



Silent Verity (Razor Monkees #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: What should have been one of the happiest times of our lives drove a wedge between us.

For years now, Dalton has been my rock. When we're apart, I feel like I can't breathe, but when we're together, I feel almost invincible. Like the world can't touch me.

But hitting it big enough for us and our bandmates to move into a mansion destroys everything.

I lost Dalton. I lost the one person I needed most in this world.

Somehow, we're all still living in relative harmony. Somehow, I hide the devastation I feel from all my friends. Somehow, I smile at Dalton all while I feel like I'm drowning in my own blood.

But when no one is looking, I allow myself to crumble. To fall. To break.

When my mother makes her reappearance, like she does every few weeks, it's the final straw. I'm breaking. Shattering. But this time, she's arriving to do more damage than she's ever done before.

Because she overdoses, and I'm woken in the middle of the night by police officers bringing me the news.

Dalton is who I beg for as my world is spinning out of control all around me. He's the only person I trust to hold all my pieces while I'm being shredded apart.

But have I truly lost him forever, or will Dalton pull through when I need him the most?

****Please read the author's note at the beginning of the book before deciding to read.**

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Dalton

I stared up at the massive home looming in front of the six of us.

We'd finally decided to move out of the tiny three-bedroom house the six of us had been renting in a rougher part of the city, deciding it was time for the six of us to put money together and buy a bigger place.

I didn't think any of us truly cared about the tight living quarters, but Kalin, Spike, Jesse, and I had enough of listening to Tor and Salem fucking like rabbits.

But now that we were all standing there in front of our new home with our keys in our hands, my chest ached .

Because moving into this massive mansion meant I would no longer share a room with Jesse, my best friend.

My fucking rock . He would no longer be in my space.

I'd no longer catch him randomly wearing my shirts and pants because he was too lazy to wash his own clothes.

I'd no longer get to smell my body wash and shampoo on him because he'd showered using my things because he didn't want to go out and get more of his own when he ran out.

We were moving up in the world, which was good, I guessed, but at what cost?

“Well, I guess now everyone can have their own rooms,” Tor said, leaning into Salem’s side.

Salem snorted. “You’re never having your own space, babe. Don’t even think about it.”

Kalin, the keyboard player in our band, grimaced at them. “I’m just happy I won’t be woken up by you two fucking at all hours of the night. You’ll be way on the other side of the house in your own wing.”

I laughed, thankful it sounded normal. Inside, I felt like I was being strangled. Jesse wasn’t saying anything, just smiling. There was nothing showing on his face except contentment. How was he okay with this?

Oh, right. He didn’t feel anything like that for me. It was just me who was madly, stupidly fucking in love with him.

“Well, let’s not stand out here with our thumbs stuck up our asses,” Jesse said, moving forward to unlock the front door. “I’m ready to unpack so I can veg out on pizza and then pass out in bed.”

Once we were inside, I was thankful to see that the movers my mom had hired for us had already placed all the furniture in their respective places, so that was one less thing we all had to worry about.

And a glimpse into the kitchen showed that all of our utensils, pots, and pans had been unpacked and put away as well.

Tugging my phone from my pocket, I shot a text off to my mom. Didn’t matter that I was a grown man and a multi-millionaire. I would never not need my mom, nor would I ever not be grateful for her always working to make my life easier.

Dalton:

Thank you for the movers. They did most of the hard work for us.

Mom:

Good. They were paid extra for it, so I would hope so. Enjoy your new home, honey. And congrats again.

I smiled before pocketing my phone. Unlike my friends, who'd been raised in various stages of poverty and in broken homes, I'd grown up in a middle-class home with great, attentive parents.

I never went without anything. I knew my friends hadn't been so lucky, which made me even more grateful for my parents.

I had no idea how I'd ended up being friends with lot of them when I was so different from them, but they'd welcomed me into their fold regardless.

And now, we were our own little family, and my parents loved all five of them like they were their own.

Looking up, I was surprised to find I was the only one left in the middle of the entrance.

Everyone else had already dispersed. Sighing, I toed off my shoes by the front door.

One of the rules my mom had always had was there were no shoes in the house, and old habits died hard.

Even if we now had cleaners and I knew my friends would never remember to take

their shoes off—as shown by my shoes being the only ones by the front door—I would never walk through the house in my shoes.

On my way to my room, I passed by Jesse's.

His door was shut, and I could vaguely hear music from his room.

I paused outside his room, raising my fist to knock.

To see if he wanted company or help unpacking.

He was disorganized at best and chaotic at his worst. But then, I noticed the “DO NOT DISTURB” door hanger, and I lowered my hand, feeling sick to my stomach.

Since when did Jesse block me from his room? Since when did he shut me out?

Feeling nauseous, I finished the walk to the end of the hall where my room was.

Once I was inside, I shut my door and bypassed all my boxes to collapse face first onto my bare mattress.

I had no idea how I was supposed to cope without Jesse asleep on just the other side of the room.

Hell, most nights, he'd always slept in my bed with me .

We'd put on a movie and fall asleep wrapped around each other.

That had always been us. Even before I moved out of my parents' place and into that tiny fucking house so we could all be close. We'd always had each other.

Now there was a hallway and two closed doors between us, but they may as well have been the fucking Pacific Ocean with how much distance I felt was between us.

I suddenly regretted ever agreeing to move out of that rundown house and buy this one. Because if I hadn't agreed, I would still be sharing a room with Jesse. He'd still be smiling at me and not blocking me out of his room.

But he was now clearly putting distance between us, and fuck me for being a gentleman. For being the good guy. Because I knew I wouldn't push him.

If this was how he wanted things now... Well, I'd let him have it.

Even if it damn near killed me inside.

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Jesse

A FEW MONTHS LATER

I wasn't doing well.

Hell, saying I wasn't doing well was a fucking understatement.

I was spiraling . And I'd been doing so damn good at keeping it hidden so Dalton wouldn't notice, but every day, it was getting harder and harder to keep that mask on my face.

To keep plastering a smile onto my lips and hang around the guys and pretend nothing was wrong while what I wanted was so fucking far away, yet so goddamn close.

For two years, Dalton and I had shared a room. And for longer than that, I'd slept over at his place, and we'd shared a bed, and he'd cuddled me because having him wrapped around me helped to keep my head silent and to keep my anxiety and depression from being so fucking loud in my brain.

Now that the six of us had thrown our money into a pot and bought this huge fucking house, there was no longer any reason for Dalton and me to share a room. There wasn't any reason for us to share a bed and cuddle anymore.

I hadn't had a good night's rest since we moved in. I tossed and turned more often than not, and when I did manage to sleep, I just had nightmares about my mother and

her random fits of rage when she was sober and how neglectful she was when she was happy and high.

I'd discreetly—so discreetly even my best friends didn't know—gone to see a doctor for my sleeplessness.

I'd been put on sleeping pills, but after a few nights of using them, I grew terrified I'd become addicted to them since drug abuse ran in my family, and I'd stopped taking them.

Addiction was hereditary, and I wasn't chancing that shit.

Sighing, I adjusted myself on the pool float and lifted my blunt to my lips.

Smoking was the only crutch I allowed myself.

Sometimes, I drank occasionally, but I never felt the burning need to smoke, and if I started smoking too much, I usually caught myself and left it alone for a while, even if it left me miserable and constantly in a mental low.

I was a contradiction. I knew that. Smoking but not allowing myself to take sleeping pills? Didn't make a lot of sense, but a lot of shit I did now didn't make sense to me when Dalton had slipped through my fingers and put a wall up between us.

The clouds moved from in front of the sun, no longer blocking the rays, and warmth bled into my skin as the sun shone down on me.

It almost felt like it was mocking my shit mood, but life tended to do that enough to me as it was, so I was pretty used to being mocked.

There was nothing quite like having a shitty mom who didn't give two fucks about

me and spending most of my time at my best friend's house in high school, where he had loving parents who adored him and gave him everything in the fucking world.

But I wouldn't wish on Dalton what the fuck me and our friends had gone through.

Salem never talked about his family, but I knew they were the shittiest out of all of our parents.

Tor's wasn't much better. Kalin's mom had passed away when he was a toddler in a car crash, and his dad lost himself in the bottom of a bottle, never to surface again.

Spike had spent his entire childhood in foster care after his mom lost him to the state and never cared enough to get clean and get him back.

The back door opened, and Spike stepped outside, a cigarette between his lips. His hand was already cupping the cigarette, and he was lifting the lighter up when he spotted me, jerking in surprise. I lifted a hand and waved at him.

"You scared the shit out of me," he said, shutting the back door and making his way to the pool. He sat on the edge and let his legs dangle into the water. Then, he lit his cigarette before setting his Zippo lighter aside. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

"Smoking," I deadpanned, holding my blunt up for him to see. "Same as you."

He sighed. "You're smoking a lot lately, man. Everything okay?"

I shrugged, brushing his concerns off. "Everything's chill. Just want to relax."

He narrowed his eyes at me, and it took everything in me to not squirm uncomfortably.

Spike had always been intuitive, and it was like if he looked hard enough, he could see right through me to all the internal bleeding happening.

Physically, I was fine. Emotionally, all of my organs were rupturing.

And my heart was in the worst condition of all.

My brain wasn't far behind.

"Liar," he finally said.

I scoffed. "Why are you smoking more?" I hit back. Spike rarely smoked cigarettes, but lately, I'd noticed he picked up more on the habit, too. When he just grunted, I snorted. "That's what I fucking thought."

"We ready for the upcoming tour?" Spike asked, changing the subject. He didn't even bother to do it subtly, but that wasn't his style. Spike was blunt, and he didn't bother to hide anything he did. And if he didn't want to talk about something, he damn well wouldn't.

I was aching for the tour. At least on the tour bus, I'd be in close quarters with everyone, and Dalton and I might be forced to share a bunk again like we used to.

And even if we didn't, at least he'd still be closer than he was currently.

Right now, several feet separated our rooms, and there were always two doors between us.

And while it was only a few feet between our rooms, it felt like an entire ocean.

It was wrong .

“Yeah,” I grunted, hoping I was hiding the longing in my voice well enough.

“I’m ready to be back on the stage.” Besides, being on tour meant we were always busy.

Hopefully, staying busy would mean that by the time I got back on the bus, showered, and got into bed, I would be too tired for my brain to run rampant like it did all the time now.

Spike eyed me again, but this time, he didn’t pry. He just nodded and lifted his cigarette back to his lips. Silence settled between us, but it wasn’t uncomfortable.

Hell, maybe both of us needed the company instead of being alone.

Because Dalton and I weren’t the only ones who’d separated rooms. Kalin and Spike had, too.

I wondered if, like me, Spike was struggling to cope, too.

If having Kalin in another room from him felt as wrong as having Dalton away from me did.

But I didn’t ask any of that. I never would. Because the last thing I wanted was my feelings getting back to Dalton, and he pull away completely. At least, right now, I still had him as my best friend, even if there was distance between us.

I didn’t want to lose more of him than I already had.

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Jesse

My phone began vibrating on the kitchen counter just as I took my cup of noodles out of the microwave.

Sighing in annoyance at the sight of Delia's name on the screen, I set my noodles down, then picked up my phone.

For a moment, I contemplated ignoring it and letting her harass one of the other guys because I just wasn't in the mood for her oh-so-pleasant personality.

If she was calling, it was for one of two reasons.

One, she needed us to work, or two, we'd done something to piss her off. Usually, she called because we'd somehow pissed her off.

Delia was a major bitch. A damn good manager, but a bitch, nonetheless. I practically hated her fucking guts.

Deciding to ignore her call, I set my phone back down. When the call ended, she called right back.

Mother fuck .

Growling, I snatched up the device again and swiped to answer her call, lifting the device to my ear. "What?" I muttered, tucking my phone between my ear and shoulder so I could grab my noodles and soda and head to the island in the middle of

the kitchen.

“You six are the most rude, ungrateful children I have ever worked with,” she muttered, completely disregarding that all of us were at least twenty now. Dalton was twenty-one and the oldest out of all of us. Tor’s birthday would be coming up soon though, making him twenty-one as well.

“What do you want, Delia?” I sighed, sliding onto the bar stool after setting my noodles and soda down.

“You and Dalton need to be at a photoshoot tomorrow,” she told me. My gut tightened, and I stared at my noodles just as my appetite slowly began to diminish. “Fans are beginning to ship the two of you together, and after some discussion with Giselle and Richard, we believe we should play on that.”

My chest fucking split wide the fuck open.

This couldn’t be happening.

