



Something Unavoidable

(Split Rock Ranch #6)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Izzy King has a reputation. He's the wild one. The fun one. The one who does what he wants. And if he's a little broken under his fun-loving facade, well, that's nobody's business—especially not Split Rock Ranch's long-time vet, Dr. Keegan Reid. That guy is the worst. Izzy keeps his distance—that is, until his boss decides they need to work together to care for a group of rescue horses. Whatever. Izzy will do what he does best and ignore the situation until it goes away.

Keegan Reid knows what he wants. He's happy with his practice, his dogs, his cabin, and volunteering with the local animal rescue. What he doesn't need is chaos—and Izzy King is chaos incarnate. Yet somehow, that doesn't prevent him from picking up the verbal gauntlet every time Izzy throws it down. There's something about Izzy that won't let him turn the other cheek.

Izzy and Keegan might fight like cats and dogs—but everyone knows that high emotions often hide explosive chemistry. Keegan thinks they'd be a good fit if Izzy gave him a chance. But apparently, that old saying about leading a horse to water also applies to stubborn ranch hands. Izzy's got a past that makes him prone to bolting, and Keegan needs to decide if he wants to tame another feral creature.

Total Pages (Source): 17

“Isaac!”

“Isaac, can I get a comment for the Chronicle ?”

Heads were turning, people staring. Not that it was anything new. Izzy kept his focus on the grass warm-up ring and the horse beneath him. He slowed Blackbird to a walk and loosened the reins, encouraging her to relax and stretch out her neck. Calm but focused was the goal today.

The horse world—who were all thirteen-year-old girls at heart, regardless of gender—loved its gossip, and the abrupt retirement of a highly respected, top-level eventing trainer was fresh and juicy. Especially when that trainer was only in his late forties and considered a shoo-in for next year’s Olympic Chef d’Equipe. So far, no one was talking to the press, and the reporters were getting pushy—desperate for the “real story” behind why their coach had left them only weeks before the final qualifier.

But Izzy was ignoring all that. He was focused forward, on what came next. He couldn’t afford to look back. Not today. He’d lost too much in the last few weeks to let this slip through his fingers too. Besides, he had something to prove. Not to the world—to himself. He deserved to be here.

He shifted Blackbird’s reins to one hand and stroked her glossy neck, wishing he could feel her warmth through his gloves. She pulled in a deep breath, her sides expanding under him, then blew it out in a sigh, shaking her head as she relaxed. Izzy’s lips twitched, and the ball of worry in his chest loosened a little. “We got this, baby girl. You and me.” He bent down and pressed his cheek to the crest of her mane,

shutting his eyes for a moment and matching her breathing.

“Izzy,” Emma called.

He opened his eyes and sat back, flashing the other eventer a reassuring smile. It faded at the sight of her wet, red-rimmed eyes and the pinched corners of her mouth. “What is it?” he asked, steering Blackbird closer to her as she stepped up on the bottom rail of the fence, her fingers bleaching white as she gripped the top. Izzy’s breath hitched as his tension came rushing back. “Emma? What’s wrong?”

Movement behind her caught his attention, and his frown deepened as Samantha and David hurried over, Stewart chasing after them. No one looked happy. Izzy swallowed down the bile creeping up his throat. He tried to meet Sammy’s eyes, but she was focused on his horse.

“I...” Emma paused, her lips parted as the word died in her throat. She startled as Sammy reached them and grabbed her elbow. After exchanging a long look, Emma turned back, her eyes welling with moisture that she blinked away. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Izzy frowned. What the hell? He turned his attention to David—the designated “old guy” at their training center—who shrugged, his lips pressed into a tight line. What the fuck had happened now? Clearly, it was something bad. Something that would take his head out of the game if Sammy and David were trying to keep Emma from telling him.

Stew—whom they’d just unofficially promoted from assistant to head trainer—reached them, red-faced and out of breath. “They’re about to call you to the box,” he told Izzy, expression a mask of sympathetic earnestness. “You need to stay focused.”

As if Izzy didn't know that.

He looked to Sammy again. Of the group that trained together outside of Boston, he'd known her the longest. They were friends—at least, he hoped they were still friends. He didn't think she'd turn against him, even after everything.

She finally looked up, her blue eyes fierce as they locked on his. "He's dead."

Izzy'd had this dream before. He blinked a few times, but nothing changed. The sun was still warm on his shoulders, the sky bright and blue, the grass almost unnaturally green. He shook his head.

He watched, numb, as Emma's tears spilled over and streaked down her cheeks. David looked troubled, a crease forming between his eyebrows. Stew pulled off his hat and ran a hand through his damp hair, making it stand up at crazy angles. He eyed Izzy like he was waiting for the explosion.

Izzy forced his gaze back to Sammy. "How?"

She drew in a steadying breath, her trembling lower lip the only thing giving her away. "Hanged himself in the training barn back home," she forced out, her eyes boring into Izzy's, like she was daring him to look away. "They found him this morning."

Izzy nodded. That checked out. There were three things Josh loved more than anything—attention, control, and winning. His forced retirement had taken all of that from him, so it was no surprise he'd found a way to get some of it back.

Izzy huffed a painful laugh that almost didn't stop. He should have known Josh would never take responsibility for what he'd done. Never be held accountable. Fuck . Fucking selfish bastard.

Blackbird tossed her head and shifted impatiently, distracting Izzy from the black hole of his thoughts. Right. Shit. He didn't have time to lose it the way he wanted. He was about to attempt one of the most important rides of his career. The 5 star cross-country course at Oxford Park had no space for the mental breakdown he so desperately needed. Instead of cracking, he buried everything deep and adjusted his seat in the saddle. "Good," he answered belatedly. "It's over then." He checked the time. The steward would be looking for him.

Stew straightened, concern deepening. "We can request a later start. Give you time to process."

