gentleman. You on the other hand ..."

"What about me?"

"Mal doesn't see me in any type of sexual way. But you? You might tempt him to break his bout of celibacy."

"Right. Because a few months without some action would make your friend desperate enough to want to bone me of all people?"

Julian rolls his eyes. "Try a few years , smartass."

Well, that does it. My brain is officially broken. Stuck in a loop of: Malachi Blanchard hasn't gotten laid in years, and we practically just eye-fucked each other to mutual orgasms.

Except I'm the only one who came, and suddenly I feel a burst of responsibility to make sure Blanchard does the same.

"Maybe I should give him the all clear."

"Maybe you should." Julian sits up and tugs the blanket around himself. "I'm tired."

The yawn is overstated this time.

“Is that your unsubtle way of kicking me out?”

“It’s my unsubtle way of saying fuck off and let me sleep.”

It hardly takes me a minute to get dressed, and I already have my phone in hand before I make it to the door.

Me

You can stop hiding. I’m leaving.

But as I leave the room, there’s no sign of him in the halls. Not down the flights of stairs. Not in the dorm common area. I suppose he could be in one of the bathrooms “taking care of” himself.

Me

Sorry for the boner.

I’m not actually sorry. Being able to witness how turned on Malachi was watching us? That’s the most erotic shit I’ve ever seen.

He still doesn’t answer, and I gnaw on my lip until I taste blood on my tongue.

Okay. If I had witnessed what he just witnessed, I probably wouldn’t respond to my texts either.

But I can’t go home without touching base. Not because I’m asking for trouble, but because ... oh, fuck it. Add it to the list of my own personal reckless endangerment.

Malachi puts up with me because Julian likes me. He got turned on because he's a gay, male human, and it's a natural reaction.

Me seeking him out serves no one but myself.

I do it anyway.

Because I'm selfish. Reckless.

And screw me if I maybe sorta like the guy and don't want him to go back to completely hating my guts.

I also like passing my class and arguing over dumb pop culture shit.

I wade around campus—the library, the shops—until the sky darkens to a midnight shade. I suppose he could have returned to his dorm by now, but a little voice in the back of my head tells me to keep looking.

When I find him, the flurry of jumbled and horny thoughts comes to a screeching halt. For the first time in hell knows how long, my head is a silent wasteland.

Malachi is situated under the giant willow tree in the quad. His eyes are closed as he rests his head back on the trunk of the tree. His hair—which barely hangs below his ears—is a deep red with intentional streaks of silver that catch on the moonlight.

I don't want to startle him, but I also don't want to stand around staring like a creep.

The grass rustling as I settle on the ground in front of him is what garners his attention. Gray eyes peer at me through the darkness, and I've never felt more exposed. Not even when I was literally exposed.

I don't know what I want to say, but the "I'm sorry," that slips out isn't it.

Malachi's lips quirk up into a ghost of a smile, and I find myself reciprocating.

"Not like I saw anything indecent," he says, somehow both soft and sarcastic.

I scratch at a scab on the back of my neck. Something about the gentleness in his expression has honesty itching to get out of my throat.

"I wanted you to."

There's no surprise, just a slight, quiet resignation in the way he tips his head back to stare through the thick of leaves and branches above.

He doesn't speak, and it feels like a heavy hand plucking at a string in my chest.

"I make you uncomfortable."

He doesn't deny it, just drums his fingers on his thigh to a familiar marching tune.

"Malachi," I whisper his name in a desperate attempt to fight off the rush of emotion making my vision blur. "I need you to say something."

His fingers still. His eyes find mine. An ethereal softness sweeps over him. He rises to his knees, and there's this gravitational pull that draws me closer. An inch at a time until our knees touch and his hand transfers from his thigh to mine.

"You are infuriatingly persistent," he says with muted humor. "But I don't dislike it."

His eyes capture mine. "I don't dislike you, Wildfire."



Wildfire. Unconfined. Spreading uncontrollably and infecting others.

It's fitting.

"I would sure hope not," I say with a dry laugh. "I really want to kiss you."

There it is, laid right there on the table. For him to face or reject. I'll accept either. But I don't want this hanging over our heads. I don't want to feel guilty for wanting him. I don't want it to be some big secret.

I'm horrible at keeping them anyway.

Malachi's breath visibly hitches. His hand forms a fist on my thigh. "Zander."

His voice holds a note of warning, of restraint on the verge of collapse.

I should pull back and let him rein himself in. Let him get his thoughts and feelings under control.

But I like the unrestrained. I like the chaos it brings.

"You want to kiss me, too."

It's a bold assumption. But the way he watched in that doorway—I know he wants my body, even if he won't allow himself to indulge in the idea. Maybe I can convince him a little is okay.

It's just a kiss.

Malachi shifts. His hand opens to get a solid grip on my hip, and I watch as he adjusts himself against the tree. He leans back, pulling me with him. His eyes are alight with

the conflict he doesn't need to say out loud.

I know I'm a bad idea.

He warned Julian away from me.

Who's to say I won't hurt Malachi, too?

He tugs me closer, and I cage my legs on either side of his hips. My knees press into the grass; the insides of my thighs brush the outside of his.

The hand on my hip slides up under my shirt. Goosebumps erupt across my skin where his fingers touch in a feather-light trail.

His other hand comes up and anchors itself in my hair, fingers curled against my scalp.

Please, I want to plead. I want to close the gap and let the consequences be damned because Malachi is right here. He's here, and there's just as much want radiating from him as I feel resonating in my own body.

I've never wanted someone so badly.

His grip is tight as he guides me down until our mouths hover inches apart. Warm breath glides across my cheeks, and I respond where hesitation haunts him.

I close the gap, the rough feel of his chapped lips on my own. At first, that's all it is. Me pressing into him, and his body still as stone.

In a heartbeat, his rigidity melts away. There's an urgency to how his lips mold over mine.

My eyes close as my focus narrows down to everything Malachi.

His mouth. His tongue. His hands.

Our thighs pressed together.

How have we never touched like this before? How have we never felt the electricity crackling between our veins and merging us together like it does now?

He explores me like a canyoneer: tongue sweeping into my mouth, hands digging into tense muscles along my back.

I don't know what to do with mine. I don't know where I'm allowed to touch or what will spook him.

Eventually, my hands take hold in his hair, not pulling but holding myself steady.

I feel Malachi growing hard beneath me. The longer we kiss, the more apparent it becomes. All those earlier thoughts come flooding back, and my own cock fills as the passion heightens.

"I want to see you come," I break away from his mouth to say, but not for long because he claims me again, swallowing my pathetic attempts at protest. "Malachi."

A growl sounds deep in his throat, and I can practically feel myself leaking through my sweats. He grips my hips in both his hands and grinds me down on his lap, eliciting a sharp moan from my mouth as our covered cocks rub together.

There's no reprieve from the kiss. Malachi makes it clear that for right now, I'm his to use. And use he does.

He rocks his hips up at the same time he pushes down on mine, and if I try to alter the rhythm in any way, he stills us both until I'm practically begging him to move again, and then he picks up. Slowly at first. Then, more forceful.

Nothing in the world exists except for our bodies and the burning pressure building in my groin. Malachi must feel it, too, because his breaths start coming out in shaky pants, and his hands dip to my ass to further trap me against him.

One more rough roll of his hips and Malachi stills. He tries to clamp his mouth shut, but I thrust my tongue inside and taste the cry he wants to hide.

I kiss him languidly as his body trembles, until he comes back to himself enough to move his mouth on mine. I don't push any further, even as my cock pulses and weeps for attention.

When he breaks away, his hands fall from my ass to the backs of my thighs. He holds me there, not pulling me closer, but not pushing me away.

"We can't do this again," he says.

Why not? I want to ask, but I'm too busy staring at the dusting of maroon expanding across his cheeks to say anything at all. I could kiss Malachi for an eternity and never get tired of it.

"The kissing or the getting off?"

There's a hint of a smile on his lips. "Either. Both."

"Because of Julian?"

He knows we aren't serious, but I understand not wanting to sleep with the same guy

your best friend is hooking up with.

He shakes his head. I want to ask him then why the hell not, but the words get tangled up in my throat.

If it isn't Julian, then the answer is obvious.

He doesn't want me . This was a one-off to relieve a couple years worth of sexual tension. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Doesn't mean it doesn't sting.

I'm used to people using me for my body. I hook up way more often than I enter relationships.

Still, I want to kiss him again.

The way his eyes gaze into mine, searching for god knows what, feels anything but casual and fun , but I'm not going to push for what he's not willing to give.

I swallow the hurt and force out a smile. "Sure thing."

He cups the back of my head, and before I can protest, his lips are on me again. My mouth. My jaw. My neck.

Confusion swims in my brain, but I don't move. I don't pull away, and I don't lean in.

"Malachi."

He stops, and after a couple of deep breaths, peels himself away from me. He eases

me off of his lap and stands, pressing himself as close to the tree as he can.

I'm at eye level with the wet patch in his jeans, and if these were any other circumstances, I'd lower his fly and lick him clean.

I'm still hard, and I know the moment I'm alone, I'm going to come thinking about the blush on Malachi's cheeks. Another odd thing to fantasize over.

He helps me to my feet, and his hand lingers in mine for a beat, but when he drops it, that's it. Our connection breaks, and he walks away without another word.

My world is shattered. Busted open. All over a kiss.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

### Chapter Twelve

Zander

Malachi is ignoring me, and it's making me play like shit.

We've lost two games in a row, and I know that doesn't rest entirely on my shoulders, but that doesn't make me any less irritable.

"If you don't get your head in the game, I'm going to body check you," Micky chirps from the bench beside me.

Yeah, I'm playing like absolute ass , and that's because I can't stop myself from scanning the stands. Malachi hasn't shown up to a single game since the first, and even though I spot Julian right away every time, Malachi is nowhere to be seen.

It's simple math.

He's avoiding me.

Ellis plops into the seat beside me and slaps me on the shoulder. "You are shit today, dude."

I take the bottle of water that's held out to me and give him the finger.

Micky bumps his own bottle on my knee.

“After the face off,” he says, eyes scanning the ice in rigid concentration, “stay close.”

I quirk my brow, but he’s too busy to notice. Micky is my captain and my best friend; I trust his judgment.

So, I do. I follow him like a hawk. I plow through the other team’s forwards, run the defensemen into the boards. My field of vision narrows to number thirty-one, and for the first time in weeks, my head feels clear.

When the puck finds my stick and a pair of players come crowding around me, I don’t have to search Micky out. I slap the puck with all the force of weeks worth of frustration, and our captain runs with it.

The lamp lights up, the buzzer sounds, and then I’m sandwiched between half the team as they shout and holler across the rink.

I’m a dazed, sweaty mess, and the moment I get to a bench, I’m ripping off my helmet, jersey, and pads.

Hockey has always been a cathartic experience for me, but it’s been a while since I’ve truly lost myself in the game.

“Look at you pulling a W out of your ass,” Ellis says, swinging his jersey over his head with a big grin as he strides to his own bench.

“Right. It’s not like Micky made the shot or anything.”

“You facilitated the hell out of that shot, and you know it,” Micky says, plopping down beside me already stripped to his underwear.



“In a hurry?” I ask, eager to change the subject. The less I have to talk about how crappy I’ve been playing the better. I already got an earful from Coach.

“Parker called. Sounded upset.” And if there’s one thing besides hockey that Micky doesn’t play around with, it’s Parker.

“Let him know if he needs anything, we’re all here for him.” We’ve only met him a handful of times outside a screen, but being as he’s Micky’s person, he’s practically an extension of the team.

“Thanks.” He’s hurriedly throwing on the basketball shorts and tank from his bag, forgoing the shower all together. In the midst of tying his shoes, he pauses and looks up. “If you need anything, you know we’re here for you, too.”

I shrug and put on my signature grin. “I just helped us win the game. What problem could I have?”

The look on Micky’s face tells me he wants to argue, but the worry for his boyfriend wins out. Before half the team is even undressed, Micky is heading up to Coach and making his way out the doors.

We sit through Coach’s speech, then take turns in the showers. I’m one of the last ones in because I couldn’t be bothered to get off my ass. That last quarter was killer on my energy. Not to mention my muscles feel like they’ve been zapped and tweaked like the poor sap in Operation.

I’m in the shower so long the others clear out. Coach hollers a check in—that he’ll be in his office for a little while if I need anything. The water runs cold by the time I shut it off and wrap a towel around my waist.

Hockey isn’t the only thing that suffered this last few weeks. My grade in Music

Theory has taken a dip. I'm still passing, but if I don't kick it into gear soon, that won't be the case for long.

Every time I'm given an assignment, all I want to do is take it to the record shop and bug Malachi to help me sort it out. Even just bantering back and forth with him makes my brain work better.

I drop down to the bench and pull my phone out of my cubbie only to have my mood dampened even more.

Julian

Can't meet up. Have paper to finish. Daddy is a jerk.

He threw in some crying and anger emojis that make me smile at his theatrics, but I'm still bummed.

If only Daddy would pay me a visit.

Even thinking it to myself has my skin breaking out into goosebumps.

I'm not an idiot. I'm fully aware that some people get off to being called that in bed. Daddy, Sir, Master . I've made my way through some interesting porn videos.

I slept with a girl once who threw a few "Daddies" out during sex, and I was far from a fan.

From her side, though? I can see the appeal.

That doesn't fit what Malachi and Julian have going on, but that doesn't stop my brain wandering every time I hear it.

Without the promise of time with Julian—and Micky likely busy on video chat with Parker in our room—it's hard to find the motivation to get dressed.

How long could I sit here before Coach came and kicked me out?

“Nice towel, Wildfire.”

My head snaps up so hard it sends an ache down my spine. “Malachi.”

There he is, all nonchalant with his awkward fashion—one of those shirts with tank straps but also short sleeve bands hanging down his shoulders—and multicolored hair falling into his eyes.

He's got his arms crossed, leaning against the row of cubbies across from me.

“Good game,” he says, then furrows his brows. “I think.”

It's kind of cute the way he comes across like an emo badass yet also a complete dork.

“It was a craptastic game,” I say. “Until the end. We kicked ass at the end.”

One of those rare, genuine smiles comes out to play, and it's hard not to consider it a personal accomplishment.

“Do you plan on getting dressed?” he asks, and I can see the way his eyes linger before he forces them away.

“I dunno. Where are you taking me?”

He scoffs and scrubs a hand through his hair. “Who says I'm taking you anywhere?”

Maybe I want to have a talk with you and not your dick.”

“Well lucky for you my dick is nice and covered and has no interest in listening.”

He quirks his brow, smile fading into something that more resembles a smirk. “There you go tempting fate, Wildfire.”

Should being called contagiously out of control be a turn on? Because I don’t think it should. Yet here we are with that little spark of arousal lighting up.

“And what fate might that be, Blanchard?”

He steps forward, crossing the room until we’re maybe a foot apart, and I have to crane my head back to see his face.

“Us. Doing something reckless.”

I grin. I can’t help it. Wide and unnerving—I can see the hesitation cross his face.

I like the idea of making him lose his composure.

“Are you calling my state of undress tempting?”

His eyes spring to mine, and then slowly trail down until that spark becomes a flickering flame come to life. There’s a slight tremble to his lip as he licks it and drags it between his teeth.

“You’re overconfident.”

“Am I?” I lean back, making sure every visible part of me is on display. “Tell me you don’t want to kiss me.”

Those gray eyes darken to their stormy shade as he leans forward, gripping the edge of a cubbie. “I can honestly say that kissing you isn’t the thought on my mind right now.”

Oh.

Oh, I like that idea better.

Not that I can say “please get down here and blow me” or “come just a little closer and let me blow you” with how thick my tongue feels as Malachi reaches a hand down and cards it through my hair.

“Sexy,” he says, and it sounds strange coming from his lips, but sensual enough that my body reacts to it.

Normally, I’d lean into it, but the entire scenario is making me a little bit antsy. Like there’s a loose string hanging just out of reach that needs clipped away.

“Oh, are you talking to me? Because you haven’t done that in weeks.”

His brows shoot up, that cocky confidence falters. There’s a few beats where neither of us speaks, but then Malachi tightens his fingers in my hair and lowers himself excruciatingly slowly to his knees.

We’re nearly eye to eye, and his hand drops down to cup the back of my neck. One firm squeeze and my shoulders droop. I hadn’t even realized they were tensed.

Malachi cocks his head, and then his fingers are back to playing, drawing nonsense patterns over my shoulder blades and collarbones.

“Want me to stop?”

Indignation bubbles up in my chest, but Malachi pressing his thumb to the center of my throat and dragging it down ... down my sternum to stop at the knot in my towel ... it stamps the fight out in an instant.

“No,” I say, quiet and—dare I say—whiny. “I didn’t want you to in the first place.”

There’s instant understanding in his eyes. He’s been thinking about it just as much as I have.

The kiss.

He brings his touch to my waist, just shy of bruising, and I like it more than I care to admit.

“Tell me what you want.”

It’s hard not to laugh, but I hold it back.

“You.”

His breathing comes out quicker. His eyes close for a second.

“Be specific.”

I specifically want us to fuck on this bench.

I don’t say that because I don’t want to scare him away.

I take a deep breath and grip the edge of the bench seat with both hands.

“Kiss me.”

Malachi shudders. He eyes me. Stares for an uncomfortable amount of time. A hand rises to the back of my neck.

“How do you ask?”

Something in me cracks. As he leans closer, holds me tighter, a part of me comes loose.

“Please kiss me ... Daddy.”

Surprise flashes in Malachi’s eyes.

Then, something deeper. Something almost primal.

“Good boy.” The words are whispered so quiet, I can almost convince myself I made them up, but the streak of satisfaction they pave in me is all too real.

Malachi closes his mouth over mine, hesitant for only a second before he’s nipping at my lips and taking the tiny gasp I make as permission to thrust his tongue inside.

Our last kiss was somewhat romantic, a deep maroon.

This one is frantic, silver and gold, and black and white.

The little bit of space between our bodies closes. Malachi fits himself between my knees, chest to chest. My growing erection presses into his stomach, but it doesn’t startle him away.

If anything, it encourages him. The kiss deepens, darkens. The hand on my hip slides to my thigh, inching just beneath the towel.

I throw my hands up to grip his sleeves.

Stop. Keep going. Wait

I don't know what I mean.

His fingernails bite into my thigh, and his mouth pulls from mine. Not far. To my jaw. Kisses a path to my ear.

"I think that's enough."

No. Not again.

I open my mouth to protest, but what comes out is an honest to god whimper.

His lips form a smile on my skin. "For now, Wildfire. For now."

Not forever.

I exhale, and it must be dramatic, because he chuckles. When he pulls away, his cheeks are a deep crimson, and whatever facade he'd put on is peeled away. His eyes are wide, pupils blown, and I can't imagine mine look much better.

"You like it," I say lowly. "Being called ..." I can't finish because if I do, I might lose myself and ask him to touch me more.

When he breathes out, he rests his forehead on mine, letting out a loud huff. "You liked it, too."

I did.



I want to ask what that means, and why he's suddenly okay with this after literal weeks of silence.

But I don't want to break the moment.

We can dissect these strange new desires later.

Preferably when all the blood in my body flows back to my top head instead of the one straining this comically small towel.

When he kisses me this time, it's soft. Timid.

My head spins.

Who are you, Malachi Blanchard? And why does wanting you make me want other things , too?

### Chapter Thirteen

Malachi

I regret my life choices. Every last one of them.

Showing up to Zander's stupid game was a gross miscalculation on my part. Julian had been texting me 'boo-hoo Zander' messages for weeks, often about how down in the dumps he is and asking me to hang out with them. I always decline.

But then he sent me a video of Zander playing today. He looked angry. Aggressive. It sparked something in me. Pride almost. Which is strange.

I couldn't focus on any of the work I was trying to get done. My brain kept toying with the idea of seeing him and knowing exactly what would happen if I did.

What's one more time?

There is no kissing him just once. No touching him once.

It's like an instant addiction. The moment I taste him I never want to stop.

It was supposed to be one visit, a short and sweet congratulatory kiss—something to sate us both.

Somehow, Zander read me like a book. Hell, he read me like a goddamn comic page.

“Please kiss me ... Daddy.”

It wasn't innocent. It was desperate.

Now, I've dug myself a hole I'm not sure I can crawl out of.

“Daddy.”

“Shut up.”

“You're ignoring me.”

“You're being a brat.”

Zander barks out a laugh, garnering the attention of a couple patrons flipping through vinyls.

“You like that, though.” He waggles his eyebrows, and once again, regretting life choices.

“If you don't watch it,” I mutter under my breath, “I'll show you what happens to brats.”

Which is? I have no fucking clue. When Julian is acting bratty, he's easy to tame. Easy not to raise my hackles. But with Zander?

It's only been a few hours, and I feel like I'm completely exasperated.

I don't know how in the hell I could manage this level of attitude on a full time basis.

Every time we lock eyes, though—every secret little smile he sends my way—I'm hit

with a twinge of satisfaction.

Why?

Hell if I know.

“Is this why Julian calls you Daddy? Because you get off on it?”

Zander is sitting on a stool near the desk, looking like a curious child, and when he speaks, he turns a few heads.

Deep breath, Malachi.

“No.” It’s not my place to out Julian, but I also don’t plan on entertaining whatever fucked up notion Zander might get in his head. “And I don’t get off on it.”

“You would have.”

When I glare, he folds his arms over the counter and lays his head on them. “You act like I wasn’t also turned on.”

“For fucks sake, Zander. I’m at work. Can we talk about anything else?”

Trust me, I’m not going to forget anytime soon just how badly I wanted him in that moment.

Or how badly I want him in this one.

“Okay,” he says, sitting back up and leaning on his elbows. “Why were you avoiding me?”

I hesitate. The truth of the matter is: I realized something that first time we kissed, and it terrifies me.

He terrifies me.

It isn't just the overwhelming protectiveness I've started to feel. It's the little things—like his smile making my chest feel warm.