“I’m not comfortable with that,” I told her, hating how strangled my voice sounded. But Delia was so out-of-touch with emotions, I didn’t think she even picked up on how distraught I sounded.

“I don’t care what you’re comfortable with, Jesse,” she snapped at me.

My heart was racing in my chest, and I was sure I was going to be sick.

“This is your job . You agreed when you signed that damn contract, kid. You’ll do as I tell you.

I expect both you and Dalton at the address I’m sending you now at nine sharp in the

morning.

Do not make a fool of me by showing up late, do I make myself clear? ”

With that, she hung up. I dropped my phone to the countertop and sighed, not even hungry anymore. But I knew I needed to eat. I hadn't eaten since sometime the day before, and the lack of food was making me feel like shit. More so than I usually did, anyway.

I was halfway through with my noodles when Dalton appeared in the kitchen.

My heart flipped in my chest, and my belly swooped at the sight of him.

His hair—one side platinum blonde and the other side pitch-black—was messy on his head like he'd run his fingers through it numerous times.

Dark eyes found mine, and a small smile tilted his full lips.

Dressed in a netted crop top that left his abs revealed and dark, low-slung jeans, he had my mouth fucking watering.

Christ . It wasn't fair that he was so fucking hot.

“Hey,” he said. He moved to the fridge, leaning down to grab a soda. He cracked it open as he gently kicked the fridge door shut. “Delia call you?”

“Yeah,” I said, focusing back on my noodles so I wouldn't drool all over the counter. Was he trying to torture me? “Doesn't seem like we have much of a choice.” I didn't want him thinking I was agreeing to this. Didn't want to drive an even bigger wedge between us.

“I think it’ll be fine,” Dalton said, not sounding affected at all. My gut clenched, and the noodles I’d managed to eat threatened to rebel. Did he have to make it so fucking obvious that he saw nothing in me but a friend? Christ, my appetite was diminishing again.

“Fans are going to see us as a couple,” I warned him.

He shrugged. “Tor and Salem faked a relationship and absolutely hated each other’s guts behind closed doors. It’ll be easy.”

It’ll be easy .

It would not be easy. I was already fucking splintering.

Before I could think up a response, my phone started vibrating again. Growling under my breath, thinking it was Delia again, I picked up my phone, only for my face to pale.

Mom .

My appetite was officially gone, and I was pretty sure I was going to throw up everything I’d just fucking eaten.

Swallowing thickly and already feeling the downward spiral coming on, I looked up at Dalton.

His brows furrowed, and concern glimmered in his eyes.

He took a step toward me, abandoning his soda on the counter, but I shook my head at him.

If he touched me, I was going to crumble.

“Can you clean this up for me?” I rasped, moving off the bar stool and heading for the kitchen exit. “I need to take this.”

“Jesse, don’t fucking answer that,” Dalton pleaded, but I ignored him, my thumb already swiping across the screen to answer my mom’s call.

Because no matter how shitty she was, I could never bring myself to abandon her, even if she’d abandoned me over and fucking over.

How fucking shitty was that?

Guessed I was just an addict for emotional pain.

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Jesse

I swiped my thumb across the screen and lifted my phone to my ear, hurrying for my room.

I didn't want anyone overhearing this conversation.

Everyone but Dalton had shitty parents, but it still didn't make this any easier to deal with, especially where others could hear.

My mother was a special kind of narcissist, and I was a coward when it came to her every fucking time.

I couldn't bring myself to abandon her the same way she'd done me over and over again. I couldn't bring myself to turn my back on her. I couldn't even bring myself to stand my ground against her—not completely.

"Jesse," she slurred, her tone sweet and loving.

My heart clenched in my chest. It hurt when she did this shit because she wasn't being sweet and loving due to her love for me.

She held none of that emotion when it came to me.

No, she wanted something, and my guess was that money had run low again, which meant she didn't have the funds needed to support her addiction.

So, she was reaching out to me in the hopes of buttering me up enough to send her at least enough to get her by.

It was a toxic cycle we had. She'd call, tell me she needed just enough money to get her by and she'd pay me back when she got paid—which I knew would never happen—and I'd fight her on it a little bit.

Then, she'd spew hateful words at me and rip my fucking heart out, stomp all over it, and then turn sweet again.

And I'd give in just so she wouldn't say that fucked-up shit to me any longer.

Then, she'd disappear again for a while until she needed my wallet once more.

"Mom," I greeted, my voice rough. I shut my bedroom door behind me, then flipped the lock for good measure. I didn't want anyone, most of all Dalton, coming in here and seeing me at my worst. And I would be at my worst. This woman had a way of ripping me to fucking shreds.

"I need help, baby," she said, her voice still sweet despite how heavily her words were slurred. "My disability check doesn't hit for a few more days, and I'm out of money."

I sank onto the edge of my bed and leaned forward, dropping my face into my hand.

My other hand tightened around the phone.

"Of course, you are," I muttered. "I'm not sending you money, Mom.

You literally only have a phone bill. You don't even have a rent payment or an electric payment.

This is ridiculous.” The home she lived in had been left to her by my grandparents.

It was paid off, and I paid the damn taxes on it every year, and the fucking electric bill came out of my checking account, too.

The woman didn’t own a car because she didn’t have a license—got that revoked when I was about five years old—so literally all she had was a fucking phone.

She blew through a twelve-hundred-dollar disability check every single month on just liquor and drugs. People liked to say rockstars partied hard, but those people had never met my mother.

“Don’t get snippy with me, boy,” she snapped. And fuck , I hated that name. The only time I had an actual name was when she was trying to soften me up. Otherwise, I was boy , kid, piece of shit , mistake , or something else along those lines.

I sighed, already exhausted from the phone call, and it’d barely even begun.

“Mom, I’m not trying to be snippy,” I told her, trying to calm her down.

She could get real hateful when she got angry with me.

“I’m sorry if it came across that way.” The apology was like acid on my tongue, but I said the words anyway.

I wasn’t in the mental space for this phone call to take a negative turn.

“If you’re so sorry, then send me some money, Jesse,” she said, reverting back to using my name. “I’ll forgive you, then.”

I closed my eyes. “Mom?—”

She made a growling noise that had me flinching. It didn't matter that she was in a completely different part of the city or that she was only on the phone with me. That sound was one she made she was about to knock me on my ass when I was younger. And old habits fucking died hard.

"I should have fucking aborted you," she snarled, furious now.

Her words became increasingly more slurred the angrier she grew.

"You always were my biggest fucking mistake, you ungrateful shit. I gave you life . You're a mother fucking rockstar now because I didn't get rid of your worthless ass.

" My throat was closing up with panic. I dug my nails into my thighs, trying to ground myself.

My heart was racing too fucking fast. "You wouldn't have any of what you have without me !

" she screeched, damn near busting my ear drum.

I had to get off this fucking phone.

"Mom, I'll put money into your account, okay? I'll do it now."

Like a fucking switch was flipped, she said, all soft and sweet again, "Thank you, baby."

I hung up the phone, and with trembling fingers, I transferred money into her bank account. And then, I turned my phone off, tossed it somewhere to the floor, and grabbed a pre-rolled blunt from my stash.

If this kept up, I was going to need something stronger than weed. And even thinking that was terrifying because I'd always vowed to never be like my mother.

But I was fucking breaking . And I wasn't sure how much longer I could cope.

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Dalton

Only one person could put that dreaded, terrified look on Jesse's face, and I fucking hated her. I wasn't a hateful person by any means, but that fucking woman made me wish she was dead. That was how much I couldn't fucking stand her.

For as long as I'd known Jesse, that bitch had neglected him, let him starve, and treated him like absolute garbage. The very few times I'd overheard the two of them having a conversation, she'd been hateful, degrading, and just pure disgusting to her son. To her own damn flesh and blood.

Yet every time she fucking called, he answered the goddamn phone as if he owed her something.

I didn't understand it. Even my own parents had tried to talk him into cutting ties with her so that he might finally heal from all the trauma she'd inflicted upon him—hell, that she still continued to inflict—but he stood his ground.

Said he couldn't just abandon her. Said she needed him.

But what he had needed was for her to be a fucking mother.

It wasn't his job as her son to take care of her.

It was her job as his fucking mother to take care of him.

But no, instead he paid the taxes on her home and paid her electric bill.

He made sure the only thing she ever needed to take care of was her phone bill and her fucking addiction, and half the time, she couldn't even do that little bit.

I loved Jesse to fucking pieces, but on days like today, I wanted to fucking throttle him. Maybe shaking him would rattle some sense into his fucking head. Make him see he didn't owe that vile woman shit.

Salem appeared in the kitchen, and he arched a brow at me. "You hold that soda can any tighter, and it's going to explode," he warned me.

I glanced down, not even realizing I'd picked the soda back up.

The can was already dented from my tight grip.

Sighing, I set it down, then leaned back against the counter and scrubbed my hand down my face.

Salem moved past me to the fridge, grabbing a pudding cup.

After getting a spoon from the drawer, he leaned against the bar across from me and crossed his legs at the ankles.

"What's got you looking like you want to start a war?"

" he asked, peeling back the lid to the pudding cup.

I looked away when he began licking it because that was just weird.

I could never bring myself to lick the pudding lid.

I usually handed it off to Jesse. And it was never a hardship to watch Jesse use his

tongue to clean it because fuck , that man knew how to move that tongue of his.

But I definitely didn't want to watch one of my best friends violate the poor thing.

"Jesse's mom called," I grumbled.

Salem paused, and when he lifted his eyes to meet mine, he looked as pissed as I felt.

"I guess he fucking answered it like a dumbass?"

"Ding, ding, ding," I muttered. "We've got a fucking winner."

Salem grunted at my smart-ass retort. "I wish he'd cut her the fuck off. He's going to be miserable the rest of the day."

"I know." And I hated that'd he put me at arm's length as soon as we moved into this damn place because I no longer knew if he'd let me comfort him.

If he'd let me hold him while he worked on piecing himself back together.

I felt untethered and fucking lost . How the fuck was I supposed to help him?

Salem spooned pudding into his mouth. "What the fuck is going on between you two?" he asked. "You used to be up each other's asses, and now, you avoid each other like the plague."

I grimaced. If Salem felt things between me and Jesse had gotten bad enough that he felt a need to speak up, I knew it was extremely noticeable to everyone else.

Salem wasn't the type to butt into anyone else's business.

He liked to keep to himself, even if it meant everyone else was falling apart around

him.

“We moved in here,” I said because that was the fucking truth. “The moment we moved in, he shut me out.”

Salem frowned. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

I shrugged because he was right. It didn’t make sense. “Well, that’s what fucking happened, Salem. He just shut me the fuck out. And I can’t think of a single fucking thing I did to push him away. I’m just as confused as you are. I feel like I’m walking on eggshells around him.”

Salem sighed. “Maybe you should—” He abruptly cut himself off when Jesse passed by the kitchen.

But I wasn’t even sure he was aware of our presence.

He had a blunt between his lips, and he was flicking his lighter anxiously.

I tracked him as he beelined for the back door to the pool and patio.

When he was out of ear shot, Salem pushed off the counter, his pudding cup empty.

“Maybe you should just fucking confront him, Dalton. Sometimes giving space isn’t what’s needed.

Look how bad shit got for me and Tor, all because we weren’t willing to open our mouths and deal with the shit between us. ”

With that, he tossed his spoon into the sink, his pudding cup into the trashcan, and then left the kitchen.

I knew he was right. He and Tor had gone from the best of friends to enemies overnight quite literally, and shit between them only got more and more toxic the more time went on because neither of them would talk about what happened.

It got so bad, they even threw fists at each other. Tor spiraled, losing himself in the bottom of alcohol and pill bottles.

Deciding to take Salem's advice since he had been speaking from first-hand experience, I left my soda on the counter to come get later and headed for the back door to go after Jesse.

When I stepped outside, he was already in the pool, the end of his blunt cherry red, and he was on a pool float, one leg in the water, the other resting on the float.

He didn't even acknowledge me, which meant he was more than likely so lost in his head, he was no longer aware of his surroundings.

This had to end today. We couldn't keep doing this, and to be honest, he couldn't keep doing this to himself. His mom had to go.

I shucked my jeans and tore my shirt over my head, then eased down into the water, not bothering to walk around to the steps. Once I was in, I made my way over to him. He jerked when I gripped his calf, and he lifted his head, blinking at me like he'd been in another world.

"Dalton?" he rasped.

A small smile tilted my lips. "Hey," I murmured, gently squeezing his leg.