Izzy ignored him. "How is the course looking?" he asked Sammy, grateful when she seemed to understand. The last thing he needed right now was to stop and think. Josh was dead. It was better this way.

"Watch the footing coming off the first water effort. It's getting muddy. A few have stayed wide and almost went down," Sammy told him, her face tight and unreadable.

Izzy breathed deep and nodded. Focus. He needed to focus. He would have time for everything else later. "Got it," he acknowledged. They'd expected the safer route to turn into a mud slick. Birdie was agile, though—they'd opt for the tight, inside turn and stay far away from danger.

"On deck, Isaac King."

Izzy gathered his reins. He was next. He made the mistake of looking at Emma as he turned to go.

She wasn't sobbing or anything, but her pale face and the silent slide of tears down her cheeks put a crack in the battered wall guarding Izzy from a storm of emotions. He couldn't do this right now. He needed to keep everything locked down. He looked

away.

Fuck, she was young—barely nineteen to Izzy’s twenty-one. She’d been a few months past her eighteenth birthday and still competing at the intermediate level when Josh started training her and immediately moved her up to advanced. Izzy had questioned him about it, but Josh had brushed him off.

Emma had proven Izzy wrong. She might look fragile, but she was the bravest person he knew. After all, she was the one who’d finally spoken up.

Stew was hovering close to her side, his hands fisted like he was trying to keep from reaching out. He was young, too, in the grand scheme of things. Twenty-five or so. Izzy had given him so much shit when he’d been hired—especially with how awkward and anxious he could get. But he’d come through in the end, while Izzy had hesitated, unable—or unwilling—to believe the man he’d idolized was capable of what Emma had claimed.

“Hey.” A fist hit the thick leather of his boot. Izzy’s gaze flicked to Sammy, who smacked him again, grinning with all her teeth. “You got this, bitch. Don’t fuck it up.”

He forced a smile that he knew didn’t reach his eyes, grateful, even if her attempt at “normal” fell flat. “Worry about yourself, bitch,” he tossed back, trying to match her energy. “I’m not the one who can’t keep their—” Izzy blanched, their traditional prairie banter a punch in the gut. Keep their legs closed. It was a throwaway line. Something a visiting trainer had shouted at them once. Now, it had taken on a different meaning.

“Heels down?” Sammy offered, her eyes shiny, the hand that had punched Izzy’s boot gripping his ankle.

Izzy nodded, unable to speak past the lump in his throat.

Sammy let him go and gave Blackbird's flank a hard pat. "Go," she said. "Knock 'em dead."

Izzy went.

Twenty-eight fences. Forty-nine efforts. Four miles. The most important seven minutes of his life. He knew how to do this. He could do this.

The trek to the starting box was gone in a blink. He nodded to well-wishers, but their words slipped past without registering. Finally, it was time. He fastened his chin strap on autopilot, then re-checked stirrups and the cord clipping his air vest to the saddle. The signal horn cut through the fog, and Blackbird, smart, beautiful creature that she was, sprang into action.

They cleared the first jump—a solid vertical—easily. He checked their pace and adjusted the route. Thirty-three strides to the next combination. He steadied his breathing. The second fence was a double-brush. Easy.

The following combination—a fence, a stride, down the bank, then up and over the oxer—flowed exactly the way they'd practiced it.

He needed this win; they all did. Sammy, David, Emma, and Stew. The last few weeks had been... Devastating didn't begin to cover it. Izzy couldn't let them down.

Blackbird's powerful muscles stretched and flexed under him, her hooves pounding against the grass as her long stride drove them up the hill toward number nine. She was on the taller end of average for an Irish Sport Horse, bred to accommodate Izzy's height, and she ate up the distance.

Izzy knew he was privileged, with parents who had both seen his potential at a young age and had the means and opportunity to support it. She'd been born when he was twelve, on his family's farm, and Izzy had been there for her first steps. He'd been the first person to touch her, the first to stroke her velvet-soft nose and play with her long ears. He'd been the one to teach her to wear a halter and walk on a lead rope. To come running across the field when he whistled for her. To walk, trot, and canter under-saddle.

She was his best friend, and he'd been devastated when she turned five and his parents sent her off to be trained by a famous Olympian.

Josh Martin had been to four Summer Olympics and brought home the gold three times. He was a world champion six times over, and it was considered an honor to have a horse trained by him. Izzy, in all his seventeen-year-old wisdom, disagreed. Blackbird was his, and he wanted to train her. He'd driven his parents insane until they agreed to let him travel up to Boston to visit his girl.

Josh had won him over with his wealth of experience, his easy smile, and his willingness to listen. Izzy had never met anyone like him. By the end of the week, Izzy had been converted—and a little bit in love. There was no one better to get Blackbird ready to compete professionally, and when Josh offered to let Izzy stay and train with him, he'd jumped at the chance. His parents didn't take much convincing, and he'd moved into Josh's spare bedroom at the start of his senior year of high school.

It had been the best four years of his life, and it had lasted right up until he'd walked in on Emma, sobbing in the tack room.

Three minutes was all it took for Izzy's world to unravel.

He wasn't ready.

Blackbird surged forward, and only years of practice allowed Izzy to keep his balance. Fuck. He grabbed for her mane as she cleared the fence. Where were they? How the fuck had he let himself get so far inside his head? He scanned ahead for the next jump. Was that twelve or thirteen? Spots floated in his vision, preventing him from reading the blue-and-white numbered flags as they raced toward the next effort.

Emma had once called Blackbird his soul-horse. He'd laughed at how cheesy that sounded, even as he silently agreed. They were perfectly in tune, to the point that it often felt like they could read each other's minds. They trusted each other implicitly. That was why, when Izzy realized a stride too late that he'd forgotten Sammy's warning about the water, she tried to turn for him.