It's my body aching for him from the slightest touch.

My body makes notoriously bad choices.

“Is it enough that maybe I don't want to share a hook up with my best friend?”

He stares straight at me; I can feel it burning a hole in my skull, but I keep my eyes on the stock I'm arranging under the counter.

“You said it wasn't Julian.”

“Maybe I lied.”

“Fine. I won't sleep with him anymore. Problem solved.”

I whack my head on the counter when I abruptly stand. “What the hell?”

“What? Julian and I have a mutually beneficial agreement. Friends with benefits. Non-exclusive. If that's an issue, we're happy being friends.”

“You act like you've talked about this.”

“We have.”

I pause, and Zander notices he has my attention.

“I’ve told him there’s interest—from me. No worries; I didn’t tell him about the kiss or that the interest might be reciprocated.”

Might be.

His grin returns. “What’s the next excuse?”

Why is he so insufferable?

“I’m not looking for what you and Jules have.”

“What are you looking for then?”

My chest feels tight, and I check out a few customers in silence before clearing my throat once we’re alone again.

“Nothing. It was a mistake.”

Hurt dances in his eyes, not a shock but a sad revelation. It’s easier if he pulls away of his own accord anyway.

“I don’t believe you.”

I grind my teeth together. “Zander.”

“Daddy.”

“Stop calling me that.” I raise my voice, and he finally backs down.

Eyes wide, he scoots his chair away a few inches. Those hazel eyes scrunch, and he purses his lips.

A silent question.

Dammit. I can't be angry.

"Listen." I take a step toward him, resting my weight on the counter between us. "Yes, it's hot in the moment. You get a pass there. But if we aren't ... you know ... don't. It's not a joke."

When he frowns, I drop my head into my hands and massage my temples.

"If you want that to be a thing, we can talk about it. But not while I'm at work."

He nods but still seems put off, or at the very least thrown for a loop.

"Can we talk about kissing again?"

I guess that's a better alternative.

"I want to. I really want to. You're good at it."

I can't tell if he's trying to give me a genuine compliment or play on my ego.

"And do you think you deserve it?"

His brows shoot up and his jaw drops open.

"Excuse you. Are you implying I have to earn your mouth?"

I chew on the inside of my cheek, debating letting this train of thought continue down the tracks.

“I’m saying you have to earn anything you want from me.”

It’s just as much for me as it is for him. My resolve is weak. I built it up, but all it took was one look at him in that locker room to dissolve it in an instant.

“Win your games,” I say. “You’ll get a reward.”

It’s slow going, the offer running through his brain, but when it clicks ... There isn’t a sun brighter than his smile.

“You’re on, Blanchard.”

He hops up, and before I can react, he brushes his lips over mine. It’s brief, gone as he folds himself over the counter to scoop up his sports bag.

As he leaves, a familiar uneasiness starts in my gut. It’s stark against the desire lying underneath. A desire that’s been dormant for years.

One that I thought had been permanently snuffed out by a man who wanted more than I could give.

Julian is coloring again while Fire Force plays on his laptop. When the door clicks closed, he looks up and smiles.

“Hi, Daddy.”

All the conflict pulling my body taut relaxes at my best friend’s greeting.



“Hey Jules.” I kiss the top of his head and give him a one-armed hug. “Finish your paper?”

He nods and points to his desk. “How was work?”

I need to breach the subject of Zander with him, but I don’t want it to come off accusatory or hurtful.

At my silence, he sets his coloring pad down and turns to face me. “Daddy?”

I meet his eyes and watch the shift in his demeanor. He unfolds his legs and scoots to the edge of the bed.

“Mal?”

I sit on my own bed, facing him. “Are you in a good head space to talk?”

“For you? Always.”

I hate having to pull him out of his happy bubble, especially given the long evening he had with his classwork.

“You and Zander. How are things going?”

Jules tilts his head and puts on a puzzled expression. “Considering you made me cancel on him?” There’s a slight pout to his lip, but he shrugs. “We’re good. Why do you ask?”

“He came by work today.”

That brings a smile to his face. “Good. He’s been wanting to see you.”

Neither of us may have told Julian what happened between us, but he's not oblivious. He's one of the best people I know at sniffing out tension and putting it to rest. I know the poor man has to be exhausted running point on both of us these last few weeks.

"Did you put the idea of us being together in his head? Did you tell him there could be something there?"

Jules' smile falls, and he brings his hands to his lap, picking at the skin around his thumbs.

"He asked if I'd be bothered by the two of you hooking up. Theoretically. I told him it'd probably be good for you. Given that you haven't shown interest in anyone since..."

"Do you think maybe there's a reason for that, Jules?"

I hate the wet wobble his lip makes and the little wisps of tears that form in the corners of his eyes.

"You deserve to be happy, Mal. I just want you to be happy."

"I am happy. Taking care of you. We're in this together, aren't we?"

He tries to smile, but it comes out sad. "We won't always be."

I know that. Realistically, I know that. But right now? For this moment? The next year or so? We have each other.

I don't need a boyfriend. I don't need sex. I don't need someone to submit to me in bed. All of those messy desires can wait.

“Mal. I want to fall in love,” he says with a soft, dreamy look in his eyes. “I want to explore the Little side of myself in places and in ways I know you won’t be comfortable. I want to find a Daddy who wants all of the things that I want.”

“I’m not stopping you.”

There’s a lull where Julian stares at the ground, and then it breaks with him taking a big, deep breath and getting to his feet. He crosses the room and sits beside me, taking one of my hands in his.

“I love you, Malachi. You’re like my brother. My protector. Daddy .” He says the last bit under his breath with a playful smile. “I will never not want you to be a part of my life. In saying that ...”

He brings our hands to his face and holds them to his cheek. “I don’t want to be your whole life. I know you don’t have any other friends. That’s why I pushed you to hang out with Zander and me. So you’d open up this closed circuit you’ve decided we have.”

“I have friends.”

“You have acquaintances. But if you aren’t in class ... at work ... or studying ... you’re here. With me. Taking care of me. Waiting on me. Or brooding alone with your headphones.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘brooding’.”

He tugs our hands back to his lap and leans his head on my shoulder.

“You don’t see how lonely you are, but I do. Mack did a number on you, but Mal ... Zander isn’t Mack.”

I know that. My brain knows that. My body knows that.

But my heart? It's still tangled in the barbed wire and electrical fence Mack left it in. Three years and I haven't felt ready to step into that landmine.

"I wouldn't be mad," he says, drawing little stars on the back of my hand with his finger. "If you two wanted to mess around."

I lay my cheek over top of his head and sigh. "That's a big 'if'."

I can't deny that Zander makes me feel things I haven't allowed myself to feel since the days in the group home. Since Mack and I would hide in closets, sneaking kisses behind the open refrigerator door. Crawling into each other's beds after room check.

It was every teenagers romantic fantasy—until it wasn't.

I'm not ready to go back there, to tackle the bits of me that never escaped that place, and I'm not sure how to move on without them.

Julian wants me to be happy. Could Zander make me happy? Even in the short run, only getting what little of me I can loan out?

I promised him rewards for winning—honestly a distraction to give me time to figure things out—but can I follow through?

And if I do, can I stop myself from falling into the quicksand that is Zander Hale?

### Chapter Fourteen

Malachi

Bright and early the next morning wasn't what I had in mind for time to think things through.

"What in the hell are you doing here?"

Julian isn't even up for the day, snuggled tightly in his bed without a care in the world.

"You said we could talk about the ... thing."

Sleep is still hanging onto the corners of my mind, but slowly our last conversation comes back to me in horrifying detail.

"And you thought ... five-twenty in the morning was the right time for that?"

Zander is standing outside the dorm room in a hoodie and jeans, hands shoved into his pockets with his unruly hair frizzing around his face.

"I couldn't sleep," he says with a shrug. "Got up and went for a run. Ended up here. Figure we could talk."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, fighting back a smile at his earnestness.

“Give me five minutes to get dressed, and we’ll go grab breakfast.”

That seems to be the moment he realizes I’m practically naked in just my boxers and a tank top, and his Adam’s apple bobs as he forces himself to look away.

Who knew Wildfire could be cute?

Fifteen minutes later, we’re walking side by side, and the chill morning air is nice on my flushed skin, acutely aware of Zander’s gaze as it keeps bouncing to me.

“Got something to say?”

If me calling him out startles him, he doesn’t show it.

“I don’t think I’ve said it clearly,” he says, “But you’re hot, Malachi. This is far from the first time sleeping with you has crossed my mind.”

They’re strange words to hear—not like I haven’t before—but uncomfortable in a way I can’t quite place. At least I can blame the red in my cheeks on the wind.

“I don’t sleep around,” I say, devoid of judgment. Just a fact.

Zander laughs—a snorting, cackling noise stark against the quiet morning.

“I don’t as much as you think I do,” he says. “I mean, yeah, I hookup, but I do have other hobbies. Hockey keeps me busy. Sometimes, after a stressful day or week, I just like the comfort of another body.”

My throat feels dry as I suck in a heavy breath. I know the feeling, even if it doesn’t quite present the same in me. It’s why some nights Julian crawls into my bed, and we just hold each other.

Sometimes you need human contact.

Maybe that's all this is. Maybe my body has just been craving attention for so long it's latched onto the first person outside of Julian willing to give it.

"Is sex like ... special to you?" Zander asks, and my immediate response is to laugh but it comes out more like a scoff. "Hey. I'm trying to find some middle ground here."

I shake my head. "No. Sex isn't special. I'm not a virgin. I'm just selective."

"So selective that you haven't slept with anyone your entire adult life?"

When I glare, he throws his hands up. "I'm just asking. You seemed into me that night in the quad. And again yesterday."

"It's not a matter of being into you or not." I briefly close my eyes and plant my feet. "I need coffee to finish this conversation."

Zander's hand grips mine, tugging me forward. With a sigh, I open my eyes and follow him to one of our campus' coffee shops. It isn't until I catch the barista giggling behind the counter that I realize we're still holding hands.

I flex my fingers to pull away, but Zander takes that as an invitation to lace ours together. My grumbled protest is met with a chuckle, but the feel of his palm against mine is oddly comforting.

We get our coffees and breakfast sandwiches and find an unoccupied table in a corner to settle into. At the very least, I can say I learned something mildly interesting about Zander today—he drinks his coffee black.

“Who puts whipped cream on hot coffee?”

I take a slow sip and raise my brow. “I do. Problem?”

“I kinda figured you’d be like ...” He waves his hand about while searching for the word. “What’s that saying? Something something as dark as your soul?”

“Ouch.”

“I don’t—I mean,”—he gestures vaguely in my direction— “Have you looked in a mirror? You give off major scene kid vibes.”

“Even if my soul was dark—which, rude, it’s not—full disclosure, I am a sugar fiend.”

“Huh.” He leans back in his seat and lets his eyes roam over me. “Never would have guessed.”

I give him the same treatment and watch the red that rises in his cheeks. Then, I take another sip and clear my throat.

“And I wouldn’t have pegged you as someone who gives up control. Most jocks I’ve met are the picture of toxic masculinity in the bedroom.”

Zander is silent for all of a minute before he barks out a laugh. “Ready to talk bedroom habits?” He folds his arms on the table and leans forward. “I’m flexible. Depends on what my partner needs. But no, I’ve never been ... is submissive the right word?”

“Seemed pretty submissive to me.” It’s hard to forget the way he relaxed and caved into each simple touch. How easy he is to guide. “You follow your partners’ lead.



That what you mean?"

He nods, picking at the remains of his sandwich. "It's usually pretty easy to suss out what they expect from me. Whether they want me in charge or more of a level playing field."

"And what do you think I want?"

I'd love to hear it, because even I'm not entirely sure I know.

Zander's eyes grow alight with mischief. "I think you want someone to challenge you ... Daddy. I think you want the illusion of a fight."

Something in the words resonates with me, but I'm not ready to dig into it.

"Don't call me that until we've talked about it."

He makes a sweeping motion with his hands. "Let's talk."

Why does he have to be so infuriating?

"For starters," I say, crossing my arms and leaning back. "It's not a joke. You say it like it's something to make fun of."

His eyes widen, and his shoulders rise. "Seriously? No, I'm just ... have you noticed how you react? When I say it?"

"You mean annoyed?"

My body reacts whole-heartedly, that much is obvious. It's something I don't have much control over.

“No. I mean ...” He looks off to the side and bites down on his lip. “Even when I’m teasing—No, especially when I’m teasing—you look like you’re one step away from bending me over and spanking me.”

Punishments have never sounded appealing when it came to sex, but even I have to admit it’s a pretty sexy—and well deserved—image.

“So you keep it up because why? You want me to snap?”

His face says he wants to protest, but all that comes out of his mouth is a “huh”. He’s silent, eyes unfocused as his thoughts visibly wander. “Kinda. Yeah.”

“You’re a brat.” The words come out of my mouth automatically, and where some people might be offended, Zander just turns a dark red.

“Maybe I just really want you to kiss me again.”

So do I. It’s like a magnetic pull, the way I want to reach across the table and drag him over it. Pull him into my lap and obliterate every thought in his head other than how my tongue feels mixing with his.

“You’re thinking about it.” He grins. “Listen. You have your own personal reasons for having a Daddy kink—and I really want to hear the details there—but for me, it’s simple. It turns you on. I like being the one to turn you on.”

“But why?”

Instead of answering, Zander pushes up from his chair and walks around the table. I look up, and our eyes meet just as he grips the back of my chair and pushes it back.

My heart hammers in my chest, my skin prickling with the awareness of his arms

brushing my shoulders, and my body rising to an inferno when he swings a leg over my lap and lowers himself down.

I catch my hands around his thighs and stop him from fully seating himself, earning me a chuckle.

“You think too much.” He lowers his face to my neck, and against my better judgment, I tip my head to give him more space. “Do I need some grand, noble reason for wanting you?”

His lips graze my ear, hot and heavy breath pulsing against my skin.

“Please, Daddy.”

I groan too loud for where we are, and a couple of heads turn our way but quickly disperse.

Could it really be so bad to indulge him? To explore these new feelings with someone open and honest and willing to lay all his cards on the table?

“I have conditions.”

His laugh skirts down my neck. “Of course you do. Lay them on me.”

It’s an awkward position to talk in, but it promises no one will overhear, and I sort of enjoy the heat of his body on mine.

“This isn’t casual. We don’t just meet up for sex because you’re horny,” I say, and he shifts a bit but nods.

“When do we meet up for sex?”

The pout in his voice makes me smile, and I'm glad he can't see it.

“Win your games, and ... you can pick a sexual favor. Or you can let me choose.”

He shivers, and the thought of touching him—or him touching me—has my cock responding almost immediately. It's been so long since anyone other than myself has put hands on me.

Zander's lips land on my throat, and it takes everything in me not to let go and start rocking him on my lap.

“What about kissing? Do I have to wait for that, too?”

With the way he whines, I should say yes. I could dangle it over his head to make him behave, but in all honesty, that would only be torturing myself.

“We'll make a deal,” I say, kneading his thighs with my fingers and listening to the tiny broken moans he puts right in my ear. “I'll kiss you at my own discretion, depending on your behavior.”

“What if I kiss you first?”

I bury my smile in his shoulder, refusing to admit that planning this is almost fun. “Maybe I'll bend you over my knee and spank you.”

He shudders and shifts around to hover his mouth over mine. “You're so hot. Daddy. Please.”

I'm going to lose complete control over myself because of this man.

I just know it.

We make out for a little while—paying no mind to prying eyes—when Zander breaks away with a gasp and whispers, “I know what I want.”

He’s got a grin that makes my defenses rattle. “What’s that, Wildfire?”

Before he even opens his mouth, I know he’s going to be trouble.

“A blowjob. If kissing is this good, I have a feeling you can do wonders with your mouth.”

This time, there’s no holding back the laugh that jumps out of my throat.

I’m in trouble indeed.

The Raven’s win their game, and I hate to admit it, but I’m strangely excited.

Things have gone back to normal over the last week in the sense that Zander shows up at work or the dorm and is hellbent on bugging me.

I can see in his eyes that he’s egging me on, hoping I’ll instigate some sort of fooling around, but watching him squirm and stew is more fun than I thought it’d be.

We haven’t kissed since the coffee shop, and when he brings it up, I quickly brush it aside. It frustrates him, but he hasn’t pushed the boundary yet.

He meant it when he said he’d stop fooling around with Julian. While he does still come over and hang out, their hands stay above board the whole time.

It’s a secret shoved way down into the depths, but every time I catch them in bed, my brain comes up with all kinds of perverted images. I’ve gotten off to the memory of listening to them fuck more times than I care to admit—not to mention the scene I’d

walked in on.

One day I'll have to come clean to Julian—not that I'm getting off to thinking about him specifically—because it feels sleazy to have my best friend in any kind of erotic fantasy without his knowledge.

But that's a problem for another day.

Right now?

I'm hit with an eerie sense of déjà vu as I make my way down to the locker room after the game. Most of the team is filtering out, and I get looks from a couple of guys, but the last thing I am is intimidated by a jock.

I'm waiting in the hall, trying to decide the best place to go for our post-victory BJ session, when Micky and another of Zander's teammates—Ellis, I think—steps out.

Ellis is tall, dark-skinned, with a buzzed head and a scruffy face, which is a stark difference beside Micky: pale, blond, and baby faced.

“Hey, Malachi,” Micky says with a note of surprise. “Where's Julian?”

Right, because to most people that's what I am, Julian's shadow.

“He's waiting outside. Figured I'd collect Zander.”

Ellis hoots and whistles, shouting through the open door, “Sounds like Halefire is in trouble!”

There's laughter, and then Zander pokes his head out, hair still dripping from a shower and a towel wrapped around his waist.

“Why? What did I do?”

He sees me, and to most people it would be imperceptible, but I’ve quickly grown accustomed to his minute tells.

His pupils dilate, and his breathing quickens. He wets his lips and bobs his throat—all small, quick motions that give him away.

Thirty seconds ago he was a badass hockey player high on a win, and now he’s Wildfire, all attention zeroed in on me and his promised reward.

“Nice towel,” I say, echoing my earlier sentiment and watching the gears in his brain play through our last encounter in the locker room.

“I’ll be out in a minute.” His eyes dart around, briefly pausing on Micky and Ellis. “Unless you want to wait inside so these two will fuck off?”

Ellis laughs and claps Zander on the back but is quick to take the opportunity to duck out. Even though Micky gives him a questioning look, he doesn’t push.

“Have fun,” is all he says before turning and continuing down the hall.

Zander latches onto the front of my shirt and yanks me into the locker room, dragging me to a corner out of direct eyesight and staring me down in all his scarcely covered glory.

“You have been an asshole,” he says under his breath, but there’s no heat to it. At least, not the angry kind. “Teasing me all week, and look at that. We won, motherfucker.”

I arch a brow and place a hand on his waist just above the towel. “That’s not what

you call me,” I whisper, bringing my face close to his but not close enough to give him what he wants.

Adrenaline buzzes in my veins, thumping harder as Zander pushes his hands up under my shirt. I freeze, because I hadn’t really taken into account Zander touching me , but unable to deny how acutely sensitive I am under his touch.

His lips form a grin that he presses to the hollow of my throat.

“Blow me, Daddy.”



### Chapter Fifteen

Zander

Malachi Blanchard gives incredible head.

I'm not just talking about how sexy he looks on his knees with his hair pulled back and cheeks hollowed out—but that definitely adds to the appeal.

He's meticulous with his tongue, careful with his suction, and I'm not sure how I'm going to survive the way he squeezes my balls when he takes me to the back of his throat.

My hands itch to grab onto his shoulders, his hair, any part of him, but each time I reach he pulls off and directs them back to my sides. That's its own kind of torture.

“Let me touch you,” I whine under my breath, careful not to be overheard.

When I look down, he's smiling with the tip of my dick in his mouth.

Hot.

He drags his lips down the side of my length then torturously slow back up. There's pure satisfaction in his eyes as he pops off.

“Want another prize? Win another game, Wildfire.”

My eyes widen, and an impatient whine leaves my throat.

“That’s not playing fair.”

He flattens his tongue on the underside of my cock, cradling it and closing his mouth around the tip—all while his eyes stay locked on mine. The sensation is a cruel torture, suckling on the head and making a show of swallowing the precum that leaks out.

“If you need something to focus on,” he says, replacing his mouth with his hand, the other latching onto one of my thighs. “Fuck my mouth. I can take it.”

I’m not sure I can.

But I’m not going to pass up the opportunity.

With nothing to hold onto, I clasp my hands behind my back, letting the tense muscles keep me balanced.

Malachi grins, pleased with himself—or with me—and agonizingly slow takes my dick down to the base. He’s still gripping me, keeping his own balance.

I pull back and give an experimental thrust of my hips, eyes on Malachi as his flutter closed and a moan rumbles around my cock.

Oh. He likes this.

That’s all it takes to erase any hesitation. My hips rock in a steady motion, tip kissing the back of his throat and throbbing with each guttural moan he makes in response.

It’s a slick, messy glide, and I can feel his spit dribbling down my balls. As my

movements become more erratic, the hand on my dick lowers to cup them and squeeze with just enough pressure that I lose all rational thought and thrust my hands with a bruising grip to his shoulders.

“Gonna come,” I choke out, rocking my hips faster. “Please don’t stop.”

Both of his hands move to my thighs, and just as I feel the orgasm cresting over there’s a hard thwack right across my ass.

My cock jumps in Malachi’s mouth, cum spurting in heavy ropes straight down his throat. He takes it without resistance, sucking me dry of every drop before letting my softening cock slip from between his lips.

My whole body tingles, nerves on the fritz, but I manage to stutter out the words, “You fucking spanked me.”

He wipes his thumb across his chin, and his tongue flicks out to lick the smear of cum from it.

“I told you not to touch me.”

I close my eyes and rest my back against the wall. “You didn’t use those exact words.”