He swallowed thickly, and his eyes glistened, though no tears spilled over onto his cheeks.

I tugged him a little closer, my chest aching.

I wished I could take his pain and make it my own just so he would no longer have to suffer. “I’m here, Jesse.”

He blew out a ragged breath and laid his head back down, closing his eyes against the sun. “The sun is so mocking,” he muttered.

I hummed. “It is,” I agreed. “It’s a right son of a bitch.”

His lips twitched with an aborted smile. Then, he heaved a sigh that felt as heavy as an impending storm. “She called.”

I rested my chin on his float. “I know.”

He lifted his blunt to his lips, inhaling and letting the smoke settle in his lungs for a bit before he slowly blew the smoke from between his pink lips.

“She wanted money.” I hummed, letting him get it out, so fucking grateful he still thought I was a safe space.

I had no idea what’d changed between us during the past few months, but him opening up to me meant he still needed me.

And fuck , I needed him to need me.

“I tried to tell her no.” He looked at me.

“I swear, I did, Dalton.” I nodded because I believed him.

He always tried. “But then she called me a mistake, told me she should have aborted

me.” My chest tightened, agony sliding through my veins for the broken man in front of me.

“I agreed to give her money just to get off the phone with her and so she wouldn’t call me back. ”

“You’re not a mistake,” I told him, my voice strong and steady. “And I’m so fucking glad she didn’t abort you, Jesse. Life would be dull as fuck without you.”

He sighed. “I’m so fucking tired, Dalton.” He tapped his finger to his temple. “Tired here .”

I stood back up straight, leaning over him a little. He looked up at me when I blocked the sun from his face. “Want to rest?” I asked quietly. The question was our go-to when he needed to just let his brain shut off, but he didn’t want the other guys knowing how bad things had gotten for him.

His throat bobbed, and slowly, he nodded. “Please,” he begged.

I ran my hand over his hair just like I used to, and he closed his eyes, his chest rattling with his shaky inhale. “Put that out, then go shower the pool off of you. Meet me in my room after.”

When he nodded in agreement, I moved away and headed toward the side of the pool. I could feel his eyes on me as I lifted myself out of the water, but I just tugged my jeans on over my soaked boxers and snatched my shirt up before heading inside to my room.

I didn’t know how to fix Jesse, but damn if I wouldn’t at least try.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:01 am

Dalton

I sucked in a ragged breath, a shiver rolling down my spine as I tightened my fist around my cock.

Knowing I was going to have Jesse back in my bed, my body curled around his, had made me so fucking horny, I could barely think straight.

It was a miracle he hadn't seen my dick standing proud and at attention when I'd gotten out of the pool.

The moment I'd undressed and gotten into the shower, I'd fisted myself, desperate to get off. Not only to relieve the aching pressure in my balls but to also make sure I didn't accidentally scare Jesse off by my dick pressing against his perky little ass.

And fuuuck , his ass was perfect. Just round enough for me to grip. Jesse was lanky with slightly defined muscles, but his mother—the bitch that she was—had gifted him with one thing besides a fuck ton of trauma.

That ass.

Groaning, I thunked my forehead against the wall, my hand moving faster over my length.

My orgasm was drawing closer and closer as I imagined Jesse's perfect body in my mind.

I'd seen him half naked more times than I could count, and fuck , the mental image of having him beneath me, a soft smile playing at his lips as I eased inside of him...

“ Fuck ,” I snarled, my cum painting the tiles in front of me. My thighs trembled as I struggled to draw air into my lungs. I turned and sagged back against the wall, my heart slamming against my chest bone.

This used to never be an issue for me. I used to cuddle Jesse all the time and be able to keep my body under control. But I guessed denying myself of the one man in this world I wanted was pure torture. It didn't help that I was demisexual and I'd latched onto him with a narrow-minded focus.

Pushing off the wall, I quickly washed my hair and bathed, then shut the water off and stepped out of the shower.

After drying off, I headed into my room and tugged on a pair of sweatpants, not bothering with boxers because I hated lying in bed with them on.

They got all twisted, and it just annoyed the shit out of me.

A light knock sounded on my bedroom door.

Drawing in a deep breath to prepare myself for having Jesse in my space again, I walked over and swung it open.

Jesse was dressed in black sweats and a long-sleeve black shirt I vaguely recognized as one of my shirts that went missing shortly before we moved.

My heart fucking melted . Did that shirt mean he had actually missed me?

Was Salem right and we just weren't communicating properly?

“Hey,” I rasped. I cleared my throat, then stepped back, letting him inside.

After shutting my door, I padded barefoot over to my bed, trying not to be weird about this.

I wanted this to be normal . We used to cuddle all the time and even fall asleep in the same bed.

This was nothing new for us. The only difference was that we just hadn’t done this in quite a few months.

Too many fucking months, really.

Pulling the blankets back on my bed, I slid beneath them, then patted the spot beside me when Jesse continued to stand near the door. “Come on,” I encouraged, letting a small smile tilt my lips. “The movie’s not going to watch itself.”

He walked around my bed to the other side, then slid under the blankets beside me.

I opened my arm to him, and he hesitated so long, I thought he was going to reject me.

But then, he moved closer, pressing into my side and resting his head on my shoulder.

Wrapping my arm around him, I quietly sighed.

This felt right. Fuck, it was right. We should have never fucking been apart.

Grabbing the remote off my nightstand, I handed it to him. “Find something for us to watch.”

He scrolled through the apps on my TV before finding one that was mostly anime and clicked on it.

After another couple of minutes, he picked a show, then set the remote on his lap.

He adjusted to get more comfortable, and then, just like old times, we were watching TV while cuddling.

And just like when we were younger, I trailed my fingertips up and down his arm, soothing him.

I had no idea how long we sat there for, but after a few episodes, I looked down at him, prepared to ask him what he wanted to eat.

But Jesse was asleep, his lips parted the slightest bit.

His dark lashes fanned over his cheekbones, and for the first time since we'd moved here, he seemed content. He seemed at peace .

"I've always got you," I whispered, knowing he wouldn't hear me but needing to say the words anyway. "I wish you would remember that."

I grunted and rolled my head toward the door, where someone was obnoxiously banging.

Jesse moaned in protest and rolled away from me, burying his head beneath my pillow.

Pissed off that we'd been woken up and Jesse was no longer cuddling with me, I rolled out of bed and stormed toward the door, yanking it open.

“What?” I snapped at Kalin.

He huffed and planted his hands on his narrow hips. “Don’t fucking what me, Dalton. You two are late for your photoshoot, and since neither of you are answering your phones, Delia has resorted to calling all of us.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. Goddamn Delia and this bullshit photoshoot. “ Fuck . I’m sorry. I’ll text her and let her know we’re on our way.”

Without a word, Kalin stormed away, clearly pissed off. I’d buy him his favorite ice cream later as an apology for having to deal with our manager because of me and Jesse.

When I turned to face Jesse, he was sitting up and rubbing at his bleary eyes. “Do we have to go?” he mumbled, his voice husky with sleep. My cock took interest, and I prayed he didn’t notice. He was all sleep mussed and gorgeous, and fuck , I wanted to own him. Claim him. Make him mine.

Instead of doing any of that, I just said, “Yeah. Come on. The quicker we head out, the quicker this will be over. Then, we can come back here and finish watching your show if you want.”

He glanced up at me, and the hopeful look in his eyes had my stomach swooping. “Really?”

“Yeah,” I promised, a small smile tilting my lips. “Whatever you want, Jesse.” And I meant that. Whatever he wanted... so long as whatever he wanted didn’t involve putting a fucking ocean between us again, that was. I wasn’t sure if I could go through the withdrawals again.

I needed Jesse like I needed to breathe.

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Jesse

When I'd woken up, even if it had been rather abruptly by Kalin banging on the door like he'd lost all his common sense, I'd felt more rested than I had in months.

More rested than I had since we'd all moved into this much bigger house.

Having Dalton wrapped around me with my head resting on his chest, his steady heartbeat thrumming beneath my ear, had been so fucking soothing. It'd been everything I'd needed.

And now, reality was slapping me in the face again. Even with his promise of us being able to do this again—since he'd said we could do whatever I wanted after this photoshoot—I still couldn't help but fear that I was going to lose this again.

I needed Dalton like I needed air to breathe. For the first time yesterday and last night, my lungs had worked properly again. And now, with the fear of him pulling away once more clouding my senses and my proper judgment, my lungs were threatening to collapse.

"You good?" Dalton asked softly as he drove, his hand resting on the steering wheel.

His right arm was resting on the center console, his hand dangling, a temptation all in itself.

How easy would it be to reach over and slip my fingers through his?

To cling on so this sick feeling in my stomach would go away?

I didn't want to fake a relationship for the cameras like Tor and Salem had.

And while Delia hadn't explicitly said that was what we'd be doing starting today, it was implied.

I was terrified that fake dating Dalton for the cameras and for the fans would just push him further away from me and send the islands we were standing on even further away from each other.

"I'm okay," I murmured.

He hummed. "I don't believe you."

Swallowing thickly, I turned my head to stare out the window, deciding not answering him would be better than supplying a response at all.

We were quiet for a good minute, and then, his hand was grabbing mine, lacing our fingers together.

My heart lurched into my throat, and I swung my head around to look at him so damn fast, I got a crick in my neck.

"This okay?" Dalton asked, his deep voice low and soothing. He glanced at me and gently squeezed my fingers before focusing back on the road. "You look like you need it."

Suddenly, there was a lump in my throat so big, it prevented me from speaking. So instead, I just nodded. Sparing me another quick glance, he smiled, then focused back on the road. And for the rest of the trip, he just held my hand, occasionally giving it a

little squeeze.

How did he always fucking know what I needed? If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought Dalton was well-versed in witchcraft or something.

Or maybe he just hadn't forgotten years of friendship after all.

When we got to the photoshoot site, Delia was waiting for us, and she was furious .

Dalton stepped up so close to me, our shoulders brushed.

"We know we're late, and we're sorry," he told her before she could open her mouth and say something that would no doubt be hateful.

She scoffed, rolling her eyes. "But yelling at us will just make us even later."

She scowled at him. "Get in that fucking trailer for hair and makeup," she snapped, pointing at one of the trailers. "Jesse, you're in that one." She pointed to the other one. "Both of you get out of my face."

I grunted, shooting her a scowl before I reluctantly moved away from Dalton and headed for the trailer she'd directed me to.

If Delia wasn't so damn good at managing us, I was sure all of us would've demanded Richard hire someone different a long time ago.

Delia was a grade-A bitch. I wasn't sure there was a single person on this planet who actually liked the dreadful woman.

But she was a fantastic manager, and because of her, we'd risen to the top super fast.

Makeup and hair were a pain in the ass, as always. My face was poked and prodded, and the hair stylist pulled at my scalp so much, I had a headache about two minutes in. And then so much hairspray was used, I was surprised me and the makeup artist didn't pass the fuck out from the fumes.

When I finally emerged from the trailer, Dalton was already done, his half blonde-half black hair hanging loose and straightened to perfection. He grinned at me, and my gut swooped. "You look hot," he teased. But fuck, my entire body responded to that compliment anyway.

"You don't look half bad yourself," I told him as we were ushered over to the tree line, where the photoshoot would be happening.

We'd both been dressed in some designer's clothes I didn't recognize.

Dalton was in a loose button-down that was only fastened to halfway up his torso, leaving his chest exposed.

Light-colored, loose pants rested on his hips, and he was wearing a pair of sandals.

I'd been dressed in dark jeans that clung to my thighs with a t-shirt with a foreign name stitched on the upper right quadrant. Unlaced combat boots covered my feet.

We couldn't have been more opposite if we tried. And maybe that was the purpose. Dalton's outfit embodied his light-hearted personality and the easier life he'd had, and mine reflected my dark mood and the shit childhood I'd had.

I doubted anyone who'd planned this had known any of that, but I found it ironic either way.

"Okay, I need you two to look like you're in love. But Jesse, I need you to be

moodier, and Dalton, I need you to look more open and friendly. We're going for an opposites attract look," the photographer told us.

I sighed. "How'd I fucking know?" I muttered as two of his assistants began to move us so I had one arm wrapped around Dalton's waist. He gripped my shirt in his right hand, his left hand slipping into my back pocket.

He was leaning back a bit, and my left knee was between his thighs.

My left hand rested on his hip like I was trying to draw him closer.

"Perfect! Now look in love," the photographer demanded before he began to snap pictures of us.