Unfortunately, he'd fucked up, and they hit the first oxer at the wrong angle. Blackbird fought for it and managed to clear the jump, but her landing was all wrong. Then, already off-balance, she hit a slick spot on the muddy grass.

The rapid expansion of his air vest as it detached from the saddle drove the wind from his lungs. There wasn't any pain when Izzy slammed into the massive log that made up the next jump and flipped over the top of it, but there was a loud crack followed by numbness. That was a bad sign. Izzy hit the dirt, the vest cushioning his fall, and lay there, stunned, as his beautiful girl went down in front of him and didn't get up.

Oh no.

Any concern for himself vanished as he scrambled to his feet. He only took one step before all the pain that had been missing roared up his leg. His vision flickered black and white, darkness closing in from the edges as he hit the ground again, getting a mouthful of dirt and grass this time. There was no air. He couldn't breathe.

The last thing he saw was Blackbird, struggling back to her feet, her tack askew, her reins tangled around her front leg.

In the rush of relief, he let the darkness drag him under.

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Six years later.

“Happy New Year!”

Izzy raised his glass with the others. They cheered a little too hard, and he laughed as the golden liquid sloshed, fizzed, and spilled over the rim of the plastic flute, running down his arm.

Before he could react, an unfamiliar hand grabbed his raised wrist, and a hot tongue slid across his skin, licking the droplets away. The sensation broke through the haze of inebriated celebration. He shivered and blinked a few times, trying to clear his fuzzy vision. Then he grinned. That was kinda hot, actually. He leaned in, his body swaying closer than he intended, and braced his free hand against a muscular shoulder. He gave it an experimental squeeze. Nice. Then he refocused. “Who gave you permission to touch?” he asked, lips moving against the man’s ear as he strove to be heard over the cheering crowd.

The hand gripping his wrist tugged, and Izzy stumbled closer, his chest landing against a wonderfully firm one. “Pretty sure you did...when you sucked my cock in the bathroom half an hour ago.”

Did he? Huh. Cool. Izzy grinned and smacked a kiss to the man’s bearded cheek. “Fair enough.” He laughed and tipped back the remainder of his drink. The bubbles tickled the inside of his nose, and he dropped his head down to rub the sensation away on the man’s shoulder. Fuck, he hated champagne, but it was New Year’s Eve and the hangover-inducing stuff was tradition.

Noisemakers and popping champagne bottles almost drowned out the notes of “Auld Lang Syne,” despite the Lookout’s impressive sound system. Colorful lights flashed over the dance floor, illuminating the smoky haze hanging near the ceiling. Hunter had rented the smoke machine for the event, and it made everything feel more...fancy or something. The air was hot and thick with delicious, musky man-scent from hundreds of tightly pressed bodies. Izzy was in heaven.

Arms wrapped around him from behind, tugging him away from the firm chest that was supporting most of his weight. He stumbled, surprised, but remained upright. Even wasted, he had great balance, thanks to more than twenty years on horseback. But Izzy didn’t like to remember that.

“Happy New Year!” a familiar voice shouted in his ear.

He turned, and the champagne bubbles in his nose were forgotten as mystery-lips caught his in an enthusiastic kiss. He kissed back and was rewarded with a large hand gripping his ass cheek and squeezing hard enough to make him groan. Damn, that gave him ideas. He broke the kiss and blinked open his eyes, trying to focus. Who? Oh. Braxton. He dove in for another friendly smear of mouths and laughed into it as Brax dragged him even closer. He pushed back, palms splayed on Brax’s chest. “Fuck off,” he said with a giddy grin. “I told you, not tonight.”

Braxton rolled his eyes but didn’t look too put out. “Yeah, yeah. You find me when you change your mind.”

Izzy jumped at the sudden sting of Brax’s big palm connecting with his ass cheek. He bit back another groan, his cock much more interested in Brax’s brand of fun than it had been a few moments ago. But no. He was in the mood for something new. He planted a hand in Brax’s face and gave a playful shove, then turned to scan the crowd.

He’d lost track of the other guy, not even sure what he’d looked like. Oh well. There

were plenty of eager eyes on him. There always were. It wouldn't be hard to find a replacement.

But first, another drink. He made his way to the bar, ignoring the hands that trailed over his skin as he slipped between dancers. He flashed a smirk at a shirtless guy with cut abs. Another, forward enough to reach out and grope his ass, got a wink and a too-firm pat on the cheek. He'd see if either of them cared enough to make a real move. In the meantime...

He bellied up to the bar and waved at Hunter.

Hunter eyed him, his forehead creasing.

Izzy did his best to look alert. The last thing he wanted was for Hunter to put his Daddy-pants on. He batted his lashes and bit his lip at the older man. Hunter shook his head, but he was smiling. When he turned to pour Izzy a new drink, Izzy grinned in triumph.

A little elf slipped into the space next to him. "Izzy, where were you?" Eli whined, drawing out the last word. He snuggled in, his arms tightening around Izzy's waist, his cheek resting against Izzy's sternum. Izzy patted the top of his bright blond head.

"Getting laid," he replied. Then he squinted. "I think."

Eli frowned up at him. His friend was a worrywart. A tiny, elfin worrywart. Izzy ducked down and blew a raspberry against his cheek. Eli's startled shout dissolved into laughter as he struggled to get away. "Ew! Stop it, you asshole!" He smacked at the parts of Izzy he could reach. "Oh my god, I hate you."

Tiny, lying , elfin worrywart. Izzy did it again, because he could.

Eli hadn't been around long, but he'd become one of Izzy's closest friends. He was also the only one partying with him tonight. Everyone else had stayed at the ranch. An easy decision for Micah when he had two smoking-hot guys to fuck him into the new year. Finn, too—his new man was mouthwatering. And the size of him? Oof. It was shocking the boy could walk straight after all six-foot-five of Xavier was done with him. Izzy could admit to being a little jealous. It was hard enough to find a guy bigger than him without the shorties cutting into the inventory. Not that Izzy was looking for anything permanent, while Xavier clearly was.