When Malachi stands, it’s impossible to miss the erection straining down the leg of his jeans. I’m still catching my breath, and when I bunch the fabric of his shirt in my hand, he doesn’t stop me.

“Can I return the favor?”

I want to witness Malachi fall apart. I want to feel him tremble and hold my head so

hard it hurts. I want to taste his cum.

My eyes rise to his lips.

I want to taste mine on him.

He chuckles and steps so close his hard dick brushes my soft one. His hands slide under my shirt, fingers splayed across my ribs.

“Ask me to kiss you.”

He’s so close, and he knows he has blanket permission. I want his mouth on mine every moment he’s willing to give it to me.

He must still be punishing me, but I can’t say I’m entirely mad about it.

I tilt my head, pulling him as close as he’ll allow. When the words pass my lips, they’re hardly a whisper, more an exhaled breath. “Kiss me, Daddy.”

He obliges with his tongue instantly finding home between my teeth.

I was able to hold myself together while he blew me, enthralled by his sounds and the look of him on his knees. But now that all I have to focus on is his tongue in my mouth, his lips on mine, and his fingers tweaking my nipples, I can’t hold back the needy noises fighting their way out.

I’m loud. Too loud. Malachi brings a hand down on my ass again, but that only makes me louder.

“Fuck,” I gasp into his mouth. “Not helping.”

He laughs and tips my head back, trailing his lips across my jaw and down my neck. “No ones going to hear you, Wildfire. I promise. Be as loud as you want for me.”

I need confident, sexy Malachi in my life at all times.

“All the customers are gone. The door is locked. I told Micky he could go home.”

If it were up to me, we would have gone at it in the locker room, but all Malachi did was work me up and leave me begging to be touched.

He insisted on making me wait: doing dinner with him and Julian—where he relentlessly teased me more.

Then, he dragged me to The Den where I had to sit through his shift—sure it was only two or three hours—before he finally brought me to one of the rooms in the back and gave me my much anticipated reward.

“And if he didn’t?”

He flicks his tongue against my earlobe, catching it with a quick nip between his teeth. I suck in a breath, and his laugh cascades across my cheek.

“Well, then now he knows what it sounds like when someone owns you.”

Who knew the whole possessive act would be a turn on?

“Is that what you want, Daddy? To own me?”

I can sense his hesitation, like maybe we’ve crossed too far into unfamiliar territory.

“Do you want to get off?” I change the subject. “I don’t have to touch you. You can

... use my thighs. Or just jerk one out and spray me with it. I don't mind."

He contemplates it. The way his hands linger on my chest, trail lightly down my sides—he's thinking about it.

But instead of reaching for his belt, he tucks me back into my briefs and pulls them—along with my pants—up over my ass.

"Maybe next time."

Relief I hadn't realized I'd been holding out for floods my system. This wasn't a one off. He wants to do it again.

He kisses me again, brief and sweet, and when he pulls away, I know he's re-erected the wall between his usual self and who he lets himself be in bed.

I always thought Malachi was unapproachable because he was off-putting on purpose, but after spending time with him I realize it's simply because he's awkward. He has a chronic case of Resting Dick Face that makes him seem scarier than he is.

"You heading back to the dorms?" I ask after a bout of silence.

"Oh. Um, yeah. Jules is waiting up."

Are you going to talk about me? Tell him how you had my dick in your mouth?

Surely not, but normally I'd joke about it anyway. The air is weird. It's the first time we've gone beyond kissing, and I can't help but wonder how Malachi really feels about it.

How cheesy is that?

“Malachi.”

“Hm?”

“You want this too, right?”

He cocks his head. “I sucked your dick.”

Yeah, I know how ridiculous I sound, but my heart is beating so hard my chest hurts. I need to clear the damn air.

After a minute, Malachi smiles. It’s small and soft, but it’s there. “It was good, Wildfire.”

I don’t mean to look down—more away to keep myself from putting on an all out grin—but I catch him adjusting his still-hard dick behind his fly.

“You sure you don’t want help with that?”

Malachi’s cheeks heat up in an instant, and it dawns on me that maybe—and my obnoxious ass should have thought of this sooner—he isn’t ready.

He’s not a virgin; both he and Julian have made that clear, but he hasn’t slept around in years. While I don’t know the reason, I suspect there’s more to it than lack of interest.

When we’re both ready to walk out the door and silently make our ways back to our separate housings, Malachi wraps his fingers around my wrist and mutters, “wait.”

His face is contemplative yet still beet red. I turn my hand and tug it slightly until I can slide my fingers into his and give them a comforting squeeze.

He laughs—barely audible—and meets my eyes.

“I’ll record myself getting off,” he says in one breath, knocking mine out of my lungs. “Pass your next test, and I’ll send it to you.”

If that’s not the most motivating sentence ever spoken, I don’t know what is.

I don’t pass the test.

It ticks me off for more than just the fact that I won’t get to watch Malachi touch himself—though that is a travesty.

I’ve been studying and working hard as much as I can between practice and other coursework, but I had already fallen behind, and even with Malachi’s helping hand, catching up is still a bitch.

Which means I kind of am too, and everyone has been more than willing to let me know it. Which makes me even crankier.

Usually I’d blow off steam with Julian—a good make out session usually winds me right down—but I promised Malachi if we were going to fool around it would just be the two of us.

Even with all the static dancing under my skin, that’s not something I’m willing to give up.

Instead, I go for a run and find myself smack dab in front of The Den. It’s like the place is taunting me. Reminding me of our dirty endeavor inside it’s walls and mocking what I fucked myself out of.

“What did the shop ever do to you? Other than house your annoying ass for every



single shift Malachi has.”

Micky is standing in the entryway, arms crossed and hip cocked on the frame.

“I’m not here that much.” I swipe at the swear on my face with the bottom of my tank top.

“I beg to differ. You’re here more than I am.”

I shrug. “Malachi here?”

Micky rolls his eyes and thumbs toward the alley. “On break. Bother him at your own risk, though.”

Warning me against doing anything is the most surefire way to make sure I do it. He should know that about me by now.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

With a quick salute, I round the front of the building to the alley, dimly lit by the sky overhead but drowned in the shadows cast between the buildings.

Malachi sits with his back to the brick wall, knees pulled up, scrolling on his phone with headphones in. A pretty clear indicator he doesn't want to be bothered.

However, I'm a master at ignoring Do Not Disturb signs.

The broken concrete crackles beneath my sneakers, and I come to a stop directly in front of him.

There's no immediate reaction, so I tap my shoe on the side of his. He doesn't bother to look up, simply copies me and continues on his phone.

Thirty seconds pass, and I cross my arms. Tap his foot again.

This time his eyes find mine, his brows raise, and the smallest of smiles forms on his lips.

That's all of the attention he gives me, and when he looks away this time, I feel something gross and ugly churn in my stomach.

I crouch down and yank on one of his earbuds, satisfied as it pops out and seems to garner an instant reaction. He frowns, snapping his gaze on me.

"Wildfire." The word is harsh like an accusation.

“Blanchard.”

His face is unreadable, and it ticks something off in my brain.

“I’ve got ten minutes left. Can it wait?”

Could I pop a squat and kill ten minutes easy enough until he’s ready to socialize?  
Yes.

Am I going to?

I shove his knees apart with my hands and fit myself between them. My hands smack into the brick beside Malachi’s head.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’.” He shuts off his phone and puts it in his pocket, straightening his legs and hooking a finger in the elastic of my shorts. “Come here.”

It’s like a game of Tetris, positioning my legs on either side of his thighs, his hands putting pressure on my waist until I lower my weight to his lap.

The position is almost comforting; Malachi’s warmth seeps through where his hands and thighs touch. But the flurry in my chest isn’t quite settled.

I squirm, and Malachi tightens his grip on my waist. “What do you need?”

“What makes you think I need anything?”

He hums, then takes a hand off my waist to pinch my chin between his fingers.

“Wildfire.” This time it’s a command.

I hate that I respond so readily to it. “I failed the stupid test.”

Malachi’s eyes widen in surprise, then soften in understanding. I hate that even more.

“You get a pass from dealing with me,” I mutter, but Malachi’s hand still clenching my face forces my eyes on his. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I’m trying to decide if you’re asking for a spanking, a kiss, or an obituary on the school website.”

The dry humor actually gets me, cracks a little of the chaos weighing me down, but I’m still acutely aware of what he’s asking me. The answer is, I don’t fucking know.

“I need sex,” I say, because it’s the only thing I can think of to fix the crossed wires short circuiting inside me.

“Won’t be getting that from me.” He’s so matter of fact it makes my actual blood boil. “I bet Jules would let you fuck him if you asked.”

Anger pulses through the rising tide of frustration. “I’m not doing that anymore.”

He brings a hand to the back of my neck and clamps down. “Why not?”

“Because you asked me to stop.”

He applies the slightest bit of pressure, and I cave like a wet paper towel, my forehead colliding with his.

“Why do you care what I want?”

I want to kiss him. I want to kiss him.

I don't need sex ... I just need him to kiss me.

"Because I want you." My throat feels raw and mangled. "Because that's how I can have you."

Silence. Anxiety-inducing, nauseating silence.

I squirm. He holds me in place.

After a few seconds, he adjusts me in his lap, and I let him. He pushes my face into his neck, looping an arm around my waist and holding me tightly.

"I'm sorry about your class," he says, running his fingers through my hair. "I'm sorry you feel like you need to get physical and shut down your feelings."

Is that what's happening? Is that what I'm doing?

Maybe. Why would I want to feel this way? Why would anyone?

Of course I want to shut it off.

"I won't have sex with you," he says softly into my ear. "Having a bad day doesn't give you the right to have a bad attitude. It doesn't give you the right to use me."

My chest feels heavy, and my lungs feel wet, but when I try to push off his chest, he only tightens his arms around me.

"I said it doesn't give you the right to use me, not that I won't let you."

He loosens his touch just enough that I can pull back to look at his face. To see the raw honesty that makes tears well up in my eyes.

There are no words for how his mouth feels when it collides with mine. How sweet it is. How every time I push to deepen it, he softens us right back up. Over and over until I give up the control and let him choose the pace.

I don't know when the tears start to fall, just that I can taste them on our lips, which means Malachi can too. Neither of us acknowledge it.

When a sob sneaks out mid-kiss, he pulls me closer, strokes a hand along my back. Comforting. Encouraging.

Eventually, I can't hold it together anymore and have to break away, but he pulls me into his neck again where I soak his skin, his work shirt. I'm sure he's supposed to be back by now, but he's not pushing me away. He's not rushing me to bottle it up because he has somewhere to be.

"It's okay to be disappointed in yourself," he whispers into my ear. "A bad mark doesn't make you any less of the arrogant superstar that you are."

A broken laugh makes its way through the tears. "Fuck you."

"I'm right."

He is, and I'm too exhausted to be mad about it.

When the tears run out, I'm left panting into his shoulder, my body feeling like it's been wrung dry and muscles screaming their discontent.

I finally peel myself back, and Malachi lets his hands fall, freeing me.

We stare at each other, words stuck somewhere behind the heavy need to just exist . To share space.

I should leave.

But my body pretends to be lead.

“You’re so good, Wildfire,” he says, tucking my hair behind my ear in a gesture that should feel condescending but just feels nice. Especially when he cradles my cheek in his palm after. “I don’t scare easy.”

I do.

The way he holds me, calms me, handles me —it’s terrifying.

I don’t want him to stop.

As the seconds tick on, my body grows heavy, and when I collapse against him, tucking myself into him like a child on a mattress, his arms come back around me like a cocoon.

He doesn’t speak, but my throat burns, and I say the words that have been taking up the space of my labored breaths.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

And there isn’t a single sexual or ironic intention to them.

Just pure gratitude.

What is he doing to me? And why do I sort of like it?

### Chapter Sixteen

Zander

Malachi kisses me a little more liberally now.

Not in the passionate way we do on game days, but when I say something stupid that makes him roll his eyes or when I'm talking too much and he wants me to shut up.

He'll press his mouth to mine just long enough to shift my focus and then pull away all sneakily satisfied.

He still doesn't let me touch him, preferring to offer blowjobs or humping sessions—and I have no problem grinding our bodies together until we both come in our pants—but I'm determined to lay hands on him this time around.

We've been kicking ass and taking names; we're even on track to make it to the Frozen Four. Which means I've gotten lots of rewards and might even be a bit spoiled.

"I don't think I've ever seen you this happy," Micky says from beside me at the buffet-style pizza shop a couple of us decided to hit up after annihilating another game.

Usually I fuck off with Malachi at the first opportunity, but he had work and the guys have started getting huffy that I never celebrate with them.



“Getting laid will do that to you,” I say, shoving a piece of piping hot cheese pizza in my mouth. What’s life without a little danger?

“You’re always getting laid,” he says with a snort. “What’s different about this one?”

I like to think Malachi and I are a well-kept secret, but I know better. I’m not subtle; I spend most of my free time with him and Julian, and I’m certain Micky has caught us making out at The Den a time or two; though, he hasn’t said anything.

What’s different?

He calls me Wildfire. Kisses me like I’m important.

Draws out the parts of me I don’t let other people see.

Not that I’ll say any of that out loud.

“Has the great Halefire finally caught feelings?”

I roll my eyes and backhand his shoulder. “I can’t like someone I’m seeing now?”

Two slices of pizza down and Micky’s stare is almost its own entity. “What?”

He drops his chin into his open hand, green eyes analyzing me to an unnerving degree.

“Is that what this is? You’re seeing him?”

“Oh, c’mon. You know what I mean.”

Micky laughs, short with an edge of sarcasm. “I don’t think you do, man. Answer me

this: are the two of you exclusively hooking up?”

I don’t like this line of questioning. “Yes.”

“Okay. Do you hook up every time you hang out?”

“No.” Though, not entirely by choice. I would have my hands all over Malachi if he’d give me the chance.

“Do you talk—often—even when you aren’t hanging out?”

“That’s kind of how friends work!” I throw my hands up. “You know my MO. Friends with benefits until the benefits wear off, and then ... eventually so does the friends part.”

The words leave an icky taste in my mouth.

“How do you feel about that? Losing out on everything that isn’t sex.”

We haven’t even had sex yet. I haven’t even seen him naked.

I know what he’s asking, and even thinking about it causes a pain in my chest.

“It’s okay to have a crush,” Micky says, patting me on the back. “Just make sure you know where he stands, too.”

Until just now, I didn’t even know where I stood.

Me having a crush on Malachi? Like genuine romantic interest?

If I suggested taking him out on a date, I’m pretty sure it would freak him the hell

out. A few weeks ago I may have thought he'd murder me at the idea, but now? After spending time with him?

I think I'd be the one scaring him.

Normally, I'm jumping on Malachi the second he's available, but now I'm standing outside The Den while he locks up for an entirely different reason.

He smiles at me over his shoulder, and it's a genuine one. I've been getting more of those lately.

"Thought you were stopping by in the morning."

A waif of cold air makes my skin feel hot. At least, that's what I blame it on.

"Is it so strange that I wanted to see you sooner?"

He steps forward, fingers gripping my wrist and sliding up to my elbow. The gentlest tug pulls me into him, his free hand cupping my chin and his mouth descending on mine.

I open up for him right away, inviting his tongue to explore mine as if there's any ground left to cover.

Why does kissing him feel like such a relief? When did that happen?

"Wanted to see me or wanted your reward?" he asks on a breathy exhale after pulling away.

I don't even entertain teasing tonight. "You. We need to talk."

“Uh oh. Bored of me already?”

If I didn't know him better, I would miss the muscles in his jaw tense and his gaze drop away. I wouldn't read them for the insecurity they are.

People think I keep everything surface level, but I pay attention.

“Nah, definitely not. Just ... not here. Can we go back to your dorm?”

His brows pinch, but he nods. We walk in relative silence. Not holding hands. Not bickering like usual. Just stewing in the tense atmosphere I can't get myself to dispel.

It's not like he makes any steps to close the gap either, so by the time we make it up the stairs of his dorm there's a cloud of dread and anticipation that makes a sickening mix in my gut.

He flicks the light on and strides with a purpose to his bed. At first all he does is stand there, back to me, but he finally decides to take a seat on the mattress and motions for me to do the same.

My chest tightens, shoulders drawing up as I clench my fists in my pockets. Heat builds up in my cheeks, only getting worse by the look in Malachi's eyes when he notices.

“Wildfire.”

Burn me up. Turn me to ash. I want to take you with me.

Micky is right about one thing: these feelings are unique to Malachi. I've never wanted to weigh my burdens on someone else like this.

I keep this part of me separate from the rest of the world for a reason.

My feet follow his silent directions, letting my weight drop heavy and hollow on the bed beside him.

“You’re freaking me out,” Malachi says, stretching his arm around my back to squeeze my shoulder with his steady fingers.

A dry laugh scrapes out of my throat, and I clasp my hand over his, grateful that he doesn’t pull away.

“Don’t be. I—I have a hard time being really ... vulnerable, I guess?”

The intense attentiveness that Malachi displays does good to settle the bundle of nerves tangled in my chest. He rubs his thumb along the curve of my neck, pressing into the groove where it and my shoulder meet.

“Do you need ...” Malachi trails off, fingers gliding along my skin with feather-light pressure. “Here.”

His other hand tangles into my hair, firm yet gentle. He turns my head, pulling the strands just hard enough to make me gasp, and then he swallows the sound with his mouth over mine.

Everything falls away while we kiss. The coil wound tight in my body loosens. A brazenness comes alive with every swipe of his tongue.

I swing my legs over his hips and nudge his shoulders until he lays himself back. He grabs onto my waist, holding me close—as if I have any intentions other than grinding my body on top of his.

Why can't everything be as simple as kissing Malachi?

My hands find the hem of his shirt and slip underneath. He's been more willing to let me explore lately, but he still keeps me on a tight leash.

Now, they travel up his stomach, and I relish in the hitched breath he huffs into my mouth. My fingers find his nipples, and when he doesn't push me away, I rub them with the pads of my fingers.

Malachi's moan is a deep, erotic sound, and his body aches into the attention. My mind is fuzzy and focused solely on dredging more of those noises out of him.

I shove his shirt up his chest and leave his mouth to pop one of the buds in mine. A scratchy sound leaves his throat and a hand comes around the back of my neck.

All I want is for him to feel good. The way he makes me me good.

My hips move in soft, circular motions over his. His dick swells against mine. He pushes his chest out with every suck and flick of my tongue.

I litter his chest with little bruises, his pants and broken cries spurring me on. When I pull away to look at him—to see the evidence of my rampage and the wrecked expression on his face.

His chest is red in all kinds of ways, and it hits me like a brick wall all of a sudden that I've never seen him shirtless before.

How is that possible?

Ink decorates his skin in a swirl of letters. Stanzas. There's an elaborate piece on his ribs of detailed headphones with wings tangled in a bright red ribbon, the only color

to the work aside from streaks of red dripping from the wings and pale pink scratch marks that look like scars.

I run my fingers over them for the peace of mind that they're actually a part of his ink and not real scars.

Malachi audibly gasps at my light touch, shivering and clenching the bedsheets in his fists.

There's no counting the tattoos—they're too numerous, weaving into each other. Lyrics. Tiny drawings that tie them together.

They're mesmerizing. Consuming.

I'm so busy touching him—appreciating him—that I don't hear the door open, I don't notice footsteps or the squeak coming from the other side of the room. It's Malachi's hands closing over my own that breaks me out of the trance.

When I look up, his face is a deep rosy hue, and I finally catch a glimpse of Julian out of the corner of my eye.

“Didn't mean to interrupt,” he says with a slight giggle. “They're beautiful aren't they?”

There aren't words for what I think about his body right now, so I simply nod and drag my hands down Malachi's chest to rest on his hips.

Julian bounds over and hops onto the bed beside us, seeming to have no care for the scene he just walked in on. His face is split in a grin, and he leans down to Malachi, faux whispering, “Did you ask him?”

Instantly, my curiosity is piqued. “Ask me what?”

Malachi curses under his breath and throws an arm over his eyes, which only makes Julian giggle again. “Nothing. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not,” Julian says, turning those bright eyes on me. “It’s hot.”

Over the last few weeks, Malachi hasn’t asked a single thing of me sexually. If he’s got something on his mind, I damn sure want to know it.

“Now you have to tell me.”

What could fluster him like this?

He huffs in surrender, tense shoulders deflating, but he keeps his eyes covered. I watch his throat bob, watch his tongue and teeth worry his bottom lip.

I give the barest rock of my hips so he’ll feel my hard cock on his thigh—so he’ll know that whatever is on his mind, I’m interested.

“Jules and I were talking ...” his voice trails off, and after a moment he clears his throat. “You want to have sex. And I’m not there yet.”

I swallow around the dryness in my throat. “If you’re trying to give me permission to sleep around, I don’t want that. You were clear about wanting this exclusive.”

“I know.” He sighs and moves his hips under mine, a reciprocated interest. “It’s not sleeping around. It’s more ... I want to watch you fuck.”

My ears ring as blood rushes to my head. My actual head this time, though my dick is also throbbing with the thrum of excitement.



“You and Julian,” he clarifies, finally dropping his arm and gazing between us. “I trust him. You’re comfortable together.” He shrugs.

The words twist and turn in my brain, creating a myriad of images that only serve to both confuse and turn me on more.

“Wait. Is this what you have in mind for ...?”

“Your reward? Yeah.”

I don’t mean to whine; it just slips out.

“I want to touch you.”

Malachi’s face grows warm again, and I flatten myself over top of him, ghosting my mouth along his jaw.

“Daddy,” I whisper in his ear, feeling him shudder and his cock jump against mine. His arms come around me, one resting on my ass where I know he’s dying to smack.

“You can touch me,” he says quietly, stroking a hand up my back. “But nothing below the belt. The rest of me is fair game.”

I kiss along his neck, hips working against his because he’s right—I want sex. More importantly, I want to have sex with him , but if he’s not ready, I’ll take whatever he’s willing to offer.

“Um.”

I startle at Julian’s timid voice, remembering that Malachi and I aren’t alone.