That wasn't hard. And apparently, it wasn't for Dalton either, which just fucking cut deep.

Because he was looking at me like I was the only man—hell, the only person—who existed.

Like his world revolved around me. I swallowed thickly, my fingers spasming on his hip.

A slow smile tilted his lips, and my heart flipped in my chest.

"You're too good at this," I rasped, feeling a little panicky. My heart was jackhammering in my chest, and my throat was tightening up.

Dalton just hummed but kept his eyes locked on mine as if we really were a couple. As if this was normal. As if he just might really love me.

When the photoshoot was over and I was left alone to change back into my normal clothes, I promptly threw up into the trash can in the tiny bathroom, feeling shaky and unstable.

I couldn't do this. I wasn't as strong as Tor and Salem had been. Delia was going to have to figure out a different way to tease fans and keep them drooling over us because faking a relationship with Dalton was going to fucking kill me.

I wouldn't be able to survive this.

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Dalton

Whatever progress I'd made with Jesse the night before and this morning had gone down the drain.

He was silent the entire ride home, and the couple of times I'd asked him if he was okay, I was pretty sure he hadn't heard me because he didn't respond.

Hell, he gave no inkling he was aware I'd been speaking to him.

He was deep in his head, which was a dangerous place for him to be.

Nothing good ever came out of Jesse being deep in his head.

"Jesse," I tried again when we walked into the house.

He just either pointedly ignored me or once again didn't hear what I said because he didn't acknowledge me in the slightest. I was going with the latter because he walked right past all our band mates sitting in the living room like he was a ghost. As if he thought no one could see him.

My heart ached. What the fuck had happened? Everything had been so good just a few hours ago.

"What's going on with him?" Tor asked, lifting his head from Salem's shoulder. Salem didn't even bother looking up from his phone, where he was more than likely playing some kind of game. Kalin stared worriedly after Jesse, and Spike just sighed.

“I don’t know,” I confessed. I dropped into the recliner I’d bought for myself because while I was only in my early twenties, my soul was that of an old man, and I needed old man comforts.

“We had that photoshoot today for a new clothing line. He was okay, then they made us pretend to be a couple, and he just... changed.” I scrubbed my hands down my face before dropping them roughly down to my lap. “I don’t know what the fuck happened.”

“Well, you two haven’t been okay since we moved,” Spike spoke up.

I scowled at him. “You think I don’t fucking know that?”

” I heatedly snapped. “But last night, something finally changed. We were normal . And we were okay this morning, too. Jesse finally seemed like he was coming back to himself. Like he was letting me back in.” I closed my eyes and pressed my fingertips to them.

“Fucking Delia ,” I growled. “She fucks everything up.”

“Let me go talk to him,” Tor said, pushing off the couch.

“Babe, don’t go butting into someone else’s business,” Salem lightly scolded, still not looking up from his phone.

Tor spun to face his man and huffed at him.

“I wish someone had butted into our shit a hell of a lot sooner than they did, Salem. Maybe half the heartache and bullshit we put each other through wouldn’t have happened.

” With that, he headed out of the living room and toward the hall that my and Jessie’s rooms were down.

Salem frowned after him, his game now forgotten. Then, he looked at us, his brows furrowed. “What the hell did I do?”

I snorted. “I’m sure Tor will tell you later,” I told him. Since they’d been together, they always communicated their feelings. I rocked lightly. “In the meantime, what the fuck do I do? Jesse’s not the type to be pushed. It just makes him shut down more.”

Salem shrugged. “I used to think I didn’t like being pushed either, but when it comes to things that matter, like Tor, I need to be pushed.

He and I wouldn’t have fixed everything broken between us if not for you guys finally butting in,” he confessed.

“Are you sure Jesse doesn’t have feelings for you, Dalton? ”

I frowned at him. “ What ?” I finally blurted when he just evenly met my gaze, one single brow arched.

“I mean, it’s not that far-fetched of an idea,” Kalin said, turning on the couch and propping his feet on Spike’s legs.

Wordlessly, Spike lifted Kalin’s left foot and began massaging the sole.

“You two have been close as fuck since you became friends. When Jesse needed a safe place to disconnect and dissociate, you were the person he turned to, even if it meant he popped up at your house at two or three in the morning.”

Kalin wasn’t wrong. But I thought that was just because we were best friends. I’d

always been in love with Jesse, but I never got the idea that he returned those feelings.

“I never thought...” My voice trailed off, and I found myself recounting so many moments together, trying to see if I’d missed anything, but I hadn’t. It literally just seemed like I was a safe place for him. What the hell were they seeing that I wasn’t? Was I just fucking blind?

“We usually don’t see what’s right in front of us,” Spike said with a shrug. “But I’m pretty sure Jesse at least likes you as more than a friend, Dalton. Especially given the way he is now after you two had to fake a relationship for the cameras and you seem so chill about it.”

“No one knows how torturous that is more than me and Tor,” Salem said. Then, like a fucking lightbulb went off in his head, he groaned and dropped his head back on the couch. “That’s why he’s mad at me,” Salem muttered.

I snorted, then my eyes widened. I lurched forward. “Oh, my fucking God. You think Jesse is upset because he does like me and wants me that way and it hurt him to think I was willing to fake a relationship with him for our fans but not actually be with him that way?”

“Goddamn—two epiphanies at one time,” Kalin muttered.

I gave him the middle finger, but my eyes remained locked on Salem. “Am I right, Salem?”

Salem nodded and heaved a sigh. “Yep.” He pushed off the couch. “Now, while you try to sort out your drama with Jesse, I’ve got to figure out a way to grovel to Tor.”

Spike smirked. “Good luck. I hope he makes you work for his forgiveness.”

Salem gave him two stiff middle fingers on his way out of the living room.

“What the fuck do I do now?” I asked, looking to Kalin and Spike for help.

Spike shrugged. “You know Jesse the best, Dalton. He hasn’t changed since we moved. He’s just stuck in a constant state of depression and self-loathing. Only you know how to deal with him when he’s like this.”

He was right. I did. And what Jesse needed was love, adoration, and someone to take care of him. Who fucking better to do that than me?

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Jesse

I stared up at my ceiling, my heart in my throat.

Dalton had seemed just fine on the way home.

As if that photoshoot hadn't bothered him in the slightest. And I guessed there was no real reason for it to.

It wasn't like he actually liked me as more than a friend.

He didn't need me the same way I needed him.

He'd gone out of his way yesterday to comfort me because it was what he'd always done when my mother called and upended my emotional stability.

There had been nothing more to it than that, and I'd been a fool to see it as anything more.

And while that morning he'd promised me we could crawl back into his bed and binge watch some more TV while cuddling, I couldn't bring myself to take him up on it again, even if I knew it'd make me feel better for a little while.

I couldn't keep doing this to myself. I couldn't keep hoping for more every time he so much as looked at me.

How the fuck had Tor and Salem done this for over a fucking year?

A light knock sounded on my door. Sighing and hoping it wasn't Dalton because I just couldn't deal with him right then, I called out, "Come in."

The door opened, revealing Tor, and I relaxed a little at the sight of him. I didn't want to be bothered, but at least he wasn't Dalton.

Tor was wearing a Sleep Token t-shirt with a pair of black skinny jeans, his feet bare. He took one look at me and sighed, shaking his head as he stepped further into my room. After shutting the door behind him, he crawled onto the bed with me and rested his head on my shoulder.

"It's okay to cry," he said quietly.

I blew out a harsh breath, my throat too tight for comfort. "Cry for what?" I muttered. "A man who doesn't fucking want me? A man who never gave me any inkling that he had feelings for me, yet I pined after him anyway?"

Tor grabbed my hand in his and laced our fingers together.

My throat tightened even more, damn near strangling me.

"Salem likes me to keep my nose to myself because, in his opinion, what everyone else is going through is not our business. But you and Dalton are our best friends, Jesse, and it breaks my heart to see you two hurting."

I scoffed, shaking my head. "Dalton isn't hurting over a mother fucking thing."

"You're wrong, you know?" Tor quietly said. I swallowed thickly. "He's in the living room right now stressing the fuck out because he doesn't know what's wrong with you. He doesn't know how to help you. You're shutting him out, Jesse. Hell, you're shutting all of us out."

“I’m not shutting you out,” I muttered, my voice petulant.

Tor snorted. “Only because I’m invading your space and forcing you to welcome me in.” I grunted because he wasn’t wrong. “Had I not come to you, you’d continue laying here wallowing in misery just like I used to. Just like Salem did.” He blew out a soft breath. “You know what I wish, Jesse?”

“What?” I grumbled.

“I wish someone had stepped in a lot sooner and forced me and Salem to work our shit out. I wish someone had come to talk to us. Did you know I wanted to fucking die, Jesse?” I swallowed thickly.

Tor had gone on a downward spiral, but I’d had no idea his thoughts had turned suicidal.

“Salem has always been my rock, and when I lost him, I fucking lost myself. I can’t help but see the parallels in you and Dalton. ”

“Salem at least got you off in a nasty ass bar bathroom first,” I said quietly.

Tor sighed. “Maybe Dalton hasn’t gotten you off in a nasty ass bar bathroom ,” he retorted, mocking me, “but you two did share a bed. You two cuddled . When your mom called, Dalton was the person you sought out. He’s your rock, Jesse, and I won’t lie and say I understand what’s happened because I don’t.

We moved here and something changed. What the fuck changed, Jesse? ”

“Dalton agreed it would be best if we all had our own rooms,” I said quietly.

“That’s what changed. The moment he...” I drew in a shaky breath.

“The moment he realized this house was big enough for us all to have our own space, it was like he couldn’t wait for it.

Like he couldn’t wait to be rid of me .”

“Oh, Jesse...” Tor whispered. “I don’t think it was like that. I think you’re both confused, and I think there’s a huge lack of communication. You two need to talk.”

“How?” I rasped, on the verge of tears. I didn’t want to cry. “What if he turns me down, Tor? What then? Delia is already trying to force us to be a couple in front of the cameras like she did with you and Salem. If he rejects me and I still have to fake that shit...”

Tor squeezed my fingers. “I know. Trust me, Jesse, if anyone knows that kind of torment, it’s me, remember?

” He rolled me onto my side and hugged me tight to him.

I sank into his embrace, tears burning in my eyes, threatening to spill over onto my cheeks.

“But it’s better to know where you stand than to feel like this, Jesse.

If he turns you down—and I don’t think he will, but if he does —you can at least attempt to move on.

But you won’t be able to let go of him if you don’t have all the answers. ”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I remained quiet.

Tor, somehow sensing that I just needed the silence and the comfort of another

person so I wasn't alone, just held me tighter, tangling our legs together.

A tear ran down my cheek as I closed my eyes, and when I began to cry harder, he just clung to me, resting his chin on the top of my head.

I was a fucking mess, and I had a feeling shit was only going to get worse from there. Because for me, nothing could ever be easy or simple.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:01 am

Jesse

I jerked out of my sleep, my heart lurching into my throat. It took a split second for me to realize what'd woken me up.

Someone was knocking on my bedroom door.

Groaning, I glanced at the clock on my nightstand—yeah, I had one of those but it was because I liked the red glow from them.

It added more dim light to my room at nighttime.

I couldn't stand the dark. Too many bad thoughts bombarded me at night, and the shadows liked to taunt me.

It was only two in the morning. Who the hell would be bothering me at this time?

Sighing, I slipped out of bed, realizing at the same time that I was alone. Tor must have slipped from my room after I'd fallen asleep. Wasn't surprising though. If he hadn't left, I had no doubt Salem would have come to drag him back to their room.

Rubbing at my eyes and wincing at how sore and swollen they felt, I made my way to my bedroom door. Swinging it open, I blinked at Spike, trying to get my eyes to adjust to the light in the hallway.

“What is it?” I mumbled, yawning.

Spike stepped back a little, jerking his head in the direction of the end of the hall. “Police are here asking to speak to you, and they said they can’t wait until it’s a more decent hour.”

Frowning, I slipped past him and headed for the front door.

Spike followed, which I was thankful for.

I was no stranger to cops, and while I knew they were meant to serve and protect, they only filled me with dread.

There was only so many times a cop could come to your house with social workers to place you in temporary foster care before you just immediately got a sense of dread and doom around them.

With a trembling hand, I grasped the silver handle and pulled the front door open. Two officers were standing on the front porch, and even though there were no social workers present and I was now an adult, nausea still swirled in my gut at the sight of them.

“Can I help you?” I asked, my voice still rough with sleep.

“Jesse Link?” the officer closest to me asked.