Of the singles left in their group, Archer was boring and had chosen to drive his sister home, and Keegan... Hell no. Izzy would rather get a venereal disease than ask that arrogant asshole to celebrate with him.

Luckily, Eli could always be counted on, if only because his partner-slash-Daddy owned the bar. If he wasn't perched on a barstool watching Hunter work, he was typically right upstairs in their apartment and only a text away.

"Love you too, honeybunch," he replied, kissing a still-squirming Eli on the forehead before releasing him.

Hunter slid Izzy his drink. Sex on the Beach. His favorite. Except, not really, because whoever thought sand in your asshole was sexy had clearly never tried it. Technically, Izzy hadn't either, but he was perfectly happy to learn from Micah's honeymoon-related experience.

He'd only taken a sip before a vaguely familiar guy appeared in front of them, holding out shot glasses filled to the brim with amber-colored liquid. Izzy accepted one without questioning the offer. Eli checked with Hunter like a good boy before doing the same. Approval given by bartender-Daddy, Izzy toasted the new arrival and downed the shot, noting the smooth burn of the whiskey. New-guy had paid for the good stuff.

Or maybe Izzy was just that drunk.

Izzy handed the glass back, fingers lingering on the guy's skin. He was nice enough to look at. Older than Izzy, with gray at his temples. No beard. That was a shame. Izzy loved the rasp of coarse hair between his cheeks. New-guy had the kinds of muscles that came from hours in the gym—which, in Izzy's experience, were adequate when it came to fucking someone into a mattress. The cocky gleam in his eyes was what sold Izzy in the end. He leaned closer.

“Bed or bathroom?”

The guy blinked, processing. Then his lips curled up, and his gaze dragged over Izzy in a slow leer. “I think I'll want to take my time with you, pretty boy.”

“And I think that can be arranged.” Izzy put on his sexiest smile and stepped toward the guy—he should probably ask his name, not that he'd remember it—but a small hand gripping his elbow stopped him.

Eli. He looked down at his friend and got an exasperated eye roll in return. “You know the rules.”

Izzy sighed and held out his hand to his future hookup. “Wallet.”

Hookup blinked but fished a beat-up leather billfold out of his back pocket. Izzy took it and handed it over his shoulder to Hunter, who was waiting behind him at the bar.

Hunter flipped it open and pulled out the driver's license, checked the photo against the guy's face, then handed the wallet back. “We open at noon. You can pick it up then.”

Hookup's eyebrows lifted and he looked like he was about to argue, so Izzy slid

forward into his space, draping his arms over the guy's shoulders. It didn't take much more than the press of his hip against the guy's hard cock to redirect his attention. "Fine," the guy agreed, hand landing on Izzy's ass and squeezing. "Worth it," he murmured into Izzy's ear once he'd had a feel.

Izzy grinned, drained his cocktail, and set the empty glass on the bar. He threw Eli a wink over his shoulder as he was manhandled toward the exit. Perfect start to the new year.

Izzy hunched his shoulders against the wind and clutched his paper cup of shitty coffee closer. The warmth soaked into his palms but barely put a dent in the bite of the January mountain air. It was supposed to snow again later. He took a cautious sip of his drink and grimaced. Ugh. This motel had the worst free coffee in town. The place a block over was a thousand times better, though the room rate was considerably higher. His hookup hadn't splurged on accommodations.

Another gust of wind blew a swirl of dry, powdery snow off the roof of a nearby car. Izzy tugged the collar of his coat up higher and checked his phone again. Two percent. He'd have to plug it in as soon as he got home. Or maybe he could borrow Archer's charger—if Archer showed up before Izzy froze to death.

He blew out a breath and replied to Eli's check-in text with a thumbs-up, an eggplant, and a string of water droplet emojis.

Not that the sex had been that great. The guy—Mark, maybe? Or Mike? Whatever. He'd been just as wasted as Izzy, and his performance had suffered. It happened. It just meant Izzy had had to work harder than expected to get what he wanted. Four out of ten. Would probably do him again in a pinch, but most likely, he would give NYE-guy a pass.

It took Izzy a minute to realize the approaching thrum was an engine and not the

lingering tinnitus or the throbbing of his brain against the inside of his skull. Fucking champagne.

Tires crunched against the gravel as Archer drove into the lot. His pickup was almost as old as he was and it showed, but Archer wasn't interested in replacing it. He didn't see the point in throwing something away just because it was old and not as pretty as it used to be—not that Izzy could remember a time when it had been pretty. It still got him where he needed to go. Izzy tried not to judge. Gift horses and all that.

Archer pulled to a stop, and Izzy hurried forward, pushed by another gust of wind. When he opened the door, Alice had already slid into the middle seat. Izzy climbed in next to her, making sure to leave some space between them. Alice wasn't a fan of being touched most of the time.

“Thanks,” he said, shutting the door against the cold and sinking into the worn vinyl with a sigh.

Archer still reached out and flicked the heat higher. “Morning,” he replied, easily. “Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year,” Alice parroted.

Izzy lifted his coffee in salute to the twins, then took another sip. Still gross, but worth it. His headache was starting to fade.

“Did your fuck buddy kick you out?” Alice asked without looking up from her phone. She was scrolling an app he didn't recognize.

After a moment of mental gymnastics that he wasn't awake enough for, he realized she was asking why he'd been standing outside. “Nah,” he replied. “Just wasn't in the mood for small talk.”

Alice nodded. She got it. She wasn't a fan of small talk either, though for different reasons than Izzy's.