Unable to convince myself to give up Malachi's warmth, I sit back up and give Julian an apologetic smile.

"Zander," he says in that soft, seductive way of his. "Is that something you'd like to try?"

Would I like to be buried in Julian while Malachi watches?

"How would it work? Where would we ... what would we ...?"

Malachi's hands find my waist and squeeze, bringing my attention to him.

"I was thinking we could rent a motel room. Sit down. Hammer out some rules and expectations."

The muscles in his face are tense, but he tries to smile for me anyway.

"One last time. Because I can handle a dry spell, you know. Let me make sure I understand."

I take in a breath, focusing on Malachi's fingers stroking my skin.

"You want to watch while I fuck your best friend?"

His eyes come to life in a way I've only seen when he's on his knees, or when he's got me shoved against a wall, lips pressed so tight to mine I can barely breathe.

It's dark. Lustful.

"Let me make this clear, Wildfire." The way he says the name sends tendrils of electricity down my spine. "I want to watch you fuck my best friend while we both

know what you really want is to be fucking me.”

My heart pounds so hard my chest might explode.

We’ve never talked about who would do what when we got that far, but I’d be lying if I said I haven’t fantasized about burying myself in his ass.

I want to fuck him.

I want to hear him beg me to hit that sweet spot—No, I want him to order me to fuck him until he comes on my cock.

“I think he likes the idea,” Julian says with a quiet snicker, and I don’t bother denying it.

I meant it when I said I’m up for whatever Malachi has in mind.

Whatever he wants me to do.

However he wants me.

As long as he wants me.

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### Chapter Seventeen

Malachi

Zander has a way of sneaking his way into parts of my life I hadn't expected to let anyone into.

I want him.

Goddamn do I want him.

In ways I haven't wanted since the days I'd let myself get lost in Mack.

I want to get lost in Zander.

The motel we pick out is close to campus so if anyone needs out in a hurry they don't feel trapped.

I wanted to get there first, to give myself time to gain a little confidence, but as I had work—as I do most days—I'm the last to arrive.

Julian and Zander are sitting on one of the two beds together, Zander's hand on Julian's thigh as they lean their heads close together, passing quiet words between them.

It's hard not to smile at their happiness, at my two boys enjoying each other's company.

My boys .

When did I start to think of them like that?

It feels natural. Right.

Maybe I'm more into this Daddy thing than I thought.

Julian catches sight of me first, and I can tell by his big grin that he's dying to bounce right into my arms.

When he opens his mouth, it wobbles slightly, but he quickly recovers. "Mal!"

I move around to the bed, holding out an arm that he quickly falls into. I kiss his head, well aware of Zander's gaze on us.

"What are you two up to?"

Julian grins. "Trouble."

Zander laughs and smacks him on the thigh, making Julian squeak and giggle.

He's feeling full blown Little today.

I'm not sure how I feel about that given what we're about to do. But I'll table that until I get him alone.

"We were talking about you," Zander says. "About tonight."

"We don't have to do this," I tell them. "If anyone is uncomfortable ..."

“Mal.” Julian takes a step back and grabs hold of my shoulders. “You always take care of everybody else. Let us take care of you for once. Besides.”

He steps back and drops into Zander’s lap. “Sex with Z is hardly a hardship.”

I cross my arms over my chest, trying to hide the bout of insecurity swimming through me.

“But with me watching?”

While we’ve never been particularly turned on by each other, we’ve also never explicitly been turned off either. At least, I haven’t.

Julian drags Zander’s arm across his chest so he can hold it. “It’s hot. Someone watching us ... directing us ...”

He flashes me those innocent eyes, and it’s impossible not to smile. “Directing, huh? What did you have in mind?”

I’d planned on being a relatively silent observer, not wanting to get in the way of whatever makes them feel good.

“We want you to get as much pleasure from this as possible,” Zander says, dropping his chin onto Julian’s shoulder. “Since you won’t let us touch you.”

“Cheeky brat,” I mutter, and it makes him grin. “Fine. If there’s something I want to see, I’ll tell you. While we’re at it, let’s go over what we don’t want to happen.”

“Obviously Mal and I won’t be interacting in any sexual way,” Julian says. “Zander knows how I am in bed. And Mal? I’m up for anything you throw at me.”

Zander nuzzles into Julian's neck, peeking up at me like he's trying to copy Julian's innocence—which I don't buy for a second.

"Your dick is off limits," he says, and I shudder. "But what about kissing?"

"You can kiss me. Jules too, if he wants."

Julian grins, but Zander's falls.

"Or not? Is that a limit for you, Wildfire?"

His expressions grows contemplative, and he eventually nods. He hesitates before he speaks, eyes brewing with conflict.

I step forward and card a hand through his hair, directing his face up to mine.

"This doesn't work if we aren't honest with each other."

His arms tighten around Julian, but his eyes remain locked on me. "I feel like a hypocrite. I don't want anyone else to touch you."

A cage of butterflies opens in my chest, the breath in my lungs growing heavy and hot.

"New rule then," I say, tendrils of excitement spreading through my body. "Nobody touches me without Wildfire's permission." As soon as relief settles into his eyes, I tug his hair and recapture his attention. "Not even me."

Julian wiggles in Zander's grasp. "Oh. He likes that."

I figured he would.

“You’re sure you’re good with all of this?” I ask, shifting my focus to Jules—red cheeked and smiling.

“Absolutely.”

I can still tell that he’s holding back, so I clear my throat and put a little space between the three of us.

“Wildfire, why don’t you get cleaned up in the bathroom while Jules and I have a chat?”

Zander nods and kisses Julian’s cheek. On his way past, he grabs and gives my fingers a quick squeeze before shutting himself into the bathroom.

I sit down on the bed beside Julian, and as soon as we hear the shower running, he sighs and throws himself back on the mattress.

“Daddy,” he whines. “God, I’ve been dying to say that.”

I had my smile behind my hand. “I could tell.”

He pouts his lip out. “Don’t tease me. I’m horny and Little at the same time. That’s new for me.”

Nodding, I stroke a hand through his hair, which he promptly grabs and presses to his cheek. “I know, baby. Is this going to be too much for you?”

“As long as it makes you happy”—he kisses my palm— “I want this.”

What did I do to deserve a friend like him?



“I just don’t want things to be weird.”

Julian’s playful smiles takes over, and he drops my hand, propping up on his elbows.

“Malachi. You told me that you’ve had actual daydreams about Zander and I fucking. Did that bother me? Not at all. It’s not like you were thinking about fucking me.”

I must make a face, because Julian’s laugh rings throughout the room. When he sobers, he reaches for my hand that I readily give.

“I guess this kind of feels like a game. A sexy game. And it makes me feel ... Little.” He scrunches his face. “I’m one hundred percent going to slip and call you Daddy.”

“I don’t mind if you don’t mind,” I say, and his eyes widen. “But we have to talk to Zander about it first. Make sure he’s comfortable.”

Julian nods enthusiastically, pulling me down to the bed beside him and throwing his arms around me. “Thank you, Daddy.”

The two of us chat idly while we wait for Zander to come back out, and the quick-witted words I’d planned die on my tongue when he does.

There is no shortage of attraction with Zander for me. Watching him sweat makes me hot. The lazy smile and forwardness he often exhibits makes me soft for him. His brattiness? That does something extra to my body, makes it hard to keep my hands off him.

So, yes, Zander—with water dripping down his body and a tiny towel tied around his waist—gets my gears churning.

“Are you allergic to underwear?” I ask once the words find their way back to me.

A grin. “We’re going to take our clothes off anyway, right?”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t say I’m mad about getting to take a good look at him unabashed.

“Sit down. We need to have a talk.”

He does, sitting on my other side and mumbling under his breath, “Uh oh. Daddy’s upset.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and breathe out hard—though I’m trying my damndest not to smile.

“It’s about that, actually.”

“About what?”

“The use of ‘Daddy’ tonight.”

Zander’s face turns a bright red, and Julian giggles beside me.

“Hey. Open and honest, remember? Jules?”

For a minute, Julian sits chewing his lip, the excitement dimming to nervousness, but he finally takes in a breath and grabs my hand for support.

“Without going into extreme detail—because then we’ll never get to the good stuff—” He huffs some hair out of his eyes on a laugh. “Mal is my best friend, and he takes care of me.”

“Uh huh.” Zander starts to smile, and I smack him lightly on the thigh, earning me a

heated glare.

“Sometimes I need a little extra care. For me, that looks like calling Mal ‘Daddy’ while I ... regress.”

“Oh.” Zander’s eyes open wide, and he grins. “Is this the Daddy origin story?”

Jules nerves seem to be getting the better of him, so I take over.

“When Jules feels safe to be vulnerable, he addresses me as Daddy more often than Mal. If it bothers you, he won’t, but he might be more reserved to keep it from slipping out.”

I know this is important to Julian. What might be fun and sexy for Zander and I is bigger for him, and I want to respect that.

“The fact that he’s willing to include you in that is special.”

Jules’ smile is small, but his eyes shine with appreciation. As if to hammer the message home, he leans into me and says in his small, quiet voice, “thank you, Daddy.”

Zander watches the two of us quietly, then slowly slides closer and holds a hand out to Julian.

“You can be as open as you want with me,” he says when Julian laces their fingers together. “You told me once that Malachi makes you feel protected. He does for me, too.”

A lump forms in my throat, chest tightening like someone has physically wrapped their hand around my heart and started squeezing.

When Zander looks at me, I can see the honesty on his face, but he's quick to cover it with a teasing smile. "You're kinkier than I thought, Daddy. "

He's half bent over my lap already, so it's easy for me to smack a palm on his bare ass hanging out of the towel.

"Shit!" He curses, jumps back, face contorting in discomfort.

"And Zander calls me Daddy because he wants to be punished."

Zander glares, but the blush on his cheeks and the chub tenting his towel betrays him.

It strange; no part of me wants to hurt him. I don't even find spanking him like I just did particularly thrilling.

It's his reactions that spur me on, that have me trying out things I was convinced I had no interest in.

"Jules, baby, your turn to shower."

I ruffle his hair and usher him to the bathroom, smiling as he pecks Zander on the cheek before disappearing.

Now that it's just the two of us, I find myself eyeing Zander with much more appreciation than I'd allowed myself previously.

He's got tight, toned muscles with a soft center. His dirty blond hair is short but just long enough to fall into his face. The way he watches me watch him—the grin that unfolds—I almost want to say to hell with tonight's plan.

Pin him to the bed and make him beg for release.

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I love the way his voice breaks when he says, “Please, Daddy.”

Zander leans back on the bed, body on display like something out of a magazine.

“I have a request,” he says, voice low and a little breathless.

“What’s that?”

He licks his lips, eyes darting up and down my body before returning to mine. “If Julian and I are going to cuck you, I want to tie you up.”

We didn’t come prepared for bondage, so we have to make do.

Zander pulls the laces out of one of his shoes and makes a loose knot around my wrists. They’re tied behind my back, my clothes lost to a pile on the floor except for my underwear.

Zander’s breath fans across my shoulder as he finishes his knot, pulling back to let his amber eyes drink in the sight of me. He eyes the tattoos and grabs hold of his cock through the towel; I’m surprised he hasn’t dropped it yet.

“You’re so goddamn sexy,” he says huskily, and the blood that rushes to my face makes my entire chest feel warm.

“Ooh, has Daddy been naughty?” Julian comes practically skipping out of the shower, copper curls thoroughly dried and pulled back into an elastic, and donning a pair of tight red briefs.

The shoe laces aren't tight enough that I couldn't get myself out if I wanted, but I tug on them just to be safe. They give slightly, and I do my best to relax.

“Are we ready now?” Julian whines slightly. “I may have spent the last ten minutes opening myself up, and I am horny.”

I chuckle at his enthusiasm. “Ready, Wildfire?”

The heat in Zander's eyes rivals the nickname, and without a word—standing in the space between the two beds—he yanks Julian to him and slots their mouths together.

Immediately, my heart starts skipping like a scratched up CD—not out of jealousy but white, hot arousal.

Zander is passionate, malleable when we kiss. He's claws and teeth and tongue, but ultimately he gives in to however I guide him.

With Julian, he's in control. Hands sliding down his neck and shoulders as he makes a wreck of Jules' mouth. Their lips are spit-soaked as Julian's hands glide down Zander's abdomen to the godforsaken towel.

It falls to the ground, Zander's cock bouncing free: erect and weeping to be touched. My fingers twitch, aching to reach out, but I ball them up until the pain distracts from the desire.

Jules doesn't waste any time, gripping and pumping him until Zander has to break away from his mouth to moan out his immense pleasure.

“Z,” Julian gasps, lips latching onto Zander's neck as he works his cock. “Show Daddy how you stretch me.”

I want to tell him to say please , but Zander doesn't seem to mind the command. He reaches around Julian to grip his ass, giving it a good squeeze and listening to him whine before pulling down the back of his briefs and spreading his cheeks apart to fit a finger between them.

Julian's breath comes out choppy and turns to a whimper when Zander pulls back to grab something off the bed.

Lube.

He takes Julian's mouth again, coating his finger and pressing it against his hole. I can't see the details, but the way Julian's legs shake and his cock strains the briefs, he's clearly enjoying himself.

It's mesmerizing, watching his hand pump in and out of Julian's hole, seeing him swallow every pleased noise.

It's been years since I've had someone inside me. Since thick fingers have stretched me open, and a cock has brushed my walls.

Zander's fingers retreat, reaching over to the bed again and grabbing a condom packet. He rips it open and slides it down his dick, then turns his focus back to Julian.

He grabs the globes of Julian's ass tightly and lifts him until he wraps his legs around Zander's waist. He holds him up with one arm, the other hand lathering his cock in lube.

Once he's satisfied, he tosses the bottle and slaps both hands on Julian's ass, devouring his mouth and every filthy sound that falls out.

It's an erotic sight, watching the two of them touch and kiss.

My cock responds enthusiastically, jumping as Zander raises Julian up just high enough to position his dick at Julian's entrance.

Jules is a squirming, whining mess, his dick still trapped by his underwear. "Daddy." He turns his head to look at me, a deep lust brimming in his eyes.

Julian is fucking beautiful. His body is lean and slender, and his whole body gets covered in a dusting of pink when he's excited. I've always been in awe of him. Watching Zander leave hickeys and bite marks over his pale, sensitive skin, it makes my own buzz with desire.

I like holding the reigns. I like that Zander respects that.

Right now? I want to beg him to treat my bodies like Julian's.

Mark me.

Force me to let him have what I keep holding back.

I'm not ready to share that need—not yet—so I swallow it down along with the shake in my voice.

"Yes, baby?"

His eyes screw shut as he rocks his ass on the tip of Zander's dick, but Zander doesn't let him go any further.

"I need to be fucked. Tell him to fuck me. Daddy, please."

Zander has a wicked smirk on his lips, teasing Julian's nipples with his teeth. "Sorry, hot stuff," he says, meeting my eyes as he grinds up against Jules' hole, making him



whimper. “I think Daddy is too busy wishing I was fucking him .”

A growl tears out of my throat, and Zander shivers. “Go ahead, Daddy . Tell me to fuck him. Let me make him scream.”

He really does change to fit his partner’s needs.

That’s more of a turn on than I feel it should be.

“Wildfire.”

He stops his assault on Julian’s body, and more than anything I realize I want to taste them together. I don’t want to just be a bystander.

I push to my feet—hands still locked behind me—and move to stand beside them.

Julian looks at me with a mix of desperation and intrigue.

Zander? He’s all heat, hands physically twitching to pull me in, but he’s got to hold onto Julian.

“You’re so defiant,” I say, and Zander snickers, eyes drifting to my mouth. I’m not sure if he’s thinking of kissing me or putting his cock between my lips, but both add to my arousal.

“You love it,” he says, and I don’t deny it.

My cock brushes his hip, and he thrusts his, tip slipping into Julian’s well prepared hole.

Julian gasps, throws an arm around Zander’s neck and slings the other around mine.

It startles me enough that I nearly lose my balance, but then Zander's arm catches me by the waist.

"Fuck!" Julian shouts, and I look down to see that when Zander rearranged to hold me up, he couldn't keep Julian suspended, and my best friend is now fully impaled on my boyfriend's cock.

Hold up. Boyfriend?

Shit, I can't have that crisis now. Not with Julian moaning and squirming and Zander's fingers bruising into my side.

"Malachi." Zander's chest heaves, but his arms tighten around us.

This wasn't how I planned tonight going, but with both of their hot breaths mixing on my face, I'm perfectly happy with this change of plans.

"Fuck him," I say, barely above a whisper. "Bounce him on your dick."

Zander doesn't need to be told twice, and it's erotic as hell to see the muscles in his arm strain as he lifts and drops Julian back down.

"Oh my God." Julian tightens his grip on us both, moaning loud and unashamed.

I stare down at where they're connected, watching Zander's long, thick cock sinking into Julian's tight heat over and over.

When Zander starts to grunt, and I can see beads of sweat pooling at his temple, I press my mouth to his ear and groan out the words, "throw him on the bed."

He gives one last rough thrust into Julian's ass, and when Julian scrambles to put both

arms around Zander again, he unwinds his arm from me and uses both hands to pin Julian to the mattress.

Jules bounces a bit, a half-giggle half-moan slipping through his lips as Zander yanks his hips and buries himself inside of him in one motion.

“Enjoying yourself?” he asks me through heavy breaths, fucking into Julian with slow rolls of his hips.

It’s every bit as exciting as I thought it would be, watching the way his body ebbs and flows with rampant desire.

I lick my lips, and push my chest up against Zander’s back. His breathing hitches, rhythm stutters.

“Show me how you’d fuck me, Wildfire,” I breathe into his ear.

He whips his head to the side, and I take his mouth in a fierce, passionate kiss. My teeth dig into his lips, drawing blood, and I lap at it with my tongue.

His hips pick up the pace, slamming so hard into Julian that the slap of skin rings out like a shot in the dead of night. So much so that I begin to worry, but Jules encourages the treatment with a slew of, “yes, please, more.”

“Daddy. Zander. Please.” Julian whines below us, holding his own legs to his chest. “Touch me.”

I chuckle, gazing down at my best friend from over Zander’s shoulder. He’s a wreck of pink, splotchy skin. Little bruises litter his skin. His cock is still trapped by his briefs, and it twitches angrily in its confines.

“Wildfire.” I kiss the side of his neck, enjoying the way his body trembles with every breath in. “On your knees.”

It’s beautiful how easily he gives in. How he frees himself from Julian’s hole despite the other’s protests. How he goes down with a quiet thud, his fingers digging into my thigh as he looks up at me waiting on my next request.

All I can think—with his eyes on me and his teasing fingers slipping just slightly beneath the fabric of my boxers —is that I am royally fucked.

### Chapter Eighteen

Zander

I want Malachi Blanchard more than I've ever wanted anyone in my life.

His hard cock juts from his boxer-briefs obscenely with a wet spot at the tip that I'm dying to get my lips around, but Daddy said no touching, and I want to be good.

He doesn't stop my wandering fingers, soaking in the warmth of his skin beneath my touch.

His attention shifts from me to Julian—writhing and panting on the bed.

"Are you okay, Jules?"

"Uh huh," he says in a quiet but sure voice. "I'm good, Daddy."

Malachi smiles, and it's so soft and affectionate that my chest aches.

I withdraw my fingers from the leg of his boxers and find the knot in the laces I tied around his wrists.

It only takes a few tugs for it to fall to the floor, and I breathe a sigh of pure relief when the first thing Malachi does is thread his fingers through my hair and hold tight.

"Take his underwear off and give his dick some appreciation. He's letting you use

him so good. Let him use you.”

Hot. He’s so fucking hot.

He tugs my head back and stares down at me with those intensely gray eyes like storm clouds. “I mean it. Jules isn’t just here to be my stand in. This is just as much about him as it is you and me.”

I swallow roughly and nod. It’s hard to focus on two people at once, especially with Malachi involved, because all I want to do is drag him down to me and kiss and touch until we’re both covered in each other’s spunk.

He guides me forward—the smallest nudge—and secretly I like the way he holds me. A reminder that he’s watching, that he’s taking care of us.

I grip Julian’s poor, stretched out underwear and slip them the rest of the way down his legs, cute little cock bouncing against his stomach now that it’s free. My hands land on Julian’s ass cheeks, kneading and spreading them apart to see his greedy hole flutter.

I lean in and lick a stripe up the underside of his dick, then suck the salty precum from the tip. Malachi’s fingers dig into my scalp, and I take a little more of his dick in my mouth.

Take care of him, Malachi’s fingers say as they twist on my hair.

I take Julian’s dick to the back of my throat, resting a hand on his hip to keep him from thrusting and trailing the other up his abdomen.

“Zander.” He latches a hand onto mine, gasping and groaning with each long, slow draw on his cock.

He's eager, responsive to every lick, suck, and moan I make. When his dick starts to swell, I pop off and grip him hard at the base. He throws his head back and thrusts his hips up, but I hold him still.

When I look up at Malachi, he's staring down at Julian with adoration in his eyes. He brushes hair tangled with sweat out of Julian's eyes and rubs his thumb over his cheekbone.

"You're taking him so good, you know that, baby boy?"

I've never heard Malachi talk like this: so sweet and reverent.

"You wanna come with Zander inside you? Want his dick again, baby?"

And so fucking dirty at the same time.

Malachi lets go of my hair and motions for me to stand. I do, without question, and immediately Julian reaches for me. His arms wrap around my shoulders, legs hooking around my waist, and our mouths collide in a fervent kiss.

Pure neediness leaks from him. From every little noise he makes into my mouth. From the rock of his hips as he searches for friction on his neglected dick.

Malachi is right. Julian is being good and patient—he deserves some undivided attention.

I fit a hand between us to wrap around his cock, stroking it slow as I line myself back up with his hole. He whimpers and bares down until the head pops in, and it takes all of my willpower not to pound into him.