When I nodded, he sighed. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, kid, but your mother overdosed a few hours ago.” He handed me a business card.

My ears were already beginning to ring, and I was pretty sure I was going to puke.

“You can contact this gentleman when you’re ready to move your mother to a funeral home or a crematorium.

” He bowed his head to me respectfully. “I’m sorry for your loss, son. ”

With that, they walked off the porch and back to their car.

I stared after them, my knees shaking so badly, I only remained standing because I was gripping the doorhandle with a death grip.

Spike gripped my upper arms and gently eased me back.

When he realized I wasn’t letting go of the front door, he gently pried my fingers loose and nudged the door shut with his foot.

Reaching around me, he locked it, then supported me as he led me toward the living room.

My ears were ringing. My heart was beating too fast. My gut churned, and the room spun.

I dropped onto the couch, my entire body trembling. I’d sent her that money, and she’d no doubt shot it all up her veins or swallowed it all in booze and pills. She’d OD’d because of me .

“I’m going to be sick,” I choked out.

Spike quickly grabbed the small trash can beneath the side table and thrust it at me. I wrapped my arms around it and proceeded to empty my stomach, my retching loud in the otherwise silent house. Spike rubbed my back, doing his best to support me.

As soon as he took the bucket from me, I leaned into his side and proceeded to sob, completely falling apart.

That woman had never done anything for me.

She'd neglected me and abused me all my life, but I'd still loved her.

Still held hope that maybe one fucking day, she'd change.

But instead, I'd inadvertently killed her.

I curled into myself and buried my face in my knees, my hands coming up to tug at my hair so roughly, my scalp smarted, and strands came loose in my fists.

"Jesse, come on," Spike urged. "Don't hurt yourself. She's not worth it."

I shook my head, needing to hurt before I completely fucking lost myself in my pain and heartache. "Please get Dalton," I cried. My chest was caving in. "I need Dalton."

Spike quickly got up. I cried harder, my chest burning. Pain bled through my veins, making my muscles ache. I couldn't fucking breathe . Why was breathing so goddamn hard?

"Jesse?" I looked up through my tears at the sound of Dalton's voice.

He was coming into the living room, and the moment his eyes met my teary ones, his expression fell.

"Oh, baby," he whispered, rushing forward.

He sank onto the couch beside me, sitting sideways, then dragged me between his spread thighs, wrapping his arms tight around me all while he tucked my head beneath his chin.

I sobbed, my fingers curling into his shirt, clinging to him like he was my lifeline. My life raft in the middle of the ocean of pain I was drowning in.

“Let it out, baby. I’m here. I’m always here, and I’ve got you.”

I finally allowed myself to completely fall apart, my agonized cry muffled by his chest.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:01 am

Dalton

I jerked awake, my heart slamming against my chest bone at the sound of someone banging on my bedroom door. What the fuck was it with people in this house slamming their fists on my door like we didn't have cellphones? Or you know, like people didn't fucking sleep ?

Snarling, I threw the blankets back, then shoved to my feet. Storming to the door, I flung it open, my mouth open to snap at Spike, but he beat me to the punch.

“Jesse needs you.”

Those three words sucked the fight out of me as if a vacuum cleaner had been put to my emotions.

Immediately, I pushed past him into the hallway, heading for Jesse's room.

I wanted to know why Spike knew before me when he didn't even live in this part of the house, but before I could ask, Spike gripped my arm and steered me toward the end of the hall.

“He's in the living room. His...” Spike blew out a harsh breath. “His mom passed, Dalton.”

Oh, no . Fuck .

I quickened my pace. I hated that fucking woman, and I wouldn't miss her at all.

None of us would. But Jesse's relationship with her was different, even if it was toxic as fuck. He would be gutted .

When I stepped into the living room, my eyes instantly landed on my sobbing boy.

His face was pale and stained with tears.

He was curled into a ball, his face buried in his knees.

"Jesse?" I called, my heart in my throat.

He lifted his head, looking up at me through teary eyes.

My heart broke for him. Fuck that bitch for once again hurting him.

"Oh, baby," I whispered, rushing toward him.

The moment I was on the couch, sitting sideways, I tugged Jesse between my spread thighs, then wrapped myself around him, cocooning him in my embrace just like I used to when he would show up at my house in the middle of the night, falling apart over the same fucking woman.

I tucked his head beneath my chin and stroked my hands up and down his back. He twisted his fingers in my shirt, clinging to me. "Let it out, baby. I'm here. I'm always here, and I've got you," I soothed.

His broken wail fucking shattered me. I buried my face in his hair, clutching him to me tighter, wishing I could take his pain and make it my own. He clung to me tighter, sobs wracking his chest, and his breaths wheezed from his lungs.

"She overdosed, Dalton," he choked out. "I don't even know why I'm crying. She

was worthless and a shit mom, but it still hurts .”

“I know, baby,” I rasped. “I know.” I didn’t know how her loss could hurt him, but I wouldn’t say that. I would just try to understand, just as I always had when it came to his relationship with her. But at least now she was gone, and she’d no longer be able to hurt him or manipulate him.

Our friends suddenly flooded into the living room, looking half-asleep. Kalin slipped onto the couch in front of us, and he joined in on the hug, the two of us squishing Jesse between us. I swallowed thickly, so fucking grateful for all of them.

Thank you , I mouthed to Kalin.

He just nodded, both of us just silently holding Jesse while he continued falling apart and purging his mother from his system.

Tor sat on the floor in front of the coffee table, working quickly to roll six blunts.

Salem and Spike collected bottles of liquor and glasses, setting them on the coffee table as well.

Getting high and drunk wasn’t a healthy way to cope with Jesse’s loss, but it was our way to cope. And we weren’t doing it alone. We were together, just as we’d always vowed to be.

Once Jesse was a little calmer, Kalin moved back.

Tor handed one of the rolled joints to Jesse along with a lighter.

Without a word, Jesse lit it, then handed the lighter over to me as Tor passed me my own blunt.

I did the same, then passed the lighter to Kalin.

Salem poured two drinks, passing one each to me and Jesse.

Words weren't needed. We all sat in silence, smoking and drinking.

The only sound was the clinking of glasses as Salem poured more drinks and Jesse's sniffing and someone's occasional cough.

Jesse stayed between my thighs, but eventually, he relaxed and turned so his back was to my chest, and he leaned against me, letting me support his weight.

I wrapped an arm around his waist and pressed my lips to the top of his head, silently reminding him I always had him, no matter how much distance he tried to put between us.

He wasn't getting rid of me so easily.

"I told Delia we would all be unavailable for the next week," Salem spoke up, breaking the silence. We all looked at him. "She's not happy about it, but I threatened to contact Richard if she didn't agree."

I snorted. We were Richard's pets. The man had already been rich and successful before us, but after signing us, he quickly became one of the richest men in the world. He'd do just about anything to keep us happy just so we stuck with him and didn't move to another record company.

"Thanks," Jesse whispered.

Salem just dipped his chin in a nod. I tightened my arm around Jesse and leaned my head back, feeling relaxed and like everything might finally be righting itself. It had

to mean something that Jesse was letting me comfort and hold him like this, didn't it?

I sure as fuck hoped it did.

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Dalton

I shifted, my arm tightening around Jesse's waist as I burrowed my face in the back of his neck. He smelled of weed and liquor, but more than that, he smelled like himself—mahogany and teakwood. It was a heady scent that was all him, and I could never fucking get enough of it.

I had no idea how we'd made it to my bed early this morning.

All of us had been beyond wasted, but after getting well and truly fucked up, Jesse had finally stopped crying over the loss of his mom.

He'd curled against me, remaining plastered to my side for the entire night until he finally began to doze off.

I didn't remember getting off the couch, but we had to have at some point.

None of the other guys had been in any condition to help us last night.

They'd been just as fucked up as we were.

Jesse shifted, making the mattress jostle, and my stomach lurched.

Quickly, I released him and got out of bed, padding barefoot to my bathroom.

I barely got my bathroom door shut before I bent over the toilet and proceeded to empty my stomach.

My head pounded, and I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to will it away, though I knew that was pointless.

This headache was going to be here to stay for the day.

The roiling stomach could go though. I just needed to locate my phone and order some extra greasy food and get some pain pills in my stomach. And a coke. The acid in the Coca Cola would settle my stomach.

Groaning, I flushed the toilet and managed to brush my teeth with the light off, knowing the light would just burn my retinas and make my hangover headache worse.

After rinsing my mouth out with some mouthwash, I opened my door and padded barefoot back to my bed.

Once I was back beneath the covers, I grabbed my phone and wound my arms back around Jesse, typing in my code.

“What are you doing?” he whispered, his voice scratchy with sleep.

“Ordering food,” I grumbled. “You want something? Might help your hangover.”

He groaned quietly and slowly nodded his head. “I feel like death.”

I hummed in agreement. “We haven’t gotten that fucked up since high school.

” Resting my chin on his shoulder, I clicked on a fast-food restaurant.

After placing two orders for burgers and fries, I locked my phone and set it on the mattress, then tugged Jesse against me.

He sighed as I nuzzled the back of his neck.

“We need showers,” he muttered.

“Mmm ,” I hummed noncommittally. We did need showers, yeah, but I wasn’t keen on letting him go so soon.

He was being oddly calm, which wasn’t normal for him.

Not after he’d been so fucking upset last night that he’d been damn near having a panic attack while I held him.

Not when he’d intentionally sought me out after pushing me away yesterday.

We just needed to lay here in bed for a little while longer until I was sure he wasn’t going to fall apart the moment he was out of my sight. Seeing him so distraught last night had fucking wrecked me. I couldn’t handle it again.

“How are you feeling?” I asked quietly.

Jesse grunted, not giving me a real answer. I sighed. “Jesse...” I murmured.

He rolled over and burrowed his face into my chest, his fingers curling into my shirt. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he muttered.

“Bottling it up isn’t going to help you,” I gently reminded him. “You never cope well when you just keep all your emotions locked up inside. You know this.”

“This is different,” he said, his voice muffled by my chest.

I began stroking my fingers through his hair, knowing it always soothed and relaxed

him.

“Is it?” I prodded. “You lost your mother last night, Jesse, and while your relationship with her was... complicated, at best, she was still your mother. You were...” I drew in a deep breath, trying to think of the right word but something delicate enough, too.

“You were distraught,” I finally settled on. “I’ve never seen you like that before.”

“Being upset over her doesn’t even make sense,” Jesse quietly confessed.

No... No, it didn’t, I silently agreed. But if there was one thing I’d learned about Jesse and his mother in all the years I’d known him, it was that the relationship between a mother and son was complicated.

Spike had told me that most days, he was glad he’d never known his parents.

That he didn’t have to worry about that tie after seeing how fucked up his friends were over their own parents.

Jesse both loved and hated his mother, and that was something he would have to come to terms with on his own.

“It doesn’t,” I told him softly. “But it’s okay to still hurt over her. To mourn what should have been. To mourn the woman she could have been.”

He audibly swallowed. “Is that why it hurts?”

I shrugged, my chest aching. Fuck, I wished I could just take his pain away. So he never had to be sad over that fucking bitch again. Even while dead, she was still fucking him up inside.

“I don’t know, baby.”

He jerked his head up, and I didn’t move back in time. When his lips brushed mine, even though it was by accident, my heart lurched into my throat and stomach swooped, this time for an entirely different reason than my hangover.

Jesse had kissed me.

It’d been by accident, but he’d still fucking kissed me .

Fuuuuuck .

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:01 am

Jesse

I jerked back from Dalton so fast, I ended up pushing him, damn near toppling him off his own bed. Panic clawed at my throat. My heart was beating so hard, I could barely breathe past the slam of it against my chest bone.

I'd kissed Dalton .

I'd fucking kissed Dalton !

I had to get out of here. Had to get the fuck away before he rejected me and ripped me to fucking shreds.

I couldn't do this. Not today. Not any fucking day, really, but definitely not today.

Not when I was already so raw and shredded.

If he rejected me and put permanent space between us, I literally might just fucking go slit my wrists.

I couldn't do life without him.

"I need to go shower," I choked out, trying to kick the blankets off my legs, but I was just tangling myself up more.

Frustrated tears burned at my eyes as I tried pushing them off, but my arms weren't cooperating properly, and my hands were shaking so badly, I could barely grasp the

fucking things with enough force to tug the blankets away.

“Oh, no, you fucking don’t,” Dalton growled, his arm banding around my waist and tugging me harshly back to lay on the mattress.