As they turned onto Main Street, Archer reached behind the seats and came back with a thermos that had seen better days. Izzy couldn't help the sound that left his throat. He rolled down the window to dump the crap coffee, then accepted the thermos. "You are my goddamn hero, Arch," he said, groaning in pleasure as he refilled his paper cup with the dark, rich, life-saving nectar. Archer might not splurge often, but when it came to coffee, he got the good stuff.

Archer chuckled. "Figured you'd need it." He returned the thermos to its hiding place, then draped his free hand along the back of the seat. Archer was every bit the classic cowboy in his heavy, wool-collared jacket, Wranglers, and boots. Alice was dressed much the same, though instead of cowboy boots, she had on rubber muck boots and had forgone her typical hat for a wool one that she had pulled down over her ears. Every once in a while, Izzy was struck by how good-looking the twins were. Aesthetics weren't something that usually escaped him—especially when it came to men—but Archer and Alice were different. For one thing, neither of them had ever hinted at being interested in him that way, and for another, they were his friends first. Izzy didn't fuck where he lived...or something like that.

The rest of the ride to the ranch was quiet as they all finished waking up after the late night. Izzy appreciated that. And the lack of judgment. Morning pickups had become routine the last few years. Izzy never drove himself when he went out—there was no point when he knew he wouldn't be able to drive home. So he'd call Archer first thing, and the twins would swing by his bed-of-the-night on their way to work. Izzy thanked them by paying for gas and buying the drinks when Archer made it to the bar. It worked for Izzy, and Archer hadn't complained yet.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, reminding him he needed to charge it. He pulled it out and snagged the cable dangling from the cigarette lighter. He wondered if kids

these days even knew what the original purpose of those sockets was. Kids these days. Izzy amused himself sometimes. He was twenty-eight, for fuck's sake. How old were these kids?

As the phone came off battery-saver mode, it started to vibrate with notifications. Social media was alive and well this new year's morning. Most of them were probably the standard, repetitive "Happy New Year" posts. He ignored those for now and opened his email instead.

Spam. Spam. Spam. Ads. Ads. Ads. A holiday newsletter from his parents. A calendar reminder to schedule his three-month blood screening—because he might fuck around a lot, but he wasn't interested in the finding out.

Izzy paused, about to delete an email from an unfamiliar sender, when the preview text caught his eye, three words jumping out at him.

Joshua Martin and interview .

He closed the app, unplugged his phone, and stuck it back in his pocket. He hadn't had enough coffee for that shit. Honestly, there wasn't enough caffeine in the state to make him willing to think about Josh Martin. The fucker could rot in hell.

A rushing sound filled his ears, and his lungs locked up, his chest squeezing tight. No. No , he wasn't doing this now.

He took a gulp of scalding-hot coffee and coughed, his eyes tearing as it seared the roof of his mouth and burned a line down his throat. He did it again. Ow. Fuck. He needed to focus on something else. A distraction before the black hole in his brain opened up and sucked him in.

"Can you believe Hunter's still policing my hookups?" he asked, latching on to the

first thought he could grasp. “How many times do I need to tell him I don’t need a fucking Daddy?”

Archer snorted. “What makes you think I disagree with him?”

Izzy’s hackles went up, because fuck that. “Fuck you. I can handle myself.”

Archer shook his head. “You hope.”

Annoyance coursed through Izzy, and he grabbed on to it, letting it help to push the panic away. What the hell, Archer? Yeah, he hooked up with randoms, but he knew what he could handle and what he couldn’t. And at six-foot-three and two hundred pounds of solid muscle, he was more than capable of stopping someone if he wasn’t into what they were doing.

“You make everyone worry,” Alice piped up from beside him.

Izzy glowered at the side of her head, and the only reason he didn’t bite back was because it was Alice. He may be an asshole, but he wasn’t that much of an asshole.

He slumped with a huff. His friends didn’t trust him. Fine. Fantastic, even. He wasn’t going to change his lifestyle just for them. He was happy the way things were. He glared out the window and drank his coffee. “Whatever.”

Eventually, they arrived. Archer turned up the driveway to the ranch, the truck bumping over the icy grooves in the gravel. The fields were stark white in the early morning light, the snow from earlier in the week still mostly undisturbed. It was pretty—right up until it became a disgusting, slushy mess near the barn. Alice had the right idea with muck boots.

Archer parked the truck next to Izzy’s little-used Jeep. “Thanks for the ride,” Izzy

mumbled, hopping out. “Be down in a few.” He slipped between the big rolling doors at the end of the aisle and jogged through the semi-darkness until he reached the stairs to his hayloft apartment. A couple of the horses nickered at him sleepily, but they would have to wait a few more minutes for breakfast.

The loft hadn’t always been his. When he first arrived at Split Rock, six years ago, Ryan, the ranch manager, had lived there. Once he’d married Micah, the two of them had moved up to the farmhouse, and Maggie, who owned the place, moved in to the single-level cottage out back. At the time, Izzy had been renting a room from a guy in town, and he was happy to give it up in exchange for his own space and a shorter commute. Well—it was shorter when he slept in his own bed.

The barn cats, Pumpkin and Peppermint, were waiting at the top of the stairs when he returned, dressed in his winter work gear. They attempted to murder him on the way down, weaving between his boots. Fuzzy little assholes. Long practice and good balance were the only reason they didn’t succeed. “You know,” he told them, “I’m not the only one who can feed you.” Peppermint jumped up on the stack of hay bales next to the feed room door and yowled at him by way of a reply. Fine. He was just gonna pretend it was because he was their favorite—and not because he was here first.

The barn was awake now, horses calling out as Alice made her way along the aisle with the giant wheelbarrow of grain. Izzy breathed in the warm, hay-and-horse-scented air, letting the familiarity soothe the lingering twist of anxiety—and his lingering hangover. Archer would be outside still, breaking up any ice that had formed on the water troughs overnight, and checking to make sure everything was in place for turnout later. He liked to get the cold stuff done before coming in to warm up. Alice would feed these guys, then head to the smaller barn to check on her crew of broodmares.