"You feel so good," I whisper to him, dragging my lips to his neck. "Do you like

Daddy watching you take dick?”

He doesn't answer right away, and when his jaw quivers, I bring my forehead to his. Maybe I read their dynamic wrong; I'm not sure of the right way to address the 'Daddy' thing between them.

His pretty green eyes stare into mine, and I smile softly at him. "It's okay," I say. Quiet. Only to him. "If you like it; it's okay."

Slowly, he nods, eyes watering at the edges. "I want Daddy to kiss me. Is that okay?"

It makes my heart hurt to hear the fear wobbling his voice. His request changes the rules, the boundaries we set in place.

I peer over my shoulder at Malachi, careful not to give Julian's vulnerability away.

I expected this to be sexy and fun, and while it is, it feels deeper, too. It's overwhelming.

Maybe it is for him, too.

Malachi makes him feel safe.

I press my lips to Julian's as soft I can, then snap my hips forward and bury my shaft to the hilt. The tears in his eyes overflow, and he lets out a hiccuped sob.

Straightening, I reach for Malachi, and he readily complies, grasping my face in his hands and covering my mouth with his. We get lost for a moment in the tangling of tongues and spit, but I'm quick to create a breath of distance no matter how badly I want to continue.



“He needs you,” I say, and that’s when Malachi takes a good look at his friend.

Panic is where he goes first, and then he’s got his fingers on Julian’s cheeks, wiping at the tears and leaning on the bed to be close to him.

“Jules?”

Julian trembles, looks at me, and I answer with a slow, deliberate roll of my hips. He focuses back on Malachi, fresh tears filling his lash line.

“Kiss me.”

He hesitates, and I put a reassuring hand on his back. Still, he waits, then slowly—so fucking slowly—he presses his lips to Julian’s waiting ones.

There’s no tongue, just small barely there kisses traded while Malachi strokes the tears on Julian’s cheek.

I start up a slow pace, trying not to disturb them and giving either of them a chance to tell me to stop, but neither happens. Julian starts to settle, rocking to meet my thrusts, moans punching out of him until Malachi chuckles and pulls away.

Whatever was bothering him seems to have passed, and Julian is wholly focused on me and my dick.

Malachi seems to have the same idea, leaning over and capturing my lips while his hand slips down to fondle my balls.

The stimulation is almost too much with Julian’s tightness and Malachi’s hands on me. My movements falter, and I have to swat his hand away to keep from coming before I’m ready.

“Wildfire?”

“Not yet,” I gasp. “Go sit down. You’re supposed to be watching.”

Malachi is quiet, and there’s no reprimand. He retreats, climbing onto the other side of the bed and sitting up against the headboard. His legs splay out, hard cock peeking through the slit in his boxers.

Even though his hands are free now, he doesn’t touch.

I drop my focus back down to Julian, blanketing my body over his and jacking his cock in time with my thrusts.

“You wanna show Daddy you’re a good boy, right?”

He nods vigorously, head thrown back and nails clawing at my shoulders.

“Let’s show him how much you like my dick. Come for me, sweetness. Come for us.”

Desperate cries fly from between his lips, and he digs into me hard, slamming down to meet each and every thrust until his dick turns red and angry in my hand.

I rub the precum dribbling down his shaft over the head and twist my palm in the way I know drives him insane.

There’s a final gasp and choked out cry as his hole clenches down on my dick. Cum shoots between my fingers and splashes both of our stomachs.

I’m teetering on the edge of an orgasm; it’s ready to barrel out of me, and I’m just barely able to hold it off. Something is missing.

Malachi and I lock eyes, and just as my dick gives a warning twitch, Julian tugs me down and presses his lips to my ear.

“Daddy wants you,” he whispers breathlessly. “Let him have you. Show him you trust him.”

Pulling out of Julian almost sets me off with how tight and responsive he is, and he kisses the soft spot under my ear as I pull away. My cock is throbbing, aching as I slowly roll the condom off and ditch it in the trash.

The bed dips under my weight as I crawl across to where Malachi sits, lust brimming in his stare. He told me I can’t touch him, so I don’t, but I fit my knees around his thighs and sit back on my haunches.

He’s fucking me with his eyes, all of my nerves becoming electrified by the mere thought of what his hands could do to me.

I grasp my cock and stroke it nice and slow, making sure to milk the precum down my shaft.

“Tell me where to come,” I say, body already starting to convulse as the wave rises higher, nearing in tighter. “Daddy, please. I want to mark you.”

Malachi’s fingers dig into his own thighs, leaving irritated, red marks as he holds himself back from likely throwing me on the bed and fucking me senseless.

Those eyes drink in every inch of my body, and if he doesn’t make a choice now, I swear to god I’m going to shove my dick in his mouth and make him choke on it.

“Daddy,” I warn, losing the fight as my eyes screw shut.

Hands grip my hips and jolt me forward, my spurting cock rubbing up on Malachi's abdomen and covering him in my release. Lips fall on my neck, sucking and teasing, and just as I let myself go, he pinches my skin between his teeth, and another wave of cum pours from my spent dick.

It stings, but he keeps going. Kissing and biting a trail along my neck and shoulder until my skin feels like pins and needles. When he lets me go, I fall boneless to my ass, then flat to my back. My head lands near Julian's, who hasn't so much as moved since being fucked.

He leans his head on mine, sighing contently and reaching for my hand. I give it, too tired to even open my eyes. Another set of hands rub up and down my thighs, but all that does is make the threat of sleep weigh down on me more.

Something cold touches my stomach, and when I swat it away, Malachi's deep chuckle sounds in my ear.

"Settle down," he says, voice low and husky.

I peek an eye open and catch him coaxing Julian to the head of the bed, and when he turns to me, my chest fills with something hot. It's not arousal; my libido is thoroughly depleted.

Hold me, it says, and the warmth in Malachi's eyes makes me think maybe he understands. Maybe he can read me—care for me—the way he does Julian.

"I've got you, Wildfire," he says as my eyes close.

Arms circle around me. Something heavy settles on my chest. A couple of seconds later, the bed shifts and another pair of arms wrap around my shoulders.

We're a tangle of limbs, but I'm not sure I can bring myself to care.

It doesn't matter who's holding who. Just that for now, we've got each other.

We're safe.

### Chapter Nineteen

#### Malachi

When I need to get out of my head, I go on the search for new indie bands to binge. It's a rabbit hole that requires minimal brain power, and the music serves as an excellent distraction from the mess of feelings I've shoved down in the corner like laundry.

Tonight's deep dive? BLU. An independent artist who travels the country in his recording studio/camping van.

Every song is a location recording that incorporates the sounds of wherever he's based at any point in time.

There's songs recorded to the patter of rain, echoing like it's being played in a party bathroom.

I lose several days of socialization, and while the distance is making me feel human again—not obsessively lost inside of my growing feelings for Zander Hale—it completely slips my mind that I wasn't the only person in that room.

I'm not the only one having to deal with a whole onslaught of new emotions.

It's a quarter to midnight, and I'm busy playing with random songs and matching them with ASMR thunder and jungle noises. It doesn't make sense, but it scratches the brain itch.

In the lull between songs, I hear a quiet noise like a bubble popping. I pull my earbuds out, and just before deciding it must have been my imagination, I hear it again. Followed by a snuffle.

I ping my gaze to Julian's bed, where he's huddled with the blankets wrapped tight around him. The main light is off, and my laptop isn't bright enough to illuminate more than the notebook in my lap, so I can't see beyond vague shadows.

"Jules?" I set my laptop to the side and frown at the realization that my bed looks like an elementary school paper mache project. "You okay, love?"

There's another snuffle followed by a balled up piece of paper launching from beneath the covers. I catch it and unfold it to see one of Julian's coloring pages.

Another ball smacks me in the shoulder.

"Julian." I laugh and am subjected to an onslaught of paper balls. "Hey now. That's enough."

"Fuck you," he squeaks, voice raw and cracked.

"That's no way to talk to your Daddy."

He goes quiet, and then there's another bubble pop.

A hiccup.

My brain switches from amused to concerned in an instant. I cross the short space between our beds, sitting on his, and tugging on the Julian shaped lump until his face pops out with red-rimmed eyes and wet cheeks.

“What’s wrong, love?” I ask, brushing my thumb through his streak of tears.

He snuffles again and bats my hand away.

“Did something happen?”

He curls in tighter and buries his face in his knees.

“Did someone hurt you?”

He swallows a deep breath and sighs it out with a garbled huff.

Brat. If he won’t answer, then I’ll have to meet him where he’s at.

I find the edges of the blanket and shove it off his shoulders, fitting his jaw between my fingers, and tugging his wandering attention my way.

“Julian Tate.” I steel my voice, even if it cracks slightly from disuse. “I asked you a question.”

My eyes have somewhat adjusted to the dark, and while I can’t see much, I can read the clear defiance in his.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” he says in a small but firm voice.

“Too bad,” I say, tilting his face up further and resting my forehead on his. “Spill, baby.”

His demeanor cracks; the tough exterior shatters. Tears flow down his cheeks like a waterfall, and he readily throws his arms around me.



“Mal.” He presses in close. Squeezes me tight. “Mal. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I say back slowly, stroking a hand down his back. “You’re freaking me out.”

He laughs—part awkward and part incredulous.

“You’re freaking out?” He huffs and scrubs aggressively at the tears on his face. “I had the second biggest revelation of my life, but you’ve been too checked out to notice!”

I pause, lips parting. “What are you talking about?”

“You.” Julian shoves at my shoulders but pulls me back in to press his face to my chest and groan. “The sex.”

That’s a pretty straightforward way to describe it, I guess.

“Jules?” I don’t make him move, but I do tug lightly on his curls and meet those pretty, green eyes. “I thought you were okay with what happened?”

“I was! I am.” His hands slip under my shirt to dig into the skin of my back, and though it stings, I don’t fight it. “I’m not okay with pretending that it didn’t happen.”

Is that what he thinks I’m doing? Oh no.

“It’s not you, love,” I say with a sigh that I feel deep in my bones. “I don’t want to pretend it didn’t happen. I guess I’ve just needed some time to ... process.”

“Well, process faster!” His words are muffled by my shirt, and I bring my fingers to his hair to gently massage his scalp.

“Is this about the kiss?”

Julian had been overwhelmed—emotionally, sensory—and he’d needed to be grounded. He’d needed his tether, and in that moment our mouths had been the most accessible option.

It was sweet. Calming.

I vaguely recall the taste of Zander’s sweat on his tongue.

Julian had initiated—it hadn’t occurred to me that it could be bothering him.

“No.” He shoves away, lips pursed. “Yes.” His eyes narrow into a glare, but he honestly just looks like a frustrated child. “That’s why I need you to get your head out of your ass and help me.”

I’ve never heard Julian whine like this. Never had him be this level of demanding.

“Hey now. You don’t have to be mean.” I bring my hands to his cheeks and watch the anger fizzle out until he drops his weight on me and pushes his face into my neck. “We should have talked about it right away. I’m sorry.”

Julian’s hands curl into my shirt, and with some minor adjustments, I manage to pull him into my lap, arms locked tight around him.

“I didn’t know how to bring it up,” he mumbles, then goes quiet again.

We sit there in the silence of each other’s company until Julian heaves a heavy sigh. “It’s not like we haven’t kissed before.”

His words are slow, throat a parched rasp.

He's right, though it's been years since we were each other's firsts.

"Jules," I say, hugging him to me. "I care about you."

He half chuckles and half snorts. "I care about you too, dork. I know that hasn't changed."

I twist him a bit to make looking down at his face easier. "Hasn't it? It's been changing ever since ..."

A sadness fills his eyes before he closes them. "The Little thing."

"It's not a bad thing," I say. "I'm just realizing I do care about you a little differently. I feel more protective. Connected."

At the roll of his eyes, I pinch his cheek. "I might actually be a little sad when you don't need me to be your Daddy anymore."

"I think you'll have your hands full with Zander."

I'm mildly relieved to hear the teasing note in his voice; I've been half convinced I ruined something between the three of us.

"We're not talking about Zander right now; We're talking about us."

Julian hums, and it vibrates against my chest. "I love you like you're my best friend," he says. "When I was lying on the bed with Zander, half in and out of Little space, I felt like I was floating and drowning at the same time. Zander is a sweet, attentive lover, but I needed ..."

He snakes his arms around my neck. "I needed you, Daddy. Not sexually, but

emotionally. I needed our connection.”

I smile and kiss the top of his head but don’t offer him any words. The gears turning in his head are nearly audible.

“I realized that I want more. Not from you, but from the dynamic. I knew I always did, but this felt more ... decisive. I want to be taken care of in every sense of the word. I want to be loved and fucked by my Daddy. It scared me a little how good it felt.”

He wiggles away to aim his chlorine green eyes right up at me. “I liked having you both. I liked the attention. I want more of it, but not specifically from the two of you. No offense.”

“None taken.” I ruffle his hair.

Julian smiles, and it’s so innocent and child-like that it lifts the worry weighing on my heart. “I was scared that I fucked up. Asking you to kiss me. Zander said you’ve been AWOL, and I guess I got worried that I ... dunno, broke you two up?”

It’s hard to break up when you aren’t dating, but no, this is entirely on me.

I clear my throat, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks. “No, it’s nothing like that. I’m glad we did it. I just ... felt more than I expected. For Zander.”

There’s no use hiding anything from Julian. He knows me better than I know myself most days.

“He’s not going to hurt you, Mal,” Julian says, leaning his head on my shoulder. “Not like Mack.”

Mack.

My chest aches like a motherfucker.

“It’s just sex. I’m not looking for anything else.”

Julian scoffs. “You are the biggest, dorkiest closet romantic on the planet. You wouldn’t have slept with him in the first place if you didn’t have feelings for him.”

When I frown, he gently pats my shoulder. “Would you have a threesome with him again but with a stranger?”

The thought makes my skin crawl.

“Exactly. You need that emotional connection. Just like I do when I’m Little. There’s nothing wrong with that, but you can’t pretend like fooling around with Zander is just fun. You care about him, and that’s okay.”

He leans up to place a kiss on my cheek, and then scoots out of my lap and stretches like a cat after a long rest. “He cares about you, too, you know. A lot. You should go see him.”

I know Julian didn’t mean right that moment, but after returning to our respective beds, I couldn’t convince my mind to settle.

Me

Any chance you have time for a ghost with an apology?

It’s been twenty minutes, and logically I know he’s sleeping. Between school and hockey, Zander keeps an insanely demanding schedule. How he ever finds the time

for me in the first place is a mystery.

Still, it hadn't occurred to me that my silence may have hurt his feelings. He messaged me once or twice, and I gave some quick, curt responses, but it honestly felt like we were all just taking a moment to breathe.

Knowing Julian spent that time spiraling worries me that I may have read Zander wrong, too.

I'm no stranger to insomnia, but the minutes ticking by with no sleep in sight feels like torture tonight.

The ceiling is starting to look like a conglomerate of faces when my phone pings. It could be any kind of notification, but my heartbeat still picks up as I swipe the screen open.

Wildfire

Depends. Does this apology include kissing?

The knot of anxiety is still there, but I manage a smile.

Me

It can.

Wildfire

Right now?

Me

Don't you have practice in the morning?

Wildfire

Don't care. Want to see you.

Me

Why didn't you say so before?

Wildfire

Didn't want to push. What we did was hot, but it was a lot. Sucks, though. I miss you.

My fingers speak before my brain has a chance to catch up.

Me

I miss you, too.

I hold my breath, and the next message comes quickly.

Wildfire

Meet me in the quad? Willow tree.

Zander is sitting against the tree when I get there, the moonlight filtering through the willow catching on his hair and making it appear almost white. When he spots me, the softest, most indulgent smile graces his lips, and it's like a vice squeezing around my ribcage.

Something has shifted in us. I can't pinpoint exactly what it is, but it pulls me closer, snuffs out the hesitation trying to sneak it's way in.

I sit cross-legged on the ground in front of him, the nipping night air drawing goosebumps on my exposed arms. A tank top and pair of flannel sleep pants are all I threw on before the anxiety ushered me out the door.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asks, and even just hearing his voice lights up the pleasure receptors in my brain.

"I often don't," I say, wringing my hands together, unsure what to do with myself.

Zander's expression grows contemplative, his chin resting on his fist while his eyes roam the empty quad.

"I don't like when we don't speak," he says. "I'd rather take sex completely off the table than have you ghost me like that."

The words hit me in the chest so hard I stop breathing. It's only for a second, but it creates a burning in my airway that spreads into my heart and through my gut until my entire body feels like it's on fire.

"I don't know you that well," he goes on. "Not as well as I'd like. So, I don't know what your hangup is, but I want to respect it. If that means we stop fooling around, so be it."

"So you can go fool around with someone else? Hard pass."

It doesn't register that my voice reeks of jealousy until Zander's shocked expression flips into an amused one.



“Feeling possessive, Daddy?”

I close my eyes as a full body shiver takes over. If there's one thing that night with the three of us unveiled, it's that there's something deeper for me with this Daddy desire. And Zander ticks every box I discover.

“I wasn't quiet because of the sex. Or because of Julian.” I nip and gnaw on my lip, trying to piece the words together. “It was after. When we were all lying in bed together.”

“You didn't think it was nice?”

“No, I did. Too nice. I realized I wanted ...”

Zander reaches over and threads his thick, calloused fingers through mine. “What do you want?”

To hold you. Kiss you. Tease you. Protect you.

“I've never had a boyfriend I didn't have to hide.”

The couple in charge of the group home were homophobic as shit, and every time they caught me so much as looking at the other boys, they beat me. I hid it as best I could from Julian, so he wouldn't be afraid, but it was Mack who patched me up. Who promised it wouldn't be like this forever.

“Malachi Blanchard.” Zander's voice is teasing, but I can hear the awe behind it. “Are you asking me to be your boyfriend?”

I squeeze his hand. “I'm asking you to be patient. And saying that I wouldn't mind ... expanding our relationship.”

He grins so wide I have to look away. “You’re so stuffy sometimes. Just say you like me, Malachi.”

My skin tingles when he says my name. Is that what this is supposed to feel like?

“Take what you can get, Wildfire,” I grumble, and he yanks me forward by the hand until I fall into him.

Sprawled on top of him, he clasps an arm around my middle. His fingers take hold in my hair, and he draws my mouth to his with a firm decisiveness.

“If you can’t tell,” he says between swipes of his tongue, refusing to let either of us breathe, “the answer is hell yes.”

There’s a pressure building in my throat, emotions so strong I’m half afraid they’ll consume me.

“I also,” I pant into his mouth, taking several gulps of air, “really like when you call me Daddy.”

He presses his smile to my lips, moaning so softly it makes my body buzz. “I already knew that. I like it, too ... Daddy.”

I’m not ready to admit just how much I want it. What all I want to give him. Want him to give me.

If he’s willing to wait, I’m willing to put my heart out there.

I just need to finish finding all of the pieces first.

### Chapter Twenty

Malachi

Apparently having a boyfriend means I become a horn dog. If we aren't making out in the alley outside The Den, we're holed up on my bed dry humping each other until we come in our pants.

I can't keep my hands off of him, and he's more than willing to let me slap his ass a little while I help him with his Music Theory papers.

"You two are sickening," Micky says from the counter while I stock some of the CDs. It's a pretty quiet day in the shop, and Zander should be getting out of class soon to remedy that.

"Hey now. I'm heard some stories about you and the boyfriend. Kinky fuckers if I recall."

Micky's face grows ten shades of red, and he flips me his middle finger. "Someone has to get fucked around here."

An image of letting Zander bend me over the desk and sink inside of me makes my cock twitch.

Micky's right, at least a little.

We've played around with our fingers, but there's been no penetration of the dick

variety.

Hell, my clothes haven't even come all of the way off yet.

As the next hour ticks by and there's been no word from Zander, I pop over to Micky and tell him I'm going to take my ten.

Mid-December means the temperature has started dropping, so when I step out the side door, I slip Zander's NHU Raven's hoodie on that he left at my dorm the other night.

For the first few minutes, I just enjoy the smells wafting through from the bakery next door and contemplate ducking out a bit early to bring Julian back a piece of the chocolate pie that he likes.

I pull out my phone and hit Zander's contact info. It rings six times before he finally picks up.

"What?" His voice is gruff, irritation dripping from the single syllable.

"Want to rethink that greeting?" I ask, expecting his usual playful response.

"Not really. I'm busy. What do you need?"

I clench my jaw and try desperately not to grind my teeth. A bad habit from the group home days.

"Thought I'd check on my boyfriend since he's nowhere to be seen, but apparently he got his phone snatched by a raging asshole."

Zander groans loud and disgruntled. "Fucking hell, Malachi. You aren't actually my

Daddy. Lay off. You can come to the house after work and we'll unwind. I can't make it by today. Didn't know I needed to ask your damn permission to have a life."

There's a dark feeling circling my gut. Like a sinkhole opening up.

"I'll see you tonight?" There's a hint of impatience in his voice, and I'm surprised he's bothering to stay on at all.

"No." I don't like how this feels.

"No?"

"No. You don't get to talk to me like that and expect me to sleep with you."

His sigh is deafening. "Okay. Fine. Don't come over. I'll catch up with you tomorrow."

This time, he leaves no room for a rebuttal. The line clicks off, and I realize of all the responses I could have to his outburst, there's tears prickling in my eyes.

I must stand there for too long getting my shit together, because Micky shows up and pokes his head out the side door.

"Hey, man. You good?"

I stuff my hands in the pocket of the hoodie and nod. When our eyes meet I can tell he sees the redness in mine.

"Hale texted me," he says. "His family showed up out of the blue."

And that would have been such a hard thing to tell me?

“Do they not get along?”

Micky seesaws his hand. “He’s always real touchy when they come up. I stopped asking him about it, you know? I’ve met his sister, Liliana, once, but that’s about it.”

I didn’t even know he had a sister.

“He can be a jerk sometimes,” Micky says. “Don’t be afraid to call him out on his shit. Too many people give him a pass because he’s good at what he does or because he’s stupidly happy most of the time.”