Before I could even try moving away again, he was straddling my thighs, trapping me beneath him.

His hand landed on my chest, the other braced beside my head as he pinned me to the mattress.

“Dalton—” I choked out.

He shook his head, grinding his teeth together.

His platinum blonde and black hair hung into his eyes for a moment as he drew in a deep breath through his clenched teeth.

Was he seeking patience? Was he trapping me here just to rip my fucking heart out of my chest?

It was already goddamn bleeding for him.

He might as well get the opportunity to just bathe himself in my blood while we were at it.

“How the fuck is it not obvious how goddamn infatuated I am with you?” Dalton finally breathed, opening his pale blue eyes to look down at me.

My heart fucking stopped .

“What?” I breathed, staring up at him in disbelief.

A half hysterical, half broken laugh fell from his lips as he shook his head.

His fingers flexed against my chest. “I can’t fucking pretend anymore, baby.

” There went that name again. I’d thought he’d only been calling me that last night to calm me down, but his use of it a couple of minutes ago was the reason we were now in this predicament.

The reason my head was fucking spinning. And there he went, using it again .

“There’s not a goddamn thing I won’t do for you, Jesse.

I’ll give you the entire world .” My heart was in my throat as I stared up at him, listening to him spill his guts to me.

“I’ve always believed I’m demisexual, but to be honest, baby, I think I was just created to love you .

” Tears welled in my eyes and immediately spilled over onto my cheeks because now, I knew he wasn’t joking.

His words were too fucking raw to be a joke.

Dalton... Dalton fucking loved me .

Me .

“I’ve waited for you for years , Jesse. I literally ache for you.” He grabbed my hand and pressed it over his chest, where his heart was beating just as rapidly as mine.

“When you hurt, I hurt. When you cry, I want to rip the fucking world apart.”

“But these are good tears,” I croaked, sniffing. I didn’t know what else to say. My head was spinning from his confession.

He smiled a little. “I think I figured that out, baby.” Releasing my hand, he cupped my cheek. I kept my hand pressed over his heart. “Tell me you feel this, too, Jesse. Please .”

Sniffing, I nodded. “For years,” I whispered, my voice cracking on my own admission.

Dalton leaned down and crushed his mouth to mine, kissing me with a desperation that wreaked havoc on my heart and my mind.

And as if those fucking blankets had been intentionally trying to trap me here in this bed, suddenly, I could get my legs loose.

Dalton moved between my thighs, pressing our bodies together.

“Is the door locked?” I panted when he began working his mouth along my jaw to my earlobe. I whimpered when he sucked the lobe into his mouth, then gently sank his teeth into the sensitive flesh.

“I don’t know,” Dalton growled. “But if someone fucking interrupts me, I’m going to bash their face into that fucking door.”

I laughed softly, but it was abruptly cut off when Dalton licked a path behind my ear and down my neck. I moaned, my heels driving into the mattress as I arched my hips, pressing my erection against Dalton’s. A low growl sounded from his throat, and a shiver raced down my spine at the sound.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful,” Dalton groaned as he pushed my shirt up and off, tossing it somewhere to the floor.

His hands mapped out the planes of my body, and then, his lips followed.

I was helpless to do anything but cling to him as my eyes rolled back in my skull and precum leaked from the tip of my cock. I was so hard for him, it hurt .

“Want your shirt off, too,” I finally managed to pant.

Dalton leaned up on his knees, then tugged his shirt over his head, revealing his wide shoulders and narrow hip bones. His stomach was toned and flat, and his chest was just defined enough to make me fucking drool over him.

How did I get so lucky to have my best friend fall in love with me?

Moving back over me, our lips met again, and I moaned at the feel of his hot skin against mine.

When his tongue probed between my lips, fucking into my mouth, I was no longer capable of coherent thought.

Because when he started fucking my mouth with that magical tongue, my ass clenched tightly, needing him inside of me.

“Fuck, I need to get you naked,” Dalton rasped.

Leaning up on his knees, he gripped the hem of my sweatpants and tugged them down my legs with my briefs.

For a split second, I was self-conscious of my body.

I was a lot leaner than Dalton, and my cock was a little less than average.

But then he raked his eyes over me, and his blue eyes darkened.

His hands ran up my thighs, and then, his thumb was tracing over my shaft like it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"Fuck, your dick is pretty," he murmured, making my skin heat with a blush.

And then, he was licking a stripe up the underside of it.

I choked out his name, or something close to it, my back bowing off the bed.

A low, husky chuckle fell from Dalton's lips, and then, he was sucking me into his mouth and swirling his tongue around me like he was sucking on a fucking lollipop.

"Dalton," I whined, my hips rolling up to fuck into his mouth. He moaned, encouraging me. "If you don't stop, I'm going to come."

He popped off of me, a cheeky grin pulling at his lips.

Then, he flattened his torso to the bed between my legs and spread my thighs before pushing my thighs back toward my chest. I parted my lips to tell him to stop because I was extremely self-conscious of my ass, but then, the flat of his tongue was running over my rim and I forgot everything but how fucking good his mouth felt on the most intimate part of me.

"Christ," I cried out, my fingers spearing through his hair. He rumbled against me, sending vibrations tingling all the way up to my balls. And then, he was eating my ass like a man starved.

And holy fucking shit, if men everywhere ate ass, there'd be fucking world peace.

My body trembled, and when he finally speared his tongue inside of me, I was pretty sure I sobbed.

I had no idea when he grabbed lube, but a few minutes later, after he'd spent quite a bit of time fucking me open with his tongue, he speared two fingers inside of me.

I tensed, but then he stroked over a magical spot inside of me that had me seeing stars and quickly forgetting the burn of the stretch.

"Dalton, Dalton, Dalton," I chanted, my breaths sawing from my lungs.

He looked up at me, his chin damp and his lips red and swollen. "Yeah, baby?"

I whined, dropping my head back to the pillow.

He chuckled, then pressed a kiss to my inner thigh as he worked on stretching me open more.

I was trembling so badly, the entire bed was shaking with me.

My cock was leaking so much, my belly was just a slick mess of precum.

But Dalton was doing so many magical things with his fingers and his mouth that I didn't even know what embarrassment meant anymore.

Suddenly, he was looming over me, my legs bent over his inner elbows, the tip of his cock notched at my opening. I blinked up at him dazedly. When the hell had he moved?

“You still want this?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I pleaded. “Dalton?—”

He leaned down to kiss me, and honestly, I couldn’t even bring myself to care that he’d just been eating my ass. I kissed him back hungrily, my hands linking at the back of his neck.

“You’re going to look so pretty on my cock, baby,” Dalton rasped.

And then, he was leaning up and pushing inside of me, watching as our bodies joined together.

He’d opened me up so well that the sting only lasted mere moments.

And then, we were moving together, my hips rolling up to meet his every thrust.

“Dalton—oh, fuck,” I sobbed, tears rolling down my cheeks.

“Fuck, you’re so perfect,” Dalton growled, leaning down to kiss me again. “You look so right on my cock like this, baby. So fucking pretty.”

Those words sent me tumbling over the edge.

My orgasm slammed through me like a fucking freight train, and my vision whited out.

Static filled my ears. I was vaguely aware that I was crying harder, but Dalton just kissed them away, fucking me harder and faster, chasing his own pleasure now that I’d come.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck ,” Dalton chanted just as my vision and hearing came back to me. Sweat beaded along his forehead, and his brows were furrowed low over his eyes. “Jesse—” he choked out.

“Come. Please,” I begged. I needed to feel him fill me up.

He crushed his mouth to mine again, moaning into our kiss as his hips fell off rhythm. I clung to him, and when he was finally finished, he dropped on top of me. I wrapped my legs around his hips and closed my eyes, feeling settled for the first time in... well, ever.

I’d never felt this content in my fucking life.

“I love you,” I whispered.

Dalton turned his head, which had been resting on my shoulder, and pressed a kiss to the curve of my neck. “I’ve loved you for years , baby,” he said just as softly. “You’re mine now.”

I nodded. “Yours,” I agreed, a stupid, dopey smile pulling at my lips. And then, I promptly passed the fuck out, cum drunk and hungover.

Yet I was the happiest I’d ever fucking been.

Dalton

I couldn't believe I'd finally gotten Jesse beneath me. That he loved me, too. That he wanted any kind of future with me. I for sure had thought he was intentionally putting distance between us. Maybe I'd been reading him all wrong and the guys were right. We just needed to communicate.

"You okay?" I murmured when Jesse shifted and winced.

A light blush stained his cheeks that I found absolutely adorable. "Yeah. Just... sore," he said quietly.

I'd taken as much care as I could with stretching him open and preparing him to take me, but I also knew Jesse was a virgin.

While he hadn't remained one out of some sense of purity, he was always cautious about who he let near his body like that.

Hell, I could probably count on one hand the number of times Jesse had actually allowed himself to be kissed.

The metaphorical wall he put up around his body was understandable, considering all his trauma. And I didn't take it lightly that he let me not only kiss him but touch him. Make love to him.

Christ, it still seemed a little surreal.

He relaxed back against me, his cheek pressed to my chest as he focused back on the TV.

After I'd cleaned us both up, I'd gone to see if our food had been delivered—which it had.

Spike had been in the kitchen and had simply smirked at me as he pointed to the bag on the counter.

His smirk said it all. No doubt, he'd come to let me know my food had arrived but had instead heard me and Jesse together.

I mean, neither of us had been all that quiet.

Being quiet had been the literal last thing on my mind when Jesse's body had been wrapped around me and I'd finally been inside of him, making him mine.

We'd eaten, then continued lounging in my bed, choosing to watch TV and pretend the world outside of my room didn't exist. I knew we would eventually have to deal with Jesse's mom's things and decide what to do with her body, but for now, I'd let Jesse have this.

He deserved it after the mess he'd become the night before.

“Why did you pull away from me when we moved here?” Jesse suddenly blurted.

“What?” I asked, frowning down at him. I hadn't pulled away from him. He had pulled away from me, hadn't he? As soon as the six of us had moved in here, a whole ocean had separated me and Jesse.

He drew in a deep breath, and he began twist and untwist his fingers in the blanket

covering us, a nervous tick he'd never broken. "I... When we moved here, you said it would be good if we all had separate rooms," he said quietly. "You pulled away from me."

My brows furrowed. "What?" I asked again. Because surely, he wasn't telling me all the space between us was my fucking fault. If we'd been apart for months, a wedge driven between us, because of me, I was going to fucking hate myself.

He swallowed thickly. "You did," he said quietly. "When we all sat down and talked about buying this place, and you said it. I thought..."

My chest fucking hurt. I tightened my arm around him and gripped his chin with my other hand, tilting his head back so he was forced to look up at me. He could've closed his eyes to avoid my gaze, but he didn't, thankfully.

"Is that what you thought, baby? That I didn't fucking want to share a room with you anymore?"

"That I suddenly wanted space from you?" He didn't answer me, but the pain in his eyes said it all.

Closing my eyes, I released his chin and thumped my head back against the headboard, blowing out a harsh breath.

"Jesus Christ," I swore. Lifting my head, I looked back down at his pretty face.

"God, Jesse, no. I never wanted that. You could've had your own space, but I still wanted you in my bed every fucking night or me in yours."

Just like always. That never changed. I thought..."

I'd thought he was tired of me.

He looked down at my chest. "I pulled away, too. Because I thought you were done dealing with me."

I quickly rolled him to his back, settling my body between his thighs.

Bracing myself up on one elbow, I cupped his cheek with my other hand.

"Never, baby. Are you telling me that these months of separation was because I said something that hurt you?" Slowly, he nodded.

I closed my eyes and blew out a harsh breath, then rested my forehead on his.

"I'm sorry, Jesse. I'm so fucking sorry.

I never meant that how it sounded. I thought it was good we would all have our own rooms. But I never meant that to be taken as you and I no longer sharing a bed anymore, baby.

I need you as much as you've always needed me. "

"Promise?" he whispered.

Lifting my head so I could meet his pretty eyes, I nodded. "I fucking swear it, baby. It's been hard as fuck to breathe without you right next to me."

A small smile tilted his lips, and then, he lifted his head, pressing his lips to mine in a soft, quick kiss. Even though it didn't last more than a mere second, my heart flipped in my chest and my gut swooped all the same.

I was so gone over Jesse Link. Always had been. Always would be.

The spot beside me was empty when I woke up the next morning.

Groaning, I rolled onto my back and scrubbed the heels of my hands against my eyeballs.

Yawning, I flung the blankets back and rolled out of bed, stumbling toward the bathroom to shower and get dressed for the day.