Izzy paused to greet a few of his favorites. Sadie leaned into the forehead scratches

for a moment before returning to her breakfast. Izzy grabbed his gloves and got to work on the hay, slicing open twine on a bale and tossing flakes up over the doors of the nearby stalls. He fell into an easy rhythm. The coffee was doing its job, and he felt a little more human. He should drink some water too at some point. Otherwise, Micah would bitch at him.

Coffee was mostly water. Izzy didn't see the problem.

The barn doors slid open again, letting in another rush of cold air and three more bodies. Speak of the devil. He took in the lazy, well-fucked grin on Micah's face and Ryan's amused expression. "Morning, Iz. Morning, Allie," Micah called as he and Ryan kicked their boots against the wall, knocking the snow free, while Ryan's dog Milo bounded over to crash into Izzy in an exuberant, tail-wagging greeting. He stayed long enough for Izzy to pat his snow-dusted side before he ran past Ryan into the office. "We missed you at midnight," Micah said. He paused to give Lex, his paint gelding, a treat and a kiss on the nose, then made his way over to fling his arms around Izzy's neck and hug him, his grip tight, even through their thick coats.

"Yeah, well, invite more appealing cock next time, and maybe I'll stick around," Izzy teased, hugging back and lifting Micah off his feet in the process. It was nice having a friend who was just as tactile as Izzy was.

Micah smacked him on the shoulder until Izzy put him down, then pulled away. "Or you could take a night off, tomcat."

Izzy snorted. "If I did that, you'd call a doctor." He gave Micah a shove, making him stumble and laugh.

"And it would be warranted."

They got to work cleaning stalls as the world brightened and the air warmed. It

wasn't going to get above freezing, but the low thirties felt balmy after a morning in the single digits.

A few hours later, Nick—Micah and Ryan's boyfriend—arrived bearing pastries and more coffee. He had the day off—lucky bastard. City hall, where he worked as the town manager, was closed for the holiday. Micah rewarded him for the treats with a kiss that got a little too hot and heavy for ten a.m. Show-offs.

Izzy wolf-whistled, just to see Micah blush—something that was getting harder to accomplish. Then he took a large bite of his raspberry Danish and couldn't hold back a groan. "Fuck me, that's good," he said to no one in particular. "Does settling down mean getting these delivered every morning? 'Cause I might consider it."

Nick's cough sounded like "Bullshit."

Izzy smirked in reply. Valid. Everyone knew he'd never go that route.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am

Dr. Keegan Reid hated people.

All right. That wasn't fair. He didn't hate people; he just wasn't generally impressed by them. He had friends he willingly spent time with. Ryan, for example, who'd been his best friend since they met in boarding school when they were fourteen. They didn't spend as much time together as they used to due to their busy schedules—Keegan with his practice, and Ryan with the ranch and his two partners—but they managed to meet up at least a few times a month at Hunter's. Hunter, owner of the Lookout, probably counted as the third in their friendship. When they went out, it was usually Keegan, Ryan, and Hunter, even if Hunter was on the other side of the bar. Chris, a transplant who owned an apartment building in town, was a more recent addition to their circle, but Keegan supposed he counted. He enjoyed Chris's unflappable demeanor. Even Nick, Ryan's boyfriend, was growing on him. See? Friends. Plural.

But “friends” and “people” weren't the same, and he'd learned over the years that people never lived up to his expectations. And, despite what Ryan claimed, those expectations were low.

Situations like this reminded him there was still further to fall.

He picked his way across what may have been a living room at some point, before the human who lived there decided to turn it into a landfill. Actually, Keegan had been to landfills that smelled better than this. At least two of the volunteers hadn't even made it through the front door. Keegan had a mask and was careful to breathe through his mouth, but he was still convinced he could taste the decay.

George was in the next room, crouched beside the matted pile of fur that was Keegan's target. She stroked the small dog's head, murmuring to it as Keegan joined her. "If the bastard weren't already in jail, I'd be sending him somewhere else entirely," she said, her deep voice soothing. Keegan wasn't sure if she was talking to him or the dog.

"Agreed," he said anyway as he set down his kit on top of a cardboard box that wasn't disintegrating as quickly as the things around it. The dog—he couldn't tell the breed with how dirty and matted it was—looked up at him through crusty brown eyes. Its weakly thumping tail made Keegan want to join the murder spree. How much of a piece of shit would someone need to be to allow this to happen to a living creature?

After a quick exam, besides having sores from the mats in its fur and some malnutrition, the dog didn't appear to have any obvious injuries. Keegan would still look it over again after they got it cleaned up back at the clinic. "Any others that need immediate attention?"

George sighed. "All of them? But most can wait until we get them out of here, clean, and fed."

A neighbor had called the police after realizing she hadn't seen anyone around the run-down house in days. It turned out the owner had been arrested and hadn't bothered to mention he had animals at home. The police, in turn, had called George's rescue. The situation was horrific, but sadly not the worst Keegan had seen in the two years he'd been volunteering his services.

The little dog was half starved and badly dehydrated but stable enough to move. They had already pulled three dogs from the property and would be trapping cats for who knew how long. At least the cats were in better shape than the dogs. They'd been able to get in and out of the house through a broken window and were self-sufficient

enough, even in winter, to keep themselves fed. There were illnesses and infections to deal with, but hopefully everyone would recover.

“Georgie!” a panicked voice shouted from the front of the house.

George’s eyes closed, and she drew in a steadying breath. “In here, Ben,” she called back.

“We need Dr. Reid. We— There are three— We found horses.”

George’s lips pinched together, and she met Keegan’s eyes, her own dark and damp with emotion. He nodded to the little dog. “You’ve got this one?”

She waved him off, so he stood and made his way back out of the deathtrap of a house, hoping he hadn’t caught some mold-borne disease while he was in there. He pulled off his mask as soon as he reached fresh air.