“So he makes a habit out of being a random dick?”

“When he can’t jump on a random dick? Absolutely.”

The sludge in my stomach grows thicker. Even before the boyfriend thing, Zander and I were exclusively sleeping together. He said he’d respect that, and I have no reason to believe he’d go back on it now.

Except he didn’t sound reasonable on the phone.

No, I’m just projecting because of Mack.

But the rest of my shift is spent in a constant state of fight or flight.

Even the thought of going home and pretending to try and sleep feels like it’ll just piss me off.

So I park my ass on the curb of the Jock House and stew. Maybe by the time Zander shows up, I’ll have something productive to say and not just a well-deserved earful.

It's several hours later by the time a car pulls up and stops in front of the house. A door opens, and Zander steps out with a scowl on his face and a buzzed flush on his cheeks. He leans into the driver's window and says something.

I've got some beat-heavy pop music playing through my earbuds, and I pull one out as Zander stumbles toward the sidewalk.

He doesn't notice me, coming to a standstill beneath a falter streetlamp and running a shaking hand through his hair. I watch him. How he hugs himself with one arm and braces his weight on the pole with the other.

I don't know how long he stands there, eyes closed, basking in the moonlight.

My anger died away long before now, leaving behind this ugly, carved out wound I haven't figured out what to do with.

Pushing to my feet, I shove my phone and earbuds into the hoodie pocket, and close as much of the distance between Zander and I as I dare. There's a good two or three feet left, but Zander was right when he said we barely know each other.

It's been a whirlwind few weeks, but I can't say I know how he'll act in a fight.

"Wildfire." Because if I say his actual name, my voice might break.

His eyes open slow and tired. "Malachi. Thought you weren't coming." He says the words steady and quiet.

"I don't think I made this clear," I say, matching his tone. "But dating me means giving each other mutual respect. Something that phone call wasn't."

Shadows play over Zander's face, making his expression hard to read.

“I’ve never had a boyfriend,” he says with a shrug, as if that absolves him of his attitude.

“That’s a crappy way to apologize to the one you have now.”

His eyes find mine, and honestly they just look tired. Worn down.

“I didn’t think I could hurt your feelings.” He pushes off the pole, slightly unsteady but holding himself well. “You keep them so bottled up.”

“There’s a reason for that,” I say, standing still as he takes a step forward.

“Yeah? Who hurt you, Blanchard? Who made you so overbearing and needy?”

He just wants to get a rise out of me.

Unfortunately, it’s working. I have the reputation of having a short fuse, and there’s damn good reason for it.

“You need to stop and go sober up.”

“You came looking for me!” He scoffs and wraps his fingers around my elbow.

The touch feels like an inferno, but I don’t pull away.

“Because I was worried about you.” I keep my voice low and steady. “Because Micky said when you get like this, you?—”

“I what?” He leans in close, nose brushing my cheek. “What do I do, Daddy?”

I swallow heavy and shut my eyes. “You want to fuck around.”



“Fuck around?” He chuckles and then grows silent. Seconds tick by, and he pulls away, but I still feel his breath across my face. “You thought because you said ... Malachi.”

A hand covers my cheek, thumb stroking the skin. “Look at me.”

Slowly, I do, to find muddled pools of sadness and confusion staring into me.

“I want you.” He says each word deliberately. “Even if I’ve pissed you off, and you don’t want me back.”

I do. I fucking do. But you do shit like this, and my heart won’t let me give in.

“You honestly think I’d cheat on you? Because I need to blow off some steam?”

I can’t tell if he’s angry or just hurt, but it mirrors the tangle of feelings I’ve been sorting through myself.

“I’ve had men do worse.” I don’t mean for it to slip out, but the way he’s touching me and looking at me has my barrier thinned.

“What the fuck does that mean?” he asks, and I can already see the calm evaporating. His breathing speeds up and his brows draw in tight.

“It means when I don’t give men what they want, they do what they can to hurt me.”

There’s a brief moment of recognition in his eyes, like he’s on the verge of understanding, but the adrenaline in his system wins out.

He slams his mouth into mine, and though I don’t shove him away, I also don’t reciprocate. His teeth dig into my lip so hard it bleeds, and when I gasp in pain, he

shoves his tongue inside and drags me closer by the hip.

If this is what he needs, he can take it.

“I wouldn’t do that,” he growls, shoving his hands under the hoodie and reaching for my skin. “I wouldn’t cheat, and I wouldn’t force you.”

Part of me wants to pull away, but the need to be close and seek his comfort is stronger.

“I’m not angry at you, I’m fucking ...” He bites back a scream and screws his eyes shut tight, digging a palm into them. “I’m fucking hurt. And when I’m hurt I want to ...”

“Hurt people, hurt people,” I say, and he jerks his head in a nod. “Is that what you need? To hurt someone?”

When his eyes open—dark and full of unwanted desire—I reach out and dig my fingers into his hip bones.

“You can hurt me, Wildfire. I’m not easy to break.”

It’s a half-truth. There’s any number of things he could do or say that would put an end to us. I’d pack up and leave without a word, just like I did with Mack.

But I know this side of him. I trust that he’d never throw more at me than I can take. Even if he’s half out of his mind.

“What if I want to break you?” he asks as his voice wobbles, eyes unsteady. “What if I want to pull your hair and shove you into the dirt? Mount you like a fucking lion and rut you into the ground until you bleed?”

His breathing comes out quicker. “What if I want to make you cry and beg and—” He clamps his mouth shut and tears away from me. “Fuck. No. You’re right. I need to sober up. I shouldn’t be thinking ...”

He stalks away toward the side of the building, likely going for the backdoor so his teammates don’t see him erratic and wasted. I follow, because every violent word out of his mouth has only served to make my pulse skyrocket.

Not out of fear.

Out of want.

“Zander.”

He doesn’t turn. Doesn’t answer. Just picks up the pace.

If he really wanted to out run me, I have no doubt Mr Star Hockey Player could do so even with a head clouded by alcohol.

The Jock House has a large backyard surrounded by dense forest; Zander often takes to one of the trails in the mornings for a run.

He makes a beeline for the trees, and I snatch his arm as we stand right there at the edge of civility and savagery.

I’m out of breath, but at least he doesn’t fight my hold.

“Do you need to fuck or be fucked?” I ask, and his attention snaps to me like a plucked rubber band.

“Malachi.” His voice wobbles. A warning? A plea?

I yank him closer until our chests bump together, placing my lips at his ear. “Do. You. Need. To. Fuck. Or. Be. Fucked?”

Each word is spoken with my mouth moving along his jaw, and I can feel every shaky breath he takes into his lungs.

When he doesn’t answer, I trail my hand down his abdomen until I brush the bulge jutting out of his pants and wrap my fingers around it.

“I need to fuck you,” he says in one breath, bucking into my hold.

I squeeze him only once, then let go and shove him toward the house. He stumbles, clearly caught off guard, and I let myself grin at the minor form of payback.

“Go find some lube and condoms.”

“You’re not coming to the room?”

Zander is hurting, and because of that he acts out. He’ll self destruct and implode his life before letting anyone help him. Before letting anyone in.

He wants to hurt me, but not to cause me pain. To quiet his own.

Something inside of me settles. One of the missing pieces has come back.

I step forward and grip him by the back of the neck, pull him to me and crash our lips together. It’s rough and fierce and everything Zander said he wanted. I only pull away when he lets out a broken moan into my mouth.

“You want to act like a wild animal?” I hook my thumb in the direction of the woods.

“Fuck me like one.”

### Chapter Twenty-One

Zander

Trying to hurry through the house without making a shit ton of noise is hard enough without my head swimming. It's my own fault; I drank one too many of those fancy cocktails at the restaurant Mom and Dad took us to.

Micky is awake when I stumble into the room—good call not coming back here to hook up—and his face immediately screams “You fucked up”.

Which, of course, I know. I'm a habitual fuck up.

“I need condoms.” Because apparently I'm just buzzed enough to have no filter.

He deadpans and points to my desk. “I don't know why you're asking me. I'm strictly monogamous, and Parks and I ditched those fuckers last year.”

I think I'm nervous.

To have sex?

To have sex with Malachi.

I'm going to break his three year virginity cherry, and that is downright terrifying.

I pilfer through my drawer until I find a strip of condoms in the back and grab the

bottle of lube sitting on the table.

“Guess you two made up?”

Oh he was mad mad if he told Micky about it.

I swallow roughly. “Something like that.”

I’m more careful going outside than I was coming in, some of the urgency settling in my veins as a pounding excitement.

Given how this night has played out, I’d think our positions would be the other way around. Daddy teaching me a lesson for misbehaving.

But he asked me what I wanted. I want to let this ugliness out. I want it to leave me alone.

And I want him. I want to give it to him. Because Malachi has already turned himself into my safety net.

When I round the back of the house, I don’t have to look far to find him. He’s picked out a tree right at the edge of the yard, leaning against it with his arms crossed and hoodie pulled up to his nose.

Malachi doesn’t seem like the type to wear his boyfriend’s clothes, but I figured if I conveniently left something behind, he just might take it anyway.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask once I’m close enough I won’t have to shout. What I want to ask is “are you okay?” but I’m almost afraid of the answer.

He tugs the hoodie down and rakes his eyes across my body. A fire starts in my belly

and quickly spreads out.

“You still want to fuck me into the ground?”

This man is going to be the death of me.

“Do you want to be fucked into the ground?”

His mouth splits in a grin, and when he reaches for me, I fold into him. Our mouths come together, and his fingers find perch in my hair.

We push and pull at each other until my shirt hits the ground, and the cold night air immediately pebbles my skin.

“Shit,” I say into another kiss, shivering. “Maybe fucking out here isn’t such a good idea.”

Malachi smiles into the press of our lips. “Get your cock in me, and I’ll warm you right up, Wildfire.”

A growl works its way out of me. “You have no right being this sexy.”

His hands land on my waist and start unbuttoning my jeans. “I’m hearing a lot of talking and not enough fucking.”

It’s my turn to smile, taking my jeans from him and shoving them down my legs. “Feeling desperate, Daddy? Do you need my cock?”

I manage to slip the hoodie off over his head amidst our flirting, and beneath is one of his work t-shirts. Guilt grabs me in that moment, and it’s significantly more gentle how I cup my hands around the back of his neck and bring his lips back to mine.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper over and over against his mouth. I’m a jackass with a hidden mean streak, and I hate that he had to be on the receiving end of it.

“You can apologize and explain your bad attitude later,” he says in a tone that leaves no room for argument. “Right now, we’re going to go far enough into the brush that your buddies won’t see or hear us, and you’re going to fuck me as hard as you’re capable.”

“You’ll tell me if it’s too much, won’t you?”

Something he said earlier rubs me wrong in the brain.

Men hurt him when he doesn’t give them what they want.

“Don’t do this just because I want it.”

His eyes level with mine. Not a hint of fear or apprehension. Just determination and resolve.

“Zander,” he says my name, and it sends a shiver from my shoulders to my toes. “You’re my Wildfire. Burning hot and covered in flames. I touch you because I don’t mind the pain, because I can be your balm if you’ll let me.”

His lips descend on my neck. “In saying that.” He sucks a bruise right over the hollow of my throat. “I’m getting fucked tonight. Either you run me into the ground, or I’ll ride you into it.”

New fantasy unlocked.

There’s a strange sort of calm surrounding us as we make our way down the trail. Far enough that the house is obscured by the trees. There’s a smoking passion rising



inside as Malachi's words play on repeat in my head.

When we come to a stop, that calm turns to uncertainty.

Malachi reads me—because of course he does—and his hands slip under the fabric of my briefs to dig into my ass.

“Let go, Wildfire,” he breathes into my mouth.

My body trembles. “You’ll take care of me? I won’t hurt you?”

A smile. “You won’t break me. I can handle a little pain from my boy.”

His boy.

Oh.

This is what he likes about it.

I run both hands through his hair, taking his kiss like the promise it is, and curl my fingers in the multicolored strands.

He kisses me harder.

The cauldron of pain bubbling inside of me spills over.

I yank him back and attack his neck with my teeth and tongue. Pinching the skin and soothing the irritation. His back hits the wide trunk of a tree, and I free a hand to reach for his jeans.

For a second, I think he might change his mind when one of his hands joins mine, but

all he does is shove the jeans down and kick them to the side. He's not fully hard—just chubbed up—so I pin his hips with mine and rut our growing erections together.

His shirt goes next, and my hands immediately jump to his tattoos, feeling each and every one beneath my fingers. I'm half-tempted to tell him to stamp my name into the trail above his dick—but that might be pushing the moment too far.

I've still got his hair gripped in my fist, and I tug it tighter until he gasps out a moan and his cock twitches against mine.

Bingo.

"I think," I whisper, moving my lips down his chest, "that you actually like pain." I have to let go of his hair to scratch my nails down his side. "You like the ache in your balls from being denied."

When his breathing hitches, I know I've hit the mark. "Maybe you're the one who needs to be spanked, Daddy."

One of Malachi's hands lands on my shoulder and pushes until I fall to my knees. Looking up, his face is clouded by shadows and lust, and it makes my dick ache that much more to be inside him.

"Maybe the brat needs a pacifier until he's ready to get his dick wet."

Without a complaint or breaking eye contact, I yank his boxers down and let his dick spring free. I've caught glimpses when fooling around, but this is my first time seeing him completely unrestrained.

His dick is long and on the thinner side, and I grip it at the base with his balls cradled

in my other hand.

It's ridiculous how long I've wanted him in my mouth.

I drag my tongue from the bottom of his shaft to the tip, sucking it between my lips with methodically slow pumps of my hand until the precum drips out.

His hands find my hair, but he doesn't pull. Just holds me. Encourages me to take him deeper into my mouth. At the first gag, I sputter off and squeeze his balls lightly the way he does to me.

His chest vibrates with a low moan, and I do it again. Harder.

Now he's pulling my hair. Pushing his cock back between my lips. I take him, playing with how rough I can be before he taps out.

The answer is really damn rough because I'm out of breath and covered in spit when I pull off and focus solely on his sack. It's ungodly attractive watching him throw his arms back to grip the trunk of the tree, jutting his hips out with every squeeze and tug.

No one has touched him like this in years. All of this is mine.

He's mine.

I have to break away to hunt for the lube I'd tossed somewhere on the grass when we got here, and even though he's somewhat grinning at my unpreparedness, Malachi doesn't move from the spot I placed him.

Once I've got the bottle, I'm back on my knees with a dick in my mouth, but this time I'm on a mission.

With my fingers coated in lube, I reach back to spread Malachi's cheeks, half thinking about actually spanking him, but I'll have to shelve that for another time. Right now, my focus is on opening him up to take me.

That first press in past the tight ring of muscles has his thighs flexing and straining. I pour more lube, rubbing and pushing on his pucker until it gives easily. Then, I work my entire finger in slowly until I reach the second knuckle.

His dick falls from my lips, and I press a quick kiss to his hip. "Think you can take another one, Daddy?"

For once, it doesn't come out mocking. It just feels ... right.

He laughs humorlessly and rolls his hips back on the finger inside of him. "Yeah."

Even though the air around us holds a sharp chill, Malachi's face and neck are beading with sweat, and I watch him carefully as I fit another finger in beside the first.

By the time I'm three fingers deep, Malachi's dick is angry and red; I've made sure to pay it plenty of attention to distract from the stretch.

"One last time," I say, pressing deep and listening to the long, drawn out moan it causes. "You want this rough and dirty?"

This has already been distraction enough from the shit with my parents, but if he wants the whole cage open, I'll give it to him.

His gray eyes are a little hazy as they lock onto mine, but the hands that grapple at my shoulders and pull me to stand have clear intentions.

“Wreck me, Wildfire.” Pure heat comes off of the words. He brushes his lips over mine.

Okay, yup, I can do that.

I hate to separate from him again, and as I slip my fingers from his hole, he catches my lip between his teeth. While it doesn’t draw blood, I have no doubt it’ll be busted and blue by the end of the night.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

The condoms take me a minute longer to find, but as soon as I do I thrust my underwear down and slip one over my leaking cock. It's not sexy in any way; it's frantic and downright comical how I try and step out of my boxers without falling over.

As soon as I'm fully gloved up, I march back to Malachi and yank his face to mine. I press my cock into his stomach, and then line our dicks up and hold them both in my hand. He groans and gasps into my mouth, and as I rut us together, his hand comes down on my ass.

Hard.

He's told me what he wants. Stop overthinking it.

"Impatient," I mutter and take a step back. "Are you going to get on your knees, or do I need to put you there?"

His eyes flash with a deep arousal, one that burns in my own gut and spurs me on to weave my fingers into his hair and pull until he shudders and drops down.

I smack my dick on the side of his face, rubbing the latex covered head over his lips but not asking for entrance.

"You're so pretty," I say softly more for myself than him. I've always thought it, but didn't dare say it out loud.

Now that I have, the blush on his cheeks emboldens to say it again.

“So pretty on your knees, waiting to be fucked.”

At the edge of my ability to hold out, I circle around him. My fingers find his name and trail down. Over each bump and ridge of his spine. Into the little dimples on his lower back.

He shivers, either from the cold or my touch, but I know I'll have to save the exploratory play for later.

I brace my hands on his shoulders and shove. He catches himself on his elbows, digging into the dirt and knees scrapping forward a few inches at the force.

There's no complaint, just air hissing through his teeth.

I grab the bottle of lube at the base of the tree and coat my dick until I feel it dripping down my balls. Then, I crouch down and spread Malachi's cheeks, pressing a finger into his hole to make sure he's still good and open.

He moans like he's trying not to, and I pour some extra lube down his crack just to be safe.

I notch my dick at his hole, spreading his cheeks with my hands. It's so fucking hot to watch my tip sink into him, to hear his breathing stutter as his body accepts me.

The whole head pops in, and I pause, giving him time to adjust. Once his breathing sounds less labored, I rub a hand up his back to grip his nape and use him as leverage to push in deeper.

He grunts, lowering his head to his arms, but as I work myself in deeper, his noises become less pained and more needy.

“That’s it. Good, Daddy.” His hole tightens around me as I bury myself to the hilt, and I can’t stop the grin that takes over. “Oh, Daddy.”

I drape over his back to press my lips to his ear. “You like that? Being a good little cock slut for your boy?”

He squeezes me again, and I bite down on the shell of his ear. “This is gonna hurt. But you can take it, Daddy, right?”

I roll my hips a few times until a moan slips past his lips, and then I grab his face and yank it to the side to taste the noises as they come out. Even as my thrusts get harder, I keep us connected until he’s panting so hard he can’t keep up the kiss.

I straighten and grab onto his thighs, pounding so hard my balls ache and my skin stings from being slapped together.

His ass is red, and his legs shake, and maybe he’s a fucking masochist after all because when I wrap my fingers around his throat and lift him up until his back hits my chest, he fucking whimpers of all things.

“You feel so good.” My pace has to slow because I don’t have the leverage to go at it as hard like this, so I focused on getting deep and staying there, rocking my hips but not creating friction.

“Zander,” Malachi rasps, and I know he wants me to move again. And I will, after I’ve teased him a little.

I gather his balls in the palm of my hand and give them a light tug. “Do you want me to touch your dick?”

He shakes his head almost immediately, and I squeeze him tighter until his entire



body trembles.

“Baby,” he whispers, and that word— that one word —breaks what little control I have left.

Baby. Baby boy. I’m his baby. He’s my Daddy.

It doesn’t make sense; it just is, and I don’t want to question or fight it anymore.

I let go of his throat and push his shoulders down. He goes easily back to all fours, but it isn’t enough. Isn’t good enough.

With my dick pulled mostly out, just keeping him stretched with the head in his ass, I grasp a handful of his hair and shove his face into the ground. He gasps and jerks, but the most I let him do is turn his head to the side.

There’s dirt covering his cheeks and nose with an angry red scratch across his forehead. It’s not bleeding, though, so I don’t panic and trust that if he needed me to stop, he’d tell me.

I let him catch his breath, easing a hand onto his hip and rubbing it in soft circles as an apology for what I’m about to do.

My other hand stays firmly clenched on his hair, and when I thrust my cock back inside of him, I push on his hip until he collapses fully on the ground.

I’ve never heard him shout so loud, but it’s not a cry of pain if the rocking of his hips into the goddamn dirt is anything to go by.

I can’t take it anymore. I grip both of his shoulders, embracing the bite of the ground beneath my knees, and fuck into him with everything I have.

He never stops screaming, not even when his voice is broken and hoarse, and I don't stop until my balls tingle and tighten, ready to blow.

I slip free of his ass and listen to the quiet whimper his voice becomes, stripping the condom from my dick and tossing it behind me.

"Hush, Daddy, you'll like this."

I barely catch the glare he throws my way, leaning my weight on his back and jerking my dick until I cum in thick streams all over his skin.

The cooling sweat on my body as I breathe and recover starts to feel like I'm covered in ice, so I move to the side and plop down on my ass. I gently nudge Malachi, and he grunts, but not much else.

When it doesn't seem like he's going to get up on his own, I force myself back to my knees and gently turn him onto his side.

Those stormy gray eyes open, and a smile appears on his lips. "I'm alright, Wildfire."

He doesn't look it, covered in dirt and scratches, but he raises a hand and cups his fingers over my cheek.

"Good boy."

And if that isn't the nail in the metaphorical coffin.

My chest feels light, and my eyes burn with unshed tears. I don't understand, but I also don't care.

"Thank you, Daddy."

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Malachi

The downstairs bathroom at the Jock House has a faulty light. I know because I've been staring into it without pause while Zander dabs water, soap, and disinfectant over the various cuts and scrapes on my abdomen.

"I can't believe you let me do that," he mumbles, and I barely hold back a smile.

As soon as we both came off the sex high, Zander started fussing over me in a way I've never seen him act before. It's sort of cute.

"I'm okay," I say, but he shoots me a glare.