No doubt, Jesse had gotten up and done the same.

Made me feel a little panicky that he wasn't next to me when I woke up, but I was trying not to be overbearing.

Just so fucking hard to not want to be when I'd just gotten him back.

I took a quick shower, then dressed in jeans and a hoodie before heading for the kitchen for coffee.

A grin tilted my lips when I found Jesse making two cups.

When I cleared my throat, he looked over his shoulder at me and smiled.

And fuck, his smile was so damn beautiful that for a moment, I forgot how to breathe.

Who needed to breathe when his smile alone filled my lungs with air?

"Hello, we're in the room, too," Kalin drawled from his spot at the bar, where he, Spike, Tor, and Salem were all sitting around.

I rolled my eyes at them and made my way toward Jesse.

Surprising me because I didn't think he was much of one for PDA, he turned his head and caught my lips in a small, quick kiss.

I vaguely heard Tor whisper, "Awe," but I ignored him.

"Here," Jesse said quietly, passing me the coffee—black, just how I liked it. Turning, he leaned back against the counter, his hip pressing to mine, so I took up the same position, letting our sides mold together.

"Jesse got a call this morning," Spike said, his deep voice a little raspy. He probably hadn't been up long. "He was just filling us in."

"Oh?" I asked, looking down at Jesse.

He shrugged nonchalantly, but his eyes were getting a pinched look around them that I didn't like.

"It was the attorney I had do up Mom's will a while back.

" He drew in a deep breath. "He got word she passed away. Offered his condolences. Then told me the house and everything inside of it was for me to do with what I wanted. She left it all to me."

"Baby..." I said softly, hating the pain in his voice.

He swallowed thickly, shaking his head as he stared at the floor. "I don't want any of it," he croaked. "Why can't I just have someone else deal with this?"

"Why don't we all go with you?" Tor offered. "Salem got all our schedules cleared

anyway so we could be here to support you. We could go with you to sort through the house.”

“And even though you may not want anything now,” I spoke up, “you may find something you want to keep.” Fuck knew I wanted him to just order a bulldozer to drive over the house with everything still inside it, or better yet, light a fucking fire and let it all burn to the ground, but I knew he’d never do that.

I could place money on it that Jesse would find something in that house he couldn’t part with, just as he could never bring himself to part from his mother.

He blew out soft breath and finally lifted his gaze. “You guys don’t mind?”

“No,” we all chorused.

“You know you’ve always got me, baby,” I gently reminded him. Reaching down, I grabbed his hand, linking our fingers together. “You’re not alone.”

He nodded, then leaned more heavily against me. I dropped his hand to wrap my arm around his shoulders, tucking him against my side. “We’ll all go out and get breakfast, and then, we’ll go to your mom’s okay?”

He nodded. I dropped a kiss to the top of his head, then just continued holding him because sometimes, being held was just something Jesse needed.

Jesse

My mom's house was a disaster, and even though I hadn't lived in the house since I graduated high school, I was embarrassed for my family—my found family—to see where I used to live.

Dalton had never even seen this place before because I never allowed him to come over.

Never even let him come pick me up. If I needed a ride, I usually walked down the street to the bus stop and had him pick me up from there.

To be honest, the house hadn't looked much better when I lived there, but I'd at least tried to clean up when I wasn't confined to my room because her newest boyfriend didn't like that she had a kid, I wasn't practicing with the guys, or I wasn't in school.

Or hiding out at Dalton's because I'd done that a lot, too.

"Looks pretty tame to where I grew up," Salem commented as he stepped past me and into the house.

It was almost like he'd known I needed someone to ease my anxiety.

And the way he just stepped inside, not the least bit bothered by the needles lying everywhere, the beer and liquor bottles all over the floor, the trash everywhere...

Yeah, Salem had seen something similar or worse.

The walls were stained by nicotine, and the house reeked of mold, booze, and cigarettes. It was a smell I'd grown up with all my life, which meant I should have been used to it, but my stomach turned all the same.

"Come on," Dalton said, gently pressing his hand to my lower back.

"You don't have to come in," I rasped, turning to face him.

He frowned at me, his brows pulling low over his eyes. "What? Why would you think I wouldn't want to be here, Jesse?"

Because you have loving parents and come from a home that was cleaned by professionals once a week .

But I didn't say that. I opened my mouth to come up with...

something, but I drew a blank. Dalton sighed and pulled me into his arms, his strength wrapping around me.

I sank into his embrace and breathed in the scent of his cologne—something rich and woodsy.

The smell settled me and eased the headache already beginning to pulse at my temples.

"Seeing this house doesn't make me think any less of you, Jesse," Dalton said quietly, his chin resting on top of my head.

I swallowed thickly and wound my arms around his waist, my fingers twisting into the back of his hoodie.

“If anything, it just makes me remember how fucking strong you are. I don’t think I would’ve survived living somewhere like this. ”

“It sucked,” I muttered because I didn’t know what else to say but also because it was the raw truth. It had sucked.

He slid his hand into my hair and tilted my head back so I was forced to look up at him.

“I know, baby.” Leaning down, he pecked my lips.

My heart skipped a beat in my chest. Now that we were...

together—it seemed to be an unspoken agreement that we were a couple now—I couldn’t get enough of Dalton’s kisses and the way he touched me and clung to me. In fact, I never wanted him to stop.

If I could, I’d burrow myself beneath his skin so we never had to be apart.

“Come on,” Dalton urged, releasing me, only to grab my hand and wrap it in his. Carefully, we traversed the nasty house until we were in the living room, where the guys were already pulling photo albums out of the entertainment center that was older than I was.

I frowned down at them. “These were in there?” I asked.

Tor nodded. “Yeah. We figured we’d start taking apart the living room, then work our way to her room, then to your room. I’m sure there’s nothing in the kitchen you want.”

There’d be nothing but pots and pans as old as I was and a few dishes she’d used as

ashtrays more than she'd ever used for food and drinks.

I shook my head at him. "No, nothing from the kitchen," I agreed.

Gingerly, I sat on the couch, making a mental note to trash these sweatpants when I got home.

Grabbing the first album, I flipped it open.

Immediately, my throat closed up with tears.

I'd never seen these pictures. Hell, I never even knew my mom had photo albums until that moment.

The very first picture was one of me and her.

She'd just given birth to me. Her face was sweaty and flushed, and she was young—sixteen, if I remembered correctly.

She wasn't even looking at the camera. She was looking at me .

Looking at me like I held the world in my tiny, bunched up fists.

And she looked happy . Fuck, my mom was healthy .

Her eyes were clear, and her sweaty skin was flushed pink.

But I couldn't get past the fact that she was looking at me like she fucking loved me.

With shaking fingers, I flipped the page, coming face to face with more pictures of me and her. These were all in the delivery room, too. In the second picture, she was

speaking animatedly to a dark-haired guy that looked to be the same age as her, and he was grinning down at me.

“Is that your dad?” Dalton asked quietly, taking a seat beside me.

“I think so,” I rasped. He sure looked a hell of a lot like I did at that age.

“I never knew him,” I admitted. “Or I don’t remember him.

Mom said he left. I never cared enough about him to find out who he was.

If he could abandon me like that...” I shook my head. “Then he’s not worth my fucking time.”

“Agreed,” Kalin said from the floor where he was sitting cross-legged, going through a stack of papers.

I looked back down at the photo album, a tear running down my cheek when I flipped the page again.

We were here in my grandparents’ house in this picture, and she was sitting on this same couch, appearing to be cooing at me as she held my tiny fist in her delicate fingers.

“I think she loved me at one point,” I whispered, my voice hoarse.

My throat was so tight, and my chest hurt looking at these pictures.

But I was relieved too. To know that at one point, she did love me.

It helped me cope with all the bullshit she’d piled on me. “Drugs and alcohol just...

changed her.”

“Do you know what her tipping point was?” Spike asked, helping Salem pick up trash. Bottles clanked as they dropped them into the trash bag they were sharing between the two of them.

“No,” I said. “I never cared to ask. And honestly, I don’t care to know now. She chose them over me, and I’ve known she loved her next fix more than she ever loved me. She might have loved me once upon a time, but her crutch was her biggest love.”

“I’m sorry, baby,” Dalton said quietly, truly sounding pained. He gripped the back of my neck and pulled me toward him so he could press his lips to my temple. I closed my eyes, letting his love soak into my pores. “But despite her, you’ve got a great family right here, and we all love you.”

Kalin snorted from the floor. “Some of us more than others, clearly.” He made a gagging noise for dramatic effect. And despite being in the midst of my mother’s chaos, I laughed. And fuck, the way Dalton beamed at me, as if my laugh was the only fix he’d ever need...

I leaned in and kissed him, letting my lips linger for a moment too long, but no one said anything. “Thank you for being here,” I murmured.

He smiled at me. “I’m wherever you are, baby. Always.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:01 am

Dalton

I groaned and buried my face beneath my pillow, willing my ringing phone to drop off the face of the earth or drown in a bucket of water.

Something other than ringing. Grow legs and walk off, maybe?

I was fucking exhausted . Jesse had kept me up most of the night, desperate to have me inside of him.

I'd come so many fucking times, my balls felt pitifully empty and were actually sore from coming so damn much.

A few days had passed since his mother died.

The first three days sucked. Clearing out her house was the worst, and receiving her ashes had sent him seeking comfort in the bottom of a bottle.

The fourth day was spent recovering from a hangover.

The fifth day, we all chilled in the pool, getting high and eating our body weight in pizza and cake because why the fuck not have cake, too.

Yesterday, we spent all day in bed, and after showering together, Jesse became fucking ravenous .

And like fuck would I deny him when he wanted to ride my cock or have me rail him

from behind. The more he'd whined and begged for me, the more feral I'd become.

My phone finally stopped ringing, but then, Jesse's started up.

Jesse groaned and rolled away from me to grab his phone from the other side of the bed.

I made a pitiful sound in the back of my throat and reached for him, not ready to let go of him yet.

He laughed softly and rolled back into the protective circle of my arm as he answered his phone.

"Hello?" he groggily answered.

"Are everyone's phones broken?" Delia snapped.

"It's not even been seven days yet," I muttered, my voice muffled by the pillow. "Go away, Delia."

She huffed. "You think I enjoy calling you boys?" she retorted. "I don't, for the record. The only good thing you six do for me is provide me a generous paycheck. This request is coming directly from Richard himself. He wants the six of you in the office for lunch and a talk."

"A talk?" Jesse asked. I lifted my pillow, squinting at Jesse's phone. "That sounds... ominous."

She scoffed. "You've got to really be the only band group or singer that doesn't find themselves splashed in the media over bullshit, so I'm sure it's nothing to worry about."

He just thought whatever he wants to talk about would come better directly from him.

So, get up and get your asses here. He wants to do lunch at twelve. ”

With that, she hung up. I grunted and shoved the pillow back onto my face. “She’s such a bitch.”

Jesse hummed in agreement. “Got to admit though, she gets the job done,” he said, his voice husky and thick with sleep. Lifting my pillow, he aimed a sleepy smile at me. “Shower?”

I shook my head, then rolled onto my side so I could pull him into me. He shifted so he was lying on his side, his back facing me. I smiled and pressed a kiss to his shoulder blade as I curled my body around his. “I love being your big spoon.”

He snorted a laugh. “I’m setting an alarm to be up at ten-thirty,” he warned me.

“Kay,” I mumbled. “Now shh . My dick and I need more rest.”

He barked out a laugh. “Oh, my God , Dalton.”

“What?” I asked, nuzzling my face between his shoulder blades. “You wore both of us the fuck out last night. Now hush. For real. I’m going back to sleep.”

He snorted again but remained quiet, his fingers idly tracing patterns into my forearms. It wasn’t long before sleep dragged me back under, and I fell asleep inhaling the scent of our sex on his skin mixed with the smell that was purely him.

Jesse and I were the last ones to file into the conference room, and I shut the door behind us before taking a seat at the table.

Richard was already present, and there were pizzas laid out on the table.

Salem, without even having to be prompted, was already balancing two plates and depositing two slices on each.

After he set one of the plates in front of Tor, he took his own seat, then promptly dug in.

“Pigs,” Delia muttered.

Salem gave her a stiff middle finger, making me snort.

“Go ahead and dig in,” Richard said, gesturing at the pizza laid out on the table. “Then, we’ll get started.”

Once we all had pizza in front of us, Richard leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table and steeping his fingers together in front of him. “I need a favor from you all.”