Ben, a young man with sandy blond hair and big, sad eyes, was waiting, wringing his gloved hands together and shifting from foot to foot. It was his first rescue, and the impact of the widespread suffering was showing. “They’re this way. No one realized the shed had stalls until we followed one of the cats in there,” he said, his words tripping over each other. “It’s dark and filthy, and they had water, but I don’t think there’s been any food in a long time.” His voice broke, and he lifted an arm to scrub his sleeve across his eyes.

Keegan picked up the pace as Ben led him to a structure that could only loosely be called a shed. It looked like one wrong move would bring the whole thing down. When they reached the doors, the stench of ammonia almost knocked him back a step. This was going to be bad.

He fucking hated people.

He didn't see the horses right away in the dim light, but as his eyes adjusted, his stomach twisted.

There were four stalls, two on each side of the aisle. He approached the first, steeling himself for what he was about to see. The horse was all the way at the back, its nose in the corner. The ammonia was so strong here that Keegan's eyes started to water. The state of the stalls told him they hadn't been cleaned since long before the horse's owner had been locked up. The mare was grossly underweight, her ribs and hip bones visible beneath her dull coat. He'd class her at a two on the Henneke scale. The scale—which measured a horse's body condition—went to nine, with anything below four considered underweight.

It took effort to force open the bolt on the stall door. When it finally gave way, he was able to force the broken hinges open. The mare's ears went back at the sound, and she shifted farther into the dark corner of the stall. "Do you have anything we can tempt her with?" Keegan asked Ben, keeping his voice calm and soothing.

"Uh," Ben mumbled, patting his pockets. "I think George has some mints in the truck."

Keegan gave him a nod, and the boy hurried off. While he was gone, Keegan shut the first door again and checked the rest. He found a second horse in one and a pony, who was in slightly better condition than the first horse, in the last.

Ben returned, and Keegan raised an eyebrow at the box of Tic Tacs. Ben's cheeks went pink in the dim light, and he shrugged. "Georgie says she called for a horse trailer. It should be about an hour."

Keegan nodded his understanding. "See if you can find halters for them—or even some rope that we can fashion into one. I want them out of this deathtrap and in the light so I can see them better." He gave the box of Tic Tacs a shake, tipping a few

candies into his palm.

The mare's ears flicked. Then her head came up, and she made her careful way across the filthy stall, nostrils flaring as she scented the air. The tightness in Keegan's gut relaxed a notch. Interest was a good sign.

The mare stretched out her neck, and Keegan gave her a few mints, wishing he had something more substantial to offer. Not that any of these horses would be able to eat full meals for a while. They would need to be refed carefully to avoid any of the dozen issues reintroducing nutrition too quickly could cause.

He ran his hand down her neck. Poor thing. She was skin and bones, her coat rough and filled with matted clumps. His breath hissed through his teeth when he caught sight of her hooves. There was no telling when any of the horses had last seen a farrier. Her hooves were so overgrown that the toes were curled back on themselves the way a person's fingernails would if they didn't trim them. Fuck. He hoped she'd be able to walk out of there under her own power.

"Keegan?" George asked as she stepped into the shed.

"In here," he told her.

She walked over but kept a respectful distance. "I sent the other animals to Josie's." Josie was another vet they worked with often. She would be able to take on the smaller animals while Keegan focused on the horses since they were his specialty. "Four dogs. Thirteen cats, so far. And a fucking African Grey parrot." She shook her head. "I don't know what the hell I'm going to do with that one."

Keegan heaved a quiet sigh. How had this asshole gotten his hands on a parrot? And how was it still alive? African Greys were notoriously difficult to care for. "I have a friend from vet school who specializes in exotic birds. I'll text you her number." He

scratched the mare's neck, and she shifted her weight closer. "How far out is the trailer?"

"About forty minutes," George said as she stepped toward the stall door. The mare's ears flicked again, and George held out her hand for inspection before stroking the poor girl's nose as she leaned into the touch. George had an energy animals gravitated toward. It was a big part of what made her so good at what she did.

George looked around the filthy stall, the long day showing on her face and audible in her voice. "Every time, I ask myself how someone could let this happen." She ran her fingers through the mare's forelock in a fruitless attempt to fix the tangled hair. "It doesn't get easier."

Keegan gave her shoulder a squeeze. There was a delicate balance when you were rescuing abused animals. You had empathy for them, of course, but you couldn't let yourself get too invested. You'd burn out because the job was never over. George was good at separating herself most of the time, but the bad ones hit everyone hard.

"We're going to need to find space for the horses. Hopefully with someone who knows something about what they're going to need."

Keegan nodded, having already figured that out. "I'll give the Averys a call. See how Ryan feels about being a foster dad."

An hour later, and with the help of four other volunteers, they had all three horses loaded up on the trailer—including the pony, who, despite her poor condition, had plenty of fight left in her. Ryan had a farrier meeting them at the ranch to start working on their feet the minute they reached their temporary home.

For the next two weeks, they would be in quarantine stalls to make sure they weren't carrying any diseases. The isolation would also give Keegan a chance to stabilize

them, tend to any injuries, and start getting weight back on them.

The drive back to Split Rock felt longer than the trip out had been. Keegan followed the trailer in his truck and held his breath over every bump, hoping no one would go down along the way. Thankfully, they made it to the ranch with all three horses still on their feet.

When they pulled to a stop in front of the big cream-colored barn, Ryan was waiting outside, seemingly impervious to the icy wind, his husband at his side. Micah's heart was in his sad brown eyes, and Keegan felt a twinge of regret for bringing the horses here and putting that look on Micah's face, but he knew this was the best place they could be. Micah proved him right when he gave Keegan a wobbly smile and a tight hug, then got to work helping George and Ben unload.

Keegan stood next to his best friend, relieved when Ryan got straight to business. He didn't have the energy for pleasantries. "The farrier's set up, and the quarantine stalls are almost ready. Anything specific they need right now?"

"Which farrier did you call? They don't seem to have been handled much. The pony, in particular. It's gonna be a rough one."

The corner of Ryan's mouth tipped up. "Mason."

Keegan let go of some of his tension. Mason was a grumpy old bastard, but there wasn't a better farrier in a hundred miles. He was about to ask Ryan what supplies they had on hand when he was distracted by the tall young man strolling out of the barn.

Izzy King moved like he owned the place, his long legs eating up the distance to where Keegan and Ryan were standing. He stopped on the far side of Ryan, his hands tucked into his coat pockets as he tossed his blond curls out of his face and gave the

activity around them a condescending side-eye.

The mare scrambled as she stepped down off the trailer, her overlong hooves making it difficult for her to find her balance on the gravel. Keegan tensed, but she steadied herself, her head lifting and her nostrils flaring as she took in her new surroundings.

“Are the stalls ready?” Ryan asked, somehow ignoring the scowl on Izzy’s face.

“All good,” Izzy replied, his distaste clear as he took in the state of the horses. “These poor guys look half dead,” he said bluntly. “What are their chances of recovery?”

Keegan had to force his jaw to relax before he broke a molar from how hard he was clenching his teeth. Izzy wasn’t wrong, but the blunt statement made Keegan’s protective instincts flare. “Better than they would be if no one tried,” he snapped.

Izzy’s shoulders went tight. “Right,” he snarked back. “’Cause that’s exactly what I was implying.” He rolled his eyes and turned back to Ryan. “You can’t assign them to Alice. She won’t be able to handle it if they don’t make it.”

Ryan nodded, his eyes not leaving the trailer as Ben unloaded the gelding. “Wasn’t planning to.”

“Micah either,” Izzy continued. “He’ll get way too attached.” Izzy pulled his hands from his pockets and crossed his arms over his chest, shoulders hunched. “Archer’ll probably be fine. He’s practical like that.”

“They’re your responsibility,” Ryan replied, voice mild. “Under Keegan’s supervision.”

Izzy’s head snapped around to stare at Ryan. “What?” he asked, voice jumping up an octave. He shot Keegan a glare, as if this was his fault, then turned that glare on

Ryan. “The fuck, boss?”

Keegan’s reaction was similar, though he refrained from voicing it. Izzy was the last person he expected Ryan to assign to the task. Not because Izzy wasn’t capable—he had plenty of experience—but because Ryan knew he and Keegan would be at each other’s throats. Their distaste for each other wasn’t new.

Ryan didn’t so much as twitch at Izzy’s outburst. “Alice will take over some of your usual tasks to make up for it,” he continued, as if Izzy hadn’t spoken.

“Why can’t Archer—”

“Because he’s busy,” Ryan said, losing some of his calm detachment. “We’ve got twenty horses that need exercise this winter, and you’re the only one who doesn’t help with that.”

Izzy’s mouth clicked shut. He looked away, his lips pressed into a tight line. That had to sting. It was an open secret that Izzy had been an Olympic-bound eventer, once upon a time. After a bad fall, he’d sold his horse and walked away from the sport. These days, though he was recovered, Izzy acted like he barely knew a Western saddle from an English one. And for reasons Keegan couldn’t understand, no one at the ranch questioned the blatant lie. The whole thing rubbed Keegan wrong—particularly when Ryan had to scramble or overschedule himself to accommodate the best horseman on his staff refusing to suck it up and get back in the saddle.

“Fine,” Izzy grated, looking like he’d smelled something rancid. “This is gonna be stellar.” He gave Ryan a scathing look that somehow included Keegan. Then he spun on his heel and stomped back into the barn, the back of his neck red—probably with anger—despite the cold.

Keegan turned to Ryan with an eyebrow lifted.

Ryan pulled off his hat, ran a gloved hand through his hair, and sighed. “Don’t say it.”

Keegan didn’t have to. Ryan was well aware of his opinions when it came to Izzy King.

“Look, you need the help, and he needs a project. Just try not to kill each other.” Ryan paused, looking in the direction Izzy had disappeared. “Or cause permanent damage.”

As if Keegan had any control over that. Izzy was the one Ryan should be warning off. “I’m going to check in with Mason,” he replied instead of acknowledging Ryan’s request. “Find out where we’re at.” He would play nice for now. But if Izzy insisted on bringing his bad attitude to work, Keegan was more than capable of giving as good as he got.

After seeing George and Ben off, and promising to keep George updated, Keegan made his way to the section of the barn they used for quarantine. He could hear Mason ranting before he rounded the corner, and he hurried his pace, sure Izzy had already pissed him off. Instead, he found the old man hunched over, working on the chestnut mare. Izzy was at her head, gripping the nose band of her halter and distracting her with a handful of hay. “...like to see whoever did this put through the same,” Mason was saying, his deep voice pitched calm despite the volume of his words.

“How’s she looking?” Keegan asked, slowing as he approached. It was hard to say how much handling the animals had had, and sudden movements could put them all in a dangerous situation.

“They’re a fuckin’ mess. Prolly haven’t been worked on in a year or more. They’ve got thrush—smell’s a dead giveaway—and prolly more I haven’t uncovered yet. Shocking that the pony can still walk. I want a word with the fucker who did this.”

“You aren’t alone in that,” Keegan said, his heart hurting for the poor creatures. “Shame the law got to him first. I have some thoughts to convey as well.” From the corner of his eye, he caught Izzy staring but ignored it. “How much do you think you can do today?”

Mason grumbled to himself. “Not enough.” He flicked a hand at Keegan. “Hand me the Kopertox.”

Keegan did as he was told. He and Mason had an understanding when it came to things like neglected horses. Keegan