"There was dirt in your dick hole. What if you get an infection?" He's whisper shouting and poking his finger at my chest, but when I circle his wrist with my fingers, he visibly calms. "Is this how everyone else feels when I jump off the deep end?"

I bring his hand to my mouth and kiss his knuckles. The feeling of those fingers in my hair shoving me around still tingles at the base of my skull.

Zander is right. I have a little bit of a pain fetish, but since I haven't had a partner since figuring that out, I've never played around with it.

"Shower with me," I say, and even I can hear the affection in my voice.

His eyes scan along my body, completely naked, and even though he's worrying himself to death, there's a twitch of interest behind his boxers.

"No sex," I assure him, because the moment those eyebrows crease, I know he's afraid he'll hurt me again. "But you can touch me. Confirm with your own hands that I'm in one piece."

I guide him forward, and he folds like paper, face pressing into the side of my neck, free arm wrapping around my waist. We sit like that for several minutes, just holding and breathing each other in.

His fingers travel up to trace patterns on my shoulder blades.

I rub my thumb over the veins on his wrist.

It's peaceful and quiet in a way I'm not sure the two of us have ever been together. Not other than the night with Julian.

Zander pulls away first to start the shower, and I slip my hands into the back of his boxers to slide them off. My lips ghost along his neck, fingers leading an exploratory path across his abdomen.

Just slightly, he turns, brings a hand to my neck, and slots our mouths together. We kiss until the bathroom mirror fogs, half dragging each other behind the shower curtain. The water turns a muddy brown as it circles the drain, and we're silent as the thickness of the night washes away.

Zander's hands touch every inch of my body. Every crevice. Every nook. At one point, he's on his knees rubbing a soaped up finger over my sore hole, and once he's rinsed everything away and is convinced no damage was done, he presses in with his tongue and urges me to a much overdue orgasm.

I taste myself on his mouth, and he drags my hips to his. We're both spent, soft, but we enjoy the company of each other's touches until the water turns cold.

Zander grabs us both a pair of sweats from his room, and then sets us up on the downstairs couch.

"You don't have to stay down here with me," I tell him as we both get comfortable with the blanket pulled up to our laps.

He touches my cheek and kisses me—because he can't seem to stop ever since we got out of the woods—and since I don't want to get up to anything indecent in the living room, I pull away.

His eyes are troubled, and it draws out the protector in me. "What's wrong, baby?"

He shivers and drops his forehead to mine. "I owe you an apology."

It takes a moment for it to sink in that he doesn't mean for roughing me up. He means the phone call. The yelling.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," he whispers, and the way he says the name has the muscles restricting around my heart. "You're not needy and overbearing. You didn't deserve to get blown up on like that."

I sigh into the minuscule space between us, but when he tries to move away, I anchor a hand on the back of his head.

"Are things with your family that bad?"

I expect him to get defensive, maybe a little angry again, but it's like his whole body deflates.

“They’re nice enough,” he says, voice low. “They stop in for visits every couple of months. They call on game days, when they remember. They’re dutiful parents.”

The muscles in his neck are tense, so I dig my fingers gentle and slow into them.

“But?”

“But ...” He lets out a heavy breath. “They don’t like me .”

“I find that hard to believe. Everyone likes you.”

I jolt as he pinches my nipple, holding back the moan that I know is the opposite of his intention.

“Smart ass. Fine. Less that they don’t like me and more that they ... don’t know me, I guess.”

Zander shrugs and pulls away, throwing himself back on the cushions and bringing his knees to his chest.

“I have a little sister by like two years, Liliana, and she’s sweet as hell. She really is. I love her. I love being her older brother.”

He drags a hand through his hair, face twisted in a mix of frustration and regret.

“Around the time I started kindergarten, she got an autism diagnosis. My parents, they did everything for her. Every therapy she needed, braces for toe-walking, the industrial iPad so she could shout for more cheerios or Baby Shark across the house.”

I offer him a hand, settling across from him and bumping his leg with mine.

“They took care of me. Met all my needs. Signed me up for extracurriculars. Everything a parent is supposed to do, but they just ... weren’t there.

Lili was always in the back of their minds.

They’d remember all of her restrictive foods but forget I don’t eat seafood.

We’d go to every sensory friendly event offered, but my games were too overstimulating, and they didn’t trust anyone to watch her. ”

He drops my hand to wrap his arms around himself with such a horribly sad and broken expression.

“Even now. They can’t stop talking about every single accomplishment she makes—and I’m happy to hear about it—but when I tell them that we are so fucking close to making it to the Frozen Four, I get tight smiles and a “that’s nice, honey”, and then they somehow bring it back around to Lili—like asking if I can let her borrow my truck to practice driving because they don’t want to risk the family vehicle. ”

As tears start to well in his eyes, I reach out and put my hands on his knees, spreading them and fitting myself between them. I put my arms around him, and he settles his head on my chest no questions asked.

“Tonight,” he says, mouth brushing my collarbone as he speaks. “They told me that Lili applied here, to North Haven, even though they’ve been trying to get her to go to some special school out west. They said if she’s accepted they want me to look into getting student housing with her. And I ...”

The guilt on his face is louder than a thunder crash.

“I feel like an asshole saying I don’t want to do that! And then I feel more like an asshole because now I’m just hoping that she doesn’t. That they have to send her anywhere but here.”

His words grow wet, and I feel the coolness from the tears that fall silently down his cheeks. The only indication we aren’t just holding each other for the hell of it is how his shoulders shake, how his fingers dig hard enough into my ribs to bruise.

I hate this for him. Hate that he feels this way. Hate that there’s nothing I can do about it except hold him.

“I’ve got you, baby boy.”

He shudders again, works his lips up my neck until they find mine, and just like that I’m lost in him. Lost in us.

Zander wormed his way into the cracks in my heart, and as the patchwork sets in, he’s sealed inside. There’s no getting him out.

I’m not sure I want to.

When I wake up, I’m alone. The blanket is half lying on the floor, my back—and the many hickeys Zander left as we were trying to fall asleep—on full display.

It must still be early, because the place is still relatively quiet, and I contemplate dozing for a few more minutes when I hear voices drifting out through the kitchen.

They’re too far away to make out any details, but my body is intimately familiar with Zander’s sleepy rumble.

I give it all of a minute before my body is buzzing to be close to his, and even though



I'm only in a borrowed pair of briefs and sweats, I make my way to my boyfriend's voice.

He's standing at the kitchen counter with a mug of coffee in his hands, blowing on the steam but stopping to smile when his eyes land on me.

"Hey there, sexy." His eyes drink me in, causing a flush to spread over my body. "We have milk and sugar, but none of the fancy shit."

It's a good thing I've never been warmer or more alert than I am with Zander's hungry gaze making silent promises.

A deep chuckle from across the room reminds me that we aren't alone, and I spot his teammate, Ellis, sitting in one of the two chairs at the tiny dining table in the corner.

"Look who stayed to socialize," he says in a laid back, humorous tone. "I've heard you upstairs but ain't seen you do the walk of shame yet."

My face flames, and Zander wraps an arm around my waist. "What shame?" he asks, dropping a kiss on my neck. "Pretty sure my boyfriend has a pass to hang out whenever he wants."

Ellis' eyes go wide, and his mouth stretches into a wide grin. "No shit? Halefire got himself a boyfriend? That mean no more party benders with Ash?"

Zander groans and hops up on the counter, pawing at me until I'm tucked between his legs with my back to his chest. His arms hang around my shoulders and his thighs squeeze me against him.

"The last time I let Ash get me drunk, I almost died. No thank you."

His fingers play not-so-innocently on my sternum, making slow paths to circle my nipples but not touch them. Zander and Ellis are still chatting, but the blood pumping in my ears drowns it out.

He drags his nails down my ribs, making little suggestive strokes along the waistband of the sweats I'm wearing.

The air around us gets heavy, and it isn't until I have to physically gasp to take in a breath that I realize it wasn't the atmosphere, it was just me.

"Whoa. Hey, babe, you alright?"

We talked about Zander picking an alternative to "Daddy" when we're in public, and based on the glare I gave him when he suggested "Babe" that's what he decided to go with.

"Fine," I grumble, rubbing at a sore spot on my chest.

He tilts my head back for a kiss, and the moment he prods my mouth with his tongue, it happens again. My chest feels tight, and I have to fight to force air into my lungs.

"Sorry." I push away from him and try for a lighthearted smile, but I'm already starting to feel a little hazy. "I should get back. Check in with Jules."

Zander waves his phone in the air. "Already filled him in. You can stay as long as you want."

When I hesitate, he frowns. There's a hint of hurt reflecting off the hazel in his eyes, but when he grabs my hand I feel the heaviness trying to settle in.

I don't mean to jerk away, but that's what happens anyway.

“Fuck. Sorry. I need ... a minute.” I turn and hurry toward the front of the house, barely bothering to grab my phone and wallet from the coffee table before hightailing it out the door.

The first gulp of fresh air balms the sting in my lungs, and after a couple of minutes sitting on the curb with my head between my knees things start to clear.

I was fine when we had sex. I was fine when he touched me in the shower. When he touched me as we laid on the couch.

Why is this happening now?

The body never forgets the trauma it’s endured.

And Mack damn sure traumatized it.

What’s worse than the pain in my body is the ache in my heart. Because I had hoped to keep this at bay for a little bit longer. To spare Zander the awful details of my last relationship.

That’s what hits me hardest. Hurts the most.

The last time I was this deeply in love with someone, he turned that love into something dark and twisted.

I barely survived loving Mack.

Shit.

I’m in love with Zander.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Zander

Malachi isn't picking up his phone.

When I check in with Julian, he hasn't heard from him.

I call the record shop. Not scheduled today.

Do I feel a teeny bit stalkerish? Maybe. But when your boyfriend suddenly starts gasping for air, runs outside, and then disappears for hours?

Yeah, I'm going to exhaust all of my options.

Julian

No coffee shop. No book store.

Me

I checked the record shop just in case. Nothing.

Julian

I hate to say it, but if Mal doesn't want to be found, we won't find him. Hiding is one of his specialties. Just hasn't needed it in a while.

Me

IDK what happened. One minute we were laughing and kissing and the next it was like he couldn't breathe.

Julian's chat bubbles come and go a couple of times, which only serves to worsen the ball of anxiety in my chest.

Me

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Julian

It might have been a panic attack.

Me

Panic attack?

Julian

Yeah. He gets those sometimes. Not as often as he used to.

Me

Did I set him off?

We didn't do anything this morning that we haven't done before; I'd even call our interaction this morning tame for our usual standards. Especially considering last night.

Julian

Did something happen?

Should I mention the woods thing to him? Is that too private?

Given the recent group play, I'm going to go with no.

Me

We maybe sorta had sex.

Julian

Maybe sorta?

Me

We had sex. Mind-blowing sex with details not for the faint of heart.

More popping and disappearing bubbles.

Julian

Has he talked to you about Mack yet?

Me

Who's Mack?

Julian

I'll take that as a 'no'. I'm at Cakes I promise." He folds his hands on the table and rests his face on them almost child-like. "Mal has some relationship hangups that he unfortunately needs to work through."

"I can help him? Look, I'm no stranger to burying the lead and having it blow up in my face. I'm the last person to judge someone's past."

Pity. That's the look in Julian's eyes. Shit.

"It's not my place to say," he says, "But I care about Mal and I care about you, so I'm willing to push the boundaries a little."

"Is he gonna be mad at you?"

Julian shrugs. "Maybe a little. But sometimes Mal needs someone looking out for him, too."

The barista comes over and drops off a cold drink and warm pastry in front of Julian, then sets a black coffee down in front of me.

"Thought you might need it," he says, sipping what looks like a cup of pure chocolate and humming a little cheerful sound.

He's probably right.

"Okay, so the first thing you need to know is that Mal has C-PTSD, which means 'Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder'. His time in the system was rough. He has trust issues. Abandonment issues. And is prone to panic attacks. Remember when I told you he was having a bit of a dry spell? Those are partially why."

He taps his fingers on the table, watching me for a silent moment before continuing

on.

“It’s why he has a short fuse. Why he can so erratically jump from mood to mood. It means he feels everything very intensely.”

I bite down on my lip, staring down into the cooling coffee. “What happened to him?”

“He was abused,” Julian says the words like they’re poison. “By everyone. His birth parents. His foster parents. The people running our group home. He wanted to protect everyone, and he paid the price for it.”

“So he’s naturally a Daddy?”

My eyes widen as the word comes out, filter be damned, but Julian simply chuckles.

“He doesn’t think so, but he is. I think ... this thing he’s got going on with the both of us ... I think it’s helping him cope. He’s been so much happier, so much more open the last few months. More than I’ve ever seen him.”

“Then, what did I do?” I ask, voice cracking a little at the end. “How did I ... trigger him?”

Julian sighs and drops his chin into his palm. “Mal has a few big triggers. One being crowds. He’s always the last to class to avoid the rush of people. It’s why he was so oppositional about going to your games.”

Well now I feel like an ass.

“The others?”



His smile this time is sad. “Being touched. Usually casual touches are fine, but ... the more intimate ones can be hard for him. Which is why I was really proud when he showed you his tattoos. And part of why we talked about the three of us fooling around. He wanted you to have whatever you needed, even if he couldn’t give it to you. ”

He takes in a deep breath and straightens. “You two having sex is a big deal. That he felt comfortable and safe enough to do that with you? That’s monumental.”

So he says, but now I’m not so sure. We were both upset. Tensions high.

He told me repeatedly that he wanted it.

But what if he just said that so I’d let him take care of me? Let him give up a piece of himself he wasn’t ready to give?

My throat feels thick and dry.

“Zander?”

Julian reaches a hand across the table, offering it to me. I take it even though my stomach feels like it might capsize.

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” I whisper, the rawness clipping my words.

“I know,” Julian says, squeezing my hand. “Mal knows, too. Sometimes he just needs some space. He’ll be back.”

I hope he’s right.

I spend the afternoon hiding out in Julian and Malachi’s dorm waiting for him to

come back. The dorm is a safe, non-crowded place that we both agree he'll return to once he's cleared his head.

Julian waits with me for a while, but as the blue sky turns a dark gray, he offers to pick us something up for dinner. I loan him the truck and wait—rather impatiently—on Malachi's bed.

I wake up to Julian gently rubbing circles on my shoulder. Sleep clings to my eyes, and even as I swipe it away, the heaviness of exhaustion is still present.

"It's late," he says, stroking a hand through my hair. "Wasn't sure if you wanted to get back."

Right. This isn't my room.

A quick look around reveals that Malachi hasn't returned, and I sag against the pillows.

"There's Chinese if you want me to heat it up."

I shake my head and dig my palms into my eyes.

"He'll be back."

What if he's not? What if I fucked up so bad he doesn't feel safe here anymore?

That thought hurts.

I want to be there for him the way he's been there for me. To show him that he isn't giving to me with nothing in return; we take care of each other.

He's my Daddy, and I'm his boy.

A thought hits me, and I sit up. "Julian? What if he does want to be found? What if he's just scared to come back?"

He sits down on the edge of the bed and squeezes his fingers around my ankle. "Mal can have a hard time getting a grip on his emotions, so, yeah, that's possible. He'd probably go somewhere important. Somewhere that tells him if we find him, then we actually care."

"Of course we care!"

Julian taps his temple. "He know that up here. But down here?" He leans forward and splays a hand over my heart. "It's hard for him to believe it."

Where would Malachi want to be found? What place would be special enough?

I wrack my brain, unable to come up with anywhere he's shown extra interest in.

What about somewhere important to us ?

I replay our entire tumultuous relationship. Most of our time has been spent in bedrooms or alleyways.

Would he have gone back to The Den in the middle of the night? Waiting out in the alley for someone—friendly or not—to find him.

The idea makes me antsy, so I throw my legs over the edge of the bed and slip my shoes on.

The least I can do is check. If I'm wrong—good.

Another snapshot plays in my head: moonlight shining through the trees, labored breaths as we fight the pull urging us together.

“You want to kiss me, too.”

Somewhere safe. Somewhere special.

Where we first kissed. Where he first told me we couldn’t be what we are.

My breath comes out of me as more of a sob.

“I think I know where he is.”

It’s late. The moon is high in the sky, and the air takes on a chilling bite. It’s worth it, though, because all of the worry and fear is abated by a silhouette beneath the willow.

I don’t even need confirmation that it’s him. My heart nearly leaps out of my chest on sight, and I cross the space with all of the speed of the winger I am.

It takes all of my self control not to drop to my knees and throw my arms around him, but I also need to just see him.

He looks up from where his knees are pulled tight to his chest, and all of my breath rushes out of my chest.

“Malachi.” Because that’s who needs me right now. The person behind the name. He can’t be Daddy if Malachi is hurting.

He doesn’t smile or show any outright joy, just stares up at me as if I were see-through, and as the seconds tick on the tension building inside starts to make my body physically ache.

After what feels like an eternity, he drops his gaze and—in a slight, barely noticeable movement—pats the ground beside him. I take it slow—so I don't spook him—and mirror his position.

"I'm glad you're okay," I whisper, knocking my knee on his.

It earns me the barest hint of a smile. "That's relative."

We sit in a bout of silence punctuated by the sounds of our breathing, unsure where to even start until Julian finally steps forward and sits down in front of us.

"You scared us, Mal."

He sits there, squeezing his arms around his knees in a repetitive pattern, staring off into one space as he shrugs. "Sorry. I just needed to?"

"Mope?" Julian chirps and reaches over to smack Malachi on the thigh.

The sound rings loud throughout the quad, and I think I'm just as shocked as Malachi is. His brows are creased, frown pronounced, and a huff of irritated air is expelled from his lungs.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

“I’m not going to baby you, jerk,” Julian says, voice gentle but firm. “You have skills for dealing with this. We have steps. You don’t ghost me of all people.”

Malachi nods like a reprimanded child. “I’m sorry. Really.”

Julian’s smile is soft, and he leans over to stroke the top of Malachi’s head. “Thank you. But I’m not the one you owe an apology to.”

That’s when he looks at me, like truly looks at me, and instead of saying anything he holds out his hand.

I take it, fitting my fingers between his and holding as tight as I dare.

He stares at our joined hands, rubbing his thumb over the back of mine, until his head drops to my shoulder. I inch my thigh over to knock against his, creating as many points of contact as I can.

After a long time where I fear he may have fallen asleep—and I would have carried his ass all the way back to the dorms if I had to—he tightens his grip on my hand and touches the tip of his nose to my jaw.

“I love you,” he says—low and breathy like he’s about to swan dive off a precipice.

My own breathing stops. My chest burns, and then it all comes rushing in at once like a tsunami.

“Holy shit,” I say, which is far from an eloquent reply, but it makes him crack a

smile. I feel it when he presses his mouth to my cheek.

“Holy shit, indeed.”

I turn my face to meet his wandering mouth, and it’s not so much a kiss as the two of us sharing a breath. When I finally press my lips to his, it’s tentative, and he responds with threading his fingers in the back of my hair and holding me steady to him.

We don’t push closer, just exist in each other’s touch.

Malachi’s skin pebbles where scratch over the surface with my fingertips, bare and cool from the whip of the air.

“How aren’t you freezing?” I ask, slipping both arms around his shoulders to pull him into me.

A soft noise comes from his lips, and I rub my hands along the planes of his back to create friction and warmth.

It isn’t long before Julian presses in beside us, covering Malachi’s other side with his body and wrapping him up in his arms.

“Silly, Daddy,” Julian mutters, and I feel Malachi’s smile as he trails it down my neck, burying his face in the crook and slipping his arms beneath my hoodie.

The three of us sit there in a human cuddle pile until the rhythmic sound of Malachi’s breathing begins to shake and little droplets cascade down my collarbone.

“We’ve got you,” I say, holding him as close as our bodies allow. “You’re safe.”

A soft rush of air skitters across my chest. Once the tears dry and his breathing

settles, Malachi pulls away to rest his weight on the trunk of the tree. Julian and I let him have a little bit of space, but stay seated beside him should he want contact.

“I have to talk about it, don’t I?”

“You don’t have to,” I say, picking at the blades of grass between us. “But I’d like to hear it. I’d like to get to know this part of you.”

His face twists into a grimace. “It’s not pretty.”

“I don’t need it to be.”

His heavy sigh fills the silence, and I resist the urge to reach out and touch him.

“Um, okay. I guess ... I had this boyfriend of sorts when I was like sixteen, seventeen. His name was Mack. He was one of the kids in our group home.”

He wraps his arms around himself and aims his eyes at the ground beneath him.

“Mack was this ... enigmatic force. Loud. Demanding. If you were on his good side, he made you feel secure in a way most of us had never had in the system.”

He releases a trembled breath.

“The couple in charge of the home, they loved him. He was their shiny, golden foster kid. They used him as an example to get more kids placed with them. If you got in with Mack, you were safe. If you didn’t then he made your life hell.”

Julian is the first to break the silent truce, grabbing hold of Malachi’s hand and squeezing it so tight their knuckles turn white.



“I knew that. I knew how he was. We’d been there longer than him, so for a while he left us alone. But one day he started ... picking away at Julian. Small jabs. Getting him in trouble for things he didn’t do. I caught Julian in the hall closet crying one day and ... I lost it.”

Malachi leans his head back on the tree and puts on a small smile.

“I confronted Mack, ready to start the biggest fight and get myself kicked out—and I would have taken Julian with me. We would have ran away at the first sign of Mack laying a hand on him. But that didn’t happen. No. I picked a fight alright, but Mack didn’t fight back.”

His eyes go a little glassy, breathing becoming more labored.

“He kissed me, and ... I’d never been kissed like that before. Mack managed to enthrall me. Convince me that he was only hard on kids because the people and places outside would be harder, and he promised that he’d lay off Julian. Admitted that it wasn’t fair, that he was jealous of our friendship.”

That one thing I can understand. Julian and Malachi are the kind of close that can make you feel insecure. Though all I’ve ever felt when it comes to their relationship is peace.

“Long story short, we started seeing each other. In secret. In private. No one could know he was gay—or bi. Honestly, I couldn’t tell you his sexuality because I don’t think he was ever attracted to a person. He was attracted to control. And I let him control me. Because I ...”

The look on Malachi’s face can only be described as self hatred, and seeing him this beaten down breaks my fucking heart.

“I fell in love with him. And I didn’t see all of the ways that he ... hurt me. Like having sex when I wasn’t ready. Hurting me when we did. Using my protectiveness of Julian to make me do things. Things I’m not proud of. Things that got me beat. That got me ... raped.”

The world becomes a colony of buzzing bees living right in my eardrum.

Within seconds, I’m the one that’s crying, the one who Julian leans over Malachi to reach, to drag into a hug where his arms envelope us both.

Mine go around the two of them, and neither of us question Malachi’s arms still lying like lead in his lap.

“Guys.” His laugh is a wet sound. “I don’t like talking about it, so I can’t go into detail, alright? It happened. I got a shit ton of issues from it. They’re mine to deal with.”

“Not true.” I knock my forehead on his and wait until his eyes rise to meet mine. “We won’t let you go through it alone. We’re your boys. We support you just like you support us.”

His lip wobbles. His eyes glisten. Then, his hands come up to grip the back of our necks.

“The day Mack left the home—” his breath is barely above a whisper, “—I told Jules I’d never let anyone hurt us again.”

And so became the birth of Big Bad Wolf Malachi.

“But you, Wildfire,” the words, along with his lips, brush my cheek, “you and all you’re stubbornness wouldn’t leave us alone.”

I still won't, but I don't think I have to tell him that.

"You don't have to run," I tell him. "If you panic, or if you're uncomfortable, you can tell me. If you need space, you can tell me. My ego isn't as big as you think."

"No, but your mouth is," he mumbles, and I know it's supposed to be an insult, but I laugh anyway.

"You love my mouth." I press a quick kiss to his lips, and when I go to pull away, he grips my head in both his hands and moves in for a longer, slower kiss.

"I love you," he says, and just like the first time my heart picks up like it's running a marathon.

We end up in each other's arms, kissing and breathing each other in, hands exploring gentle and slow above our clothes. Malachi ducks his head when he needs to catch his breath, and lets out a low, slightly stilted chuckle.

"Sorry, Jules."

Oh, right.

I look over his shoulder where Julian has moved an arms length away, watching us with the sweetest, saddest smile, and it makes my heart twinge.

"I want that someday," he says, voice quiet and thick.

I hold Malachi to my chest and reach a hand out to pull Julian over top of us. For right this moment, we need each other.

A few months ago, I never would have thought this was something that I wanted.

Now? I can't imagine not having it.

A Daddy.

A boyfriend.

Malachi freaking Blanchard.

I can't imagine letting any of it go. Losing it.

Do I love him?

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Malachi

For the first time in years, I sleep easy. Wrapped around my best friend and boyfriend. Acting as a shield from the lies my mind feeds itself.

I've kept all the shit with Mack locked up so tight by the time it spilled over it was like snapping open an over-pressurized soda can.

Exhaustion heavy in my bones, I don't wake up until nearly noon, and even then I have no motivation to get out of bed because curled into my side is the golden retriever who somehow won me over before I could even realize I'd started to fall.

I stare at his sleeping face for far too long. I stare until his eyes squint open and confusion passes over his face before his attention lands on me and recognition has his body melting against mine.

"Morning, Daddy," he says, and it almost sounds as innocent as when it comes from Julian.

"Afternoon, Wildfire."

He reaches around me for his phone on the desk and groans at the clock.

"I can't tell you the last time I slept past nine."

“Whatever will you do without going for a run at the ass crack of dawn?”

Zander props up on his arm beside me, swirling his fingers over the ink on my chest.

Adoration swells up beneath every pass of his fingertips.

God, it feels incredible whenever he touches me. What is wrong with my body that it thinks this could ever be bad?

“I’m sorry.” I card a hand through his messy bedhead, and he lifts those solemn eyes to stare into mine.

The hand on my chest slides up to cup the side of my neck as he leans in.

I tilt my face up to meet his, waiting for him to close the distance.

His nose bumps mine. Breath slides along my face. Then, for the briefest moment, he lets our lips meet in a kiss.

It’s tentative. Fragile.

Let me in , it says, and I want to. I really fucking want to.

We break apart, and I look into those deeply caring hazel eyes.

“I love you,” I say, needing this swell of emotion to exist outside of the confines of my chest.

He doesn’t say anything, and I wonder if this is a mistake.

You found me, I want to say, but I won’t give up more than one confession without

reciprocation. If my heart is going to take damage, the least I can do is keep enough for myself to heal and rebuild.

“Say something.” It comes out as a whispered plea, and I hate being this battered. Having so much of me exposed.

“I’m trying ...” He says it soft and slow, his thumb drawing circles on my cheek. “I’ve never felt like this before.”

“It’s scary.”

“Can I just kiss you? Can that be enough for now?”

I expect the non-confession to hurt, but it doesn’t. It’s like a weight falls off my chest.

I don’t need him to make any declarations or to have his feelings pinned down the way mine came at me like a speeding train.

So I lean into him again, sighing into his mouth as it crashes on top of mine, as his fingers sink into my hair.

He rolls on top of me, the softness of the kiss beginning to flame.

His body blankets mine, thighs squeezing my hips, and growing erection jutting into my stomach.

Our hands wander to every inch of skin, and when we run out, we slip our fingers beneath each other’s boxers and rid one another of those as well.

We’re both hard and leaking but don’t focus on cocks. He kneads my balls between his thick fingers. I slip between his cheeks to stroke his hole.

Eventually, the arousal becomes too hard to ignore.

Zander tugs my hair to force us apart and squeezes his thighs around me. We're both catching our breath, and I can see the desire in his eyes that matches mine.

"Need you, Wildfire."

His eyes flash with concern. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," I say, though his pinched brow says he's skeptical. "I don't want it rough. I want it slow. Sensual. I want you, Zander Hale, inside me. Remind me that I'm yours."

The last thing I expect is to see tears drip from Zander's lashes, for him to clasp my face in his hands and kiss me like it's our first all over again. It's so tender my own eyes grow wet.

"I can show you how I feel," he says, lips still resting on mine. "I can do that for you."

And then his hands are on my body, hiking my hips and rutting his hard, pulsing cock against the cleft of my ass.

He fumbles for my lube on the dresser, refusing to leave my mouth, and he makes a mess of us both as he coats his fingers with it.

One by one they push inside me, stretching me wide until it feels like I might split in half. I can remember the feel of his cock out in the woods. The way he sunk inside and treated me like something he owned, not a body he was experiencing for the first time.



His fingers slip free, and his tongue retreats from my mouth, pulling back just enough to stare down at me.

To make sure I'm okay.

There's a hint of panic seeded in the heat that roars to life beneath my skin at his scorching gaze. It sprouts in the breath of silence—of appreciation—but as soon as his hands move on me again, it's decimated among the flames.

They grip my thighs and spread them apart. They push on my chest, dig into the spacing of my ribs.

The head of his dick touches the rim of my hole, and it feels so good, so anticipatory, that I jolt with a realization.

“Shit. Zander. Condoms.”

He freezes and blinks to clear the haze of lust, blushing like mad when the words hit.

“Do you have some?”

I should have bought some when Zander and I started hooking up, but I never did.

“Do you?”

Zander winces and smiles apologetically. “I wasn't really thinking about getting laid when I came over.”

Fair.

We could trade off blowjobs or handjobs, but it's obvious by the way neither of us

moves, by the way our hands stay rooted on each other, that we're both desperate for a deeper connection.

"Have you ever been ...?" He wets his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"Once. When Jules was ready to start ... seeing people. We went together to get checked out. Negative on all fronts." It's my turn for my cheeks to heat. "You know I haven't touched anyone other than you."

"We should have talked about this before?—"

"I put your dick in my mouth or you put yours in my ass?"

We both break out into grins, and he leans over me to rest his forehead on mine.

"That's my fault. I'm the one who should have known better."

"Why? Because you like to have sex? You're human. We all mess up. Can you tell me you've checked the STI status of every single person you've ever hooked up with—excluding me?"

Zander frowns and presses it against my lips. "That number is higher than I care to admit."

"It's fine," I say with a laugh.

It feels good. To be happy.

"Put your dick in me, Jackass."

He obliges, and I'm positive that I stop breathing. The tip of his dick pops in, and my asshole burns despite the lube, but it feels so fucking good that I can't help but bear

my weight down, taking him deeper and stretching myself wider.

When he bottoms out, I gasp so hard my vision fills with black spots.

Ragged breaths gasp from my lungs, cheeks ablaze with arousal, and Zander smiles down at me in triumph.

“You feel so goddamn incredible,” he says with a long, slow roll of his hips.

I’d echo the sentiment, but each thrust, no matter how small, is sending shockwaves through my bloodstream.

Face to face, all I want is to hide in the crooks of his body. Let him take me but not see me, even if I’ve already exposed him to every frayed wire.

His cock drags along my walls—slow and precise. When my eyes close, his hands push into my hair and urge them back open.

“I want you, Malachi Blanchard,” he says, each word matching his groin meeting mine. “Every broken piece. Every part you think isn’t worth saving. I want it.”

He drags a sensual touch down my body, gripping onto my thighs and pushing them up, forcing them open so he can fuck me harder.

Not faster.

“Say it.”

Our gazes collide, and the ecstasy etched into every line of his face as he buries himself inside me breaks down the last barrier I have.

Tears spring to my eyes and spill over, cheeks becoming an endless waterfall of overflowing emotion.

“I love you.” It’s a gasp because I’m drowning.

“I love you.” A please because I need this more than air.

“I love you.” Complete surrender.

He folds on top of me, mouth inches from mine, keeping the same excruciating pace that makes my body feel like it might combust.

“I’ve got you,” he says. “Let go.”

The moment his lips make contact with mine, his fist closes over my dick, and all it takes is one pump for me to pop like a champagne bottle.

He milks every drop from me, switching between squeezing my balls and stroking my dick until there’s nothing left.

No more walls between us.

Just two bodies.

Two souls.

Two hearts.

When Zander comes inside me, filling me with warmth, I hold him as long as our bodies will allow. Until his softening cock slips out, and his cum trickles out behind it.

He holds me close then, kissing along my neck, whispering sweet nothings in my ear that silences all of the noise in my head.

Everything but him.

Everything but us.

“I’ve never told anyone this,” I say as we lay in the aftermath, wound up in each other’s arms. “But some nights, when Mack would feel insecure or threatened, he’d sneak into my bed.

It would start off with me comforting him, but would quickly transform into Mack insisting he needed a different kind of reassurance. ”

Zander doesn’t say anything, but I feel his breathing tremble. He rubs a hand along my arm—soothing, comforting.

“He’d be rough. Would hold me down. Keep me quiet. He demanded I tell him how much I loved him. Over and over while he ... abused me.”

Saying it out loud makes me feel just as disgusting as when it would happen, but being in Zander’s arms, I can feel it washing away.

“It was so bad that it gave me night terrors. Even now, almost four years since the last time he touched me, I still feel it some nights. I’ll be laying in bed, starting to doze off, and then suddenly I can’t move.

I hear him breathing in my ear, feel his weight on top of me ...

and all I can do is stay there and cry until the episode passes. ”

“Oh my fucking god , I want to kill him.”

Despite the gravity of the confession, I smile. “Because of that, I have really bad insomnia. I always have a fan going, music playing, anything to distract me and busy my brain so maybe the attack won’t happen.”

Even Julian doesn’t know the cause of my sleep disturbances, doesn’t know why I lie awake some nights until the sun rises, and even then only let my eyes rest for a few moments at a time.

“I’ve never noticed,” Zander says, the wound in his voice crater sized and hollow.

“They haven’t happened with you.”

I was afraid the first night we spent together would end with him running for the hills, but when sleep took over and morning came all with no signs of Mack’s ghost, I knew there was no protecting my heart from finding solace with Zander Hale.

“What do I do if they do?”

It fills me with warmth how much he cares, how intense his words sound. His arm around me is almost too tight, but that somehow settles me more.

“If you’re holding me, don’t stop. But don’t move either. If you’re not ... stay close but don’t touch me. Wait for it to pass.”

“I don’t like that.”

“Me neither, but I think your Coach would really start to dislike me if you came to practice all banged up because I punched you.”

“I’d take it,” he says without a hint of humor or sarcasm. “If it gets you away from the memory, I’ll be a goddamn punching bag.”

Fuck, what am I going to do with this man?

“I love you.” Every time I say it, I feel lighter.

Those words used to hold something dangerous, used to hold my heart hostage with the threat that they might shatter it again.

Zander touches his fingers to my cheek, tilting my head so his eyes capture mine.

“I love you, Daddy.”

I feel raw, like an open wound in need of irrigation, and Zander’s words come at me like a flood.

His lips brush mine, a hand presses on the back of my head.

“I want to explore this,” he says. “I want to understand why this feels so ...”

“Right?” I supply, voice crackling.

He smiles, fingers twisting and playing in my hair. It’s relaxing—comforting.

“You take care of me,” he says while his mouth lingers over mine, “and I’ll take care of you.”

It’s a strange notion, being taken care of. I’ve spent my whole life looking after others, but here Zander is—who undeniably needs more care than anyone I’ve ever known—wanting to do that for me.

“We’ll figure out where we fit. Together.” My arms around his torso tighten.

He beams down at me, every bit the cocky, sunshine boy that he is.

“Yes, please, Daddy.”

We might not know how this will work out for us or how far we want this to go, but it’s a journey we feel we can take on together.

With a little help from Julian, of course.

A Daddy and his boys.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.



## Page 29

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:01 am*

Zander

One Year Later

Six months in the making, and everything is finally coming together.

Planning isn't my strong suit. I'm all about spontaneity.

If I'm in charge of date night, our plans are made in the moment.

When I suggest Malachi let me tie him up, it's mid-sex with my cock in his ass.

He likes that about me.

The spontaneity.

And the cock. He likes that, too.

But I have used every ounce of focus and determination I can muster up, and it's finally time to let the cat out of the bag.

Five more minutes.

The Den has been under construction for the last two months, and Malachi has spent all of his free time hardcore Daddying me.

Which has involved a surprising amount of spankings coming from someone who

says he's not into giving punishments.

“Maybe I like your ass being a little sore and red before I fuck it.”

That's a hot new development, and now even the lightest tap—like he sometimes does casually when we aren't alone—makes me hard.

Because if Malachi spans me, he's going to fuck me after. It's the only time he does.

Malachi knows there's a new section being built onto The Den that's opening today, but I convinced him to spend a little time with Julian while I went to practice so he couldn't get here early. Julian knows to keep him far away until it's time to meet up.

Speaking of practice, I've had to be a lot more active than just being an ace winger and taking directions from one of our captains.

It's grueling at times, but I enjoy it more than I thought I would.

Even if I still feel a little unsettled holding Micky's co-captain title.

We made it to the Frozen Four last season, but there was an accident that took Micky out for the remainder of our games. The team wasn't up to the task of playing at the level we needed without him. We didn't get our asses kicked right away, but it was inevitable that we fell behind.

Which is why my focus on the ice has been strengthening our player alignments. Our gameplay can't hinge on one player or highly favor another. We need to be adaptable.

Tessa

We're setting up now.

I grin down at the phone, watching as the other group chat bubbles come and go.

Julian

Be there in a minute. Grabbing coffee. Mal has yours, Z.

Malachi brings me a coffee and a muffin from our usual coffee shop every day after practice.

It's one of his caregiving things.

Me

Thank you guys for all the help.

Tessa

Payment to be collected at a later date.

There really isn't anything for me to do other than wait for Malachi and Julian. My job was more about throwing ideas around and convincing people to give me what I want. Now, I have to trust everyone else to put it together.

Something hot touches the side of my face, and I jolt hard enough to jostle the contents of the coffee cup. Malachi's grip is firm, though, so it doesn't spill.

"Ow, asshole."

He grins full of amusement and affection.

"Love you, too, Wildfire."

I draw him in for a kiss, moaning obscenely when his tongue— warm and sweet from his own coffee—prods around my mouth like a playground.

“Not fair.”

We break away at Julian’s pout, and while keeping one arm around me, Malachi slings the other around his best friend.

“Maybe it’s time for you to start looking for your own Daddy.”

Julian only pouts more, crossing his arms but leaning into Malachi’s chest.

“You won’t let me use the websites.”

“Because I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“How am I going to meet a Daddy if you won’t let me talk to any Daddies?”

The three of us have played around a handful of times, but as mine and Malachi’s dynamic has gotten more serious, we’ve found that so has our possessiveness of one another. Even casually, Julian has dropped referring to Malachi as “Daddy” because I expressed discomfort over it.

I felt like an ass, because he was Julian’s first, but they both assured me that my feelings were a priority. They restructured their relationship so Malachi can offer him support but not full on caretaking anymore.

“I might have a solution for that,” Malachi says, giving both of our waists a squeeze. “I looked into an event coming up. A camp for Littles. I thought maybe you could meet some like-minded friends.”

Julian’s eyes light up, though hold a bit of skepticism.

“I’d have to go alone.”

Malachi nods. “Zander doesn’t regress, and I’m not leaving him for a whole summer.”

Julian blows out a breath, but movement from inside the building interrupts whatever he’s about to say.

Tess pops her head out, sees the three of us, and grins. “Hello, loves. Right on time.”

Before anyone can complain, Tess grabs one of my hands and one of Malachi’s and pulls us toward the doorway.

“I worked really hard on this,” she whispers in my ear, earning her a look of suspicion from Malachi. “Appreciate me.”

I kiss her cheek. “Whatever you need.”

“I’m holding you to that.”

The rearranged record shop is more spacious with half of the store housing rows of CDs and vinyls with brand new listening stations that are much more Zander-proof than the originals.

The other half? It’s a wide open space with a small, gated off section of audio equipment and a slightly elevated, circular stage.

I use the term lightly, because it won’t likely fit more than two or three people.

It’s currently occupied by cords and instruments, namely a keyboard and something else with a lot of buttons.

There's someone crouched at the keyboard, messing with something at the bottom, and when I throw Tess a questioning look, she nods enthusiastically.

"What's this?" Malachi asks, still taking everything in.

"It's a set up for live bands," I say, fighting a blush when Malachi's surprised eyes turn on me. "You love music, and Julian told me you've never gotten to go to a concert."

Which I understand given his aversion to crowds. "So, I figured I'd bring the concert to you."

The words are barely out of my mouth before Malachi ropes me into him and covers my mouth with his own.

"Happy anniversary," I squeak as soon as I can catch a breath.

"I'd give you a reward," he mutters against my lips, "but that's not appropriate for prying eyes."

I don't get a chance to give him one of my ultra-creative solutions, because he kisses me again.

"Lucky for you, I just picked your gift up," he says.

"That's last minute of you," I tease, flicking his mouth with my tongue. "I can think of a couple gifts you could give me later."

"Mhm." The sound rumbles out of his throat and goes straight to my cock. "You'll like what I got you, Wildfire."

It takes all of my willpower not to have him drag me out now and explain himself,

but his gift isn't finished yet. It'll have to wait.

I take a step out of his arms, because that's the only way we'll stop roaming our hands all over each other, and that's when his eyes slide back to the performance area and widen.

I couldn't grin wider if I tried.

"What did you do?" He asks, barely above a whisper, and I know I'm dealing with full blown dorky, Malachi Blanchard. Daddy has been shelved.

"I may or may not have found a clusterfuck of ramblings you made about some indie artist you like. I also may have seen the sheer amount of playlists you have his music on. And I may—okay, I definitely —asked Tessa if she could work some of her newly acquired band manager magic to see if she could bring him here?"

Anytime I get to see Malachi's eyes light with excitement, whenever he gets to be happy without the pressure of looking after someone else, my heart feels impossibly full.

"I love you," he says, and gives me another quick kiss before pulling me out the door.

"What are we doing?" I ask. I kinda figured he'd abandon me for the musician. And I wouldn't have been mad, because I'm the one who gave this to him.

But I won't say no to whatever else he has in mind.

He takes me to the truck, pulling a box out of the bed and handing it to me.

"Oh, I get my present now?"

Malachi raises his brow and rests a hand on the back of my neck.

“Drop the attitude or I’ll let you walk in there with a handprint on your ass.”

I shiver and lift the lid of the box, revealing green and red parchment paper that I easily push aside—not rip out because littering will also get me spanked.

Beneath the paper is a green, white, and maroon jersey with the number “16” displayed in large numbers on the back. It’s not the team’s colors, and instead of my name above the numbers it says “Wildfire.”

I run my fingers over the letters, smiling softly as emotion bubbles rapidly in my chest.

“Malachi...”

He squeezes my nape, whispers in my ear, “look at the front.”

I turn it over, and the laugh I choke out is wet and wobbly. “Goddammit.”

In the spot that would normally have the team logo, Malachi has replaced with the words, “Malachi’s Boy.”

“I figure,” he says, lips brushing my temple, “that sounds innocently enough like boyfriend behavior.”

He’s not wrong. Most people won’t bat an eye at it. The team will chirp and rib me if they see it—and of course I’ll wear it around them just to show off anyway—but Malachi and I, we both know what it means.

“I love you,” I tell him, winding my arms around his neck. The box drops unceremoniously to the ground, but the jersey is clenched right in my fists.

“Happy anniversary.” He wraps an arm around my waist, the other hand on my neck



creeping up to get tangled in my hair.

I breathe him in, and we stand there, intermittently kissing, until I pull back to lean on the door of the truck.

“So who’s getting fucked tonight?”

Malachi follows me, ducking his head to hold his mouth above mine.

“We both are.” His tongue pokes at the seam of my lips, and I part for him with a needy exhale. “Unless you don’t think you can keep it up that long?”

The challenge sparks the adrenaline in my veins.

“You’re on, Blanchard.”

THE END