“Oh, boy,” Spike muttered. Richard shot him a look I couldn’t decipher, but Spike pointedly ignored him, making Kalin snort in amusement.

“I know this is spur of the moment, and I know you all were taking some time off, but I really need your assistance with this. There’s a charity event being sponsored by Nightwork Records, and the band I originally had planned to play all caught the flu.

They’re bed-ridden and unable to be present, even if they were to just lip sync. ”

“You want us to step in?” Tor asked. When Richard nodded, he pursed his lips. “When is this event?”

Richard visibly winced because no doubt, one of us was going to end up throwing a fit—more than likely Salem. “Tonight.”

Salem calmly set his pizza down, then turned his dark eyes on Richard. “ Tonight ?” Salem repeated. “You brought us in at lunchtime and buttered us up with pizza to ask us to perform tonight ?”

Richard sighed. “Yes.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Salem muttered, shaking his head. “Jesse can’t even have the full seven days to mourn the loss of his mom before you or Delia is asking us to do something.”

“Hey—” Delia snapped at him, but Richard calmly held up his hand to her. She snapped her mouth shut, but her glare didn’t waver from Salem. He just dismissed her like he did everyone else he deemed unworthy of his time.

“I don’t mind,” Jesse spoke up. I gripped his thigh beneath the table, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Really. I’m okay,” he said when Salem shot him a look that told him to shut the fuck up.

I glowered at Salem, but just like he had with Delia, he ignored me.

“This will be good for me. I love being on stage.”

“Are you sure?” I asked him.

Jesse looked at me with those gorgeous dark eyes I loved and nodded. “Yeah. I need this, Dalton.”

“Only if you’re sure,” Kalin said, speaking up finally. “You deserve to have whatever time you need, Jesse.”

Jesse shook his head, then looked at Salem, Tor, and Spike. “Are you three okay with doing this?”

Salem sighed. “I don’t like the very little time we have to prepare, but if you want to do this, bro, then we’ll do it.”

“Yeah,” Tor agreed, smiling at Jesse. “We’re in if you’re in.”

Spike shrugged. “I’m down.”

Richard visibly relaxed. “Thank you,” he said, sounding like he truly meant it. “Delia will fill you in on everything you need to know, and I’ll have bonuses deposited into your accounts for doing this on such short notice.”

He didn’t have to do that. Technically, while we were under contract with him, he could make us do this charity event whether we wanted to or not.

But Richard wasn’t that kind of record label owner.

While he was rich and could definitely be an asshole, he treated us like human beings with our own thoughts and feelings.

I had no doubt in my mind that if we hadn’t agreed to do this, he would have figured something else out.

“You sure you’re ready for this?” I quietly asked Jesse as he reached for another slice of pizza.

He nodded, turning his head to look at me. “I’m sure.” He smiled at me. “I never feel more alive than I do when I’m on the guitar.”

I arched a brow at him. “Oh, really?” I asked.

He flushed. “Well—I—” he stammered.

I laughed and leaned in to kiss him, humming in appreciation when I pulled back and licked my lips, the taste of pizza exploding on my tongue. “I thought so,” I teased.

He rolled his eyes at me, but there was no hiding the blush staining his cheeks.

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Jesse

This was one of the biggest things I lived for. This was one of the reasons I was still alive today. That I hadn't given in to the impulses to just end it all. To no longer suffer.

The crowd in front of us was small, but they were roaring .

The charity event Richard was hosting was a sort-of exclusive thing, and the ticket prices were astronomical with all proceeds going to a charity supporting trans rights.

And fuck if I wasn't all for playing at the drop of a hat for a cause like that, too.

Even Salem, who'd still been salty about the short notice, had lost his ire when he found out what the charity event was for.

"You ready for this?" Dalton asked as I slid my guitar strap over my shoulder and began to tune my guitar.

Many people thought the lead singer would be the most vital part to a band, but we all knew without each of us playing our parts, this band wouldn't even be a thing.

I took pride in being the bass guitarist, and I knew Tor and Salem were relying on me to hit my notes just right to really give our elements the darker, moodier note they needed.

"More than ready," I assured him. Lifting my head, I looked up at him.

He looked fucking good in ripped black skinny jeans, tan boots, a tan shirt to match, and a black leather jacket.

He was the picture-perfect image of a rockstar, honestly.

And damn if I didn't want to get him into a dark corner and sink to my knees for him. "What about you?" I asked.

Dalton was our rhythm guitarist, one of the more vital parts of the band. Apart from Tor being the lead singer, I felt that Dalton's job was the hardest.

"Always," he promised. Leaning down, he kissed me. "We've only got a minute before the curtain rises," he warned me.

I stood to my feet and took my position near the back of the stage.

I drew in a deep breath, steadying myself.

I widened my stance, planting my boots shoulder-width apart.

My jeans were baggy, so they didn't stretch uncomfortably.

It was hot in the arena, so sweat was already beading on my skin where it was exposed by my black muscle tank.

The curtain slowly rose, and the crowd was deafening as they screamed for us. I grinned and looked over my shoulder at Dalton, who was already looking at me. He flashed me a quick, devilish grin, and goosebumps littered my skin.

"How are we doing tonight?!" Tor yelled into the mic. The crowd went fucking wild for him, just like they always did, no matter where we played. Tor was practically the

face of our band, and the fans fucking adored him.

When their screams died down, Tor cleared his throat.

“Before we begin to play, I just want to say a few words. Trans rights are fucking human rights.” The crowd went wild again.

“Trans people should not be battling for the right to fucking exist!” Tor shouted to be heard over the crowd that was growing increasingly louder with every word he spoke.

“And if you’re watching us right now, whether you’re here or someone is recording us for you, I want you to know we see you, we love you, and we want you here! ”

With that, Tor stepped back, and Salem nodded once at us, giving us the signal to launch into our first song of the night.

I was breathing heavily, sweat glistening on my skin and running from my hair onto my face as we ended the last song. I could barely hear myself think over the cheers from our fans, but I grinned, nonetheless. This had been everything I’d needed. It was the cleansing my soul had been seeking.

Sometimes, I just couldn’t bleed my emotions out of me unless my fingers were working tirelessly over my guitar, and I could barely breathe from the exertion of playing song after song.

“What—” I gasped when I was suddenly spun around.

Then, Dalton’s fingers were lacing in my hair and he was crushing his mouth to mine.

I moaned, one of my hands coming up to grip the side of his neck.

I vaguely recognized the crowd going even wilder, but I was too lost in Dalton to care that our kiss was no doubt being broadcast all over the world at that moment.

“You were—” Dalton heaved a breath as he rested his forehead on mine, “—so fucking beautiful,” he rasped.

I grinned and leaned in to kiss him again. “I love you,” I murmured against his lips.

He groaned. “I love you, too, baby.” And then, he was kissing me again, plunging his tongue into my mouth for the entire fucking world to see.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:01 am

Dalton

Tor sang the last note of his song, then took the headphones off, signaling to the sound engineer that he wanted a break.

We'd already recorded the music itself, and now it was up to Tor to get the lyrics in.

The rest of us technically didn't have to be there, but we always showed up in support of him.

Recording music could sometimes get to be too much for Tor, especially since without us there as backup, Delia liked to try to push him to record more than he was comfortable with recording in one day.

As Tor was stepping out of the recording booth, the main door opened, and Richard appeared, his tall, broad frame filling the doorway.

I frowned, my arm tightening around Jesse's shoulders as he lifted his head from my chest. He'd damn near dozed off, honestly, his phone limp in his hand, the game he'd been playing still open with the GAME OVER message flashing on the screen.

"Sorry to interrupt," Richard said, though he didn't sound sorry at all. "Kalin, Spike, I need a word with you two."

I looked at my two friends in confusion. What the hell had they done to piss off Richard? Or to gain his attention so undivided like that?

“Fuck off,” Kalin bit out, his upper lip curling in disgust at Richard.

My eyes widened, and Jesse tensed beside me.

Tor, who had been reaching for a water bottle, paused and looked at Kalin with wide eyes.

The only person who seemed unbothered was Salem.

He didn’t even seem to be paying attention, his eyes on his phone, though I knew he was aware of everything happening.

“Kalin,” Spike muttered, standing to his feet, “not here.”

“I’ve got nothing to fucking say to him,” Kalin snarled, surprising me. Kalin was always laid back and chill. He never lashed out like that. In fact, I couldn’t think of a single time he’d gotten truly angry. To know Richard had done something to infuriate him was alarming.

Spike grabbed Kalin’s wrists and pulled him off the couch, then pushed him from the room as soon as Richard moved out of the way. The door shut behind them quickly, and I blinked slowly, trying to wrap my head around what the fuck just happened.

“Anyone know what that was?” Tor asked, frowning at the closed door.

“I think the three of them have something going on,” Salem said, not seeming interested in whatever just happened in the slightest. “I heard Kalin arguing with Spike about Richard the other night when I went to get us some water from the kitchen.”

“About Richard?” I asked. “The three of them are... what, dating? Seeing each

other?”

Salem shrugged one shoulder. “Seems like it.”

I shook my head in disbelief. When the fuck had that happened? “I didn’t even know Kalin and Spike were together.”

“Me either,” Tor admitted.

Salem sighed. “Spike is private. You guys know that. If he wants us to know he and Kalin are together or banging or whatever the fuck it is they’re doing, he’ll make it known. Though I think the cat is out of the bag now after that display.”

I silently agreed.

“If they do have something going on with Richard and shit goes sideways, what about our future?” Tor asked. “I like working for Nightwork Records. We won’t get treated half as decently if we end up somewhere else.”

“I hope they don’t make this messy,” Jesse grumbled. “I won’t cope well with change.”

I squeezed my arm around him again in support. He hated change, but he had me now, especially since we’d cleared the air about the whole living situation thing. I still couldn’t believe simple miscommunication had driven us apart. Still blew my mind fucking months later.

Tor stepped back into the recording booth, and Jesse slumped back against my side.

I leaned my head back, letting myself doze off and trying not to worry about Kalin and Spike.

Or what their fight with Richard might mean for the rest of us.

I would hope Richard wouldn't let it affect the band as a whole, I also knew relationships could get fucking messy.

Especially one with a power imbalance like theirs.

I was almost asleep when I felt Jesse move. "Where are you going?" I mumbled, opening my eyes just enough to watch him.

Which meant I saw him when he dropped down to one knee.

My eyes snapped open, and I sat up straighter, staring down at him with wide eyes. "Jesse?" I rasped.

He swallowed thickly, and with trembling fingers, he held up a simple black Tungsten band. Like a fucking sap, tears welled in my eyes. Was he really fucking doing this? Was he really doing what I thought he was doing?

The door behind him opened, and I could hear Kalin and Spike talking, but they both abruptly shut up and stopped in the doorway when they spotted Jesse on one knee in front of me.

"I love you," Jesse croaked. "I had a huge speech in my mind, but now I'm drawing a blank. I don't know why I'm nervous, but I am." He sucked in a shaky breath. "I know this isn't some extravagant place, but we have all our friends here, which feels special enough. Will you marry me, Dalton?"

"Jesus fucking Christ, baby," I laughed, a tear slipping down my cheek. "Fucking yes, I'll goddamn marry you."

He stood and grabbed my hand, slipping the ring onto my finger. As soon as it was in place, I gripped his hips and yanked him down so he was straddling my lap. Leaning in, I kissed him hard, slow, and deep. He softly moaned into the kiss, his fingers sliding into my hair and tugging on the strands.

“I love you,” I rasped, breathing hard and fast. Didn’t matter how many times I kissed him, he still made me dizzy with need for him.

He nodded. “Love you, too,” he mumbled. Then, he leaned in, kissing me again. And fuck if I would ever deny him.

“There’s other people in the room,” Salem drawled.

“Oh, shut up,” Kalin told him. “They just got fucking engaged, dude. They deserve this.”

I laughed softly against Jesse’s lips, then hugged him to me, burying my face in the crook of his neck.

I couldn’t believe Jesse had asked me before I’d asked him, but that was fine. We were engaged, and that was all that fucking mattered.

I’d pick our wedding date and our venue—which would be the courthouse because fuck extravagance—to even the playing field.

Jesse

I moaned around Dalton's cock, my fingers tightening on his thighs as he fucked himself into my throat. His grip on my hair was punishingly tight, making my scalp smart, but I couldn't get enough of it. Tears streaked down my cheeks, and drool ran down my chin. I knew I was a mess, but fuck, I couldn't bring myself to care about how pitiful I looked when Dalton had me on my knees for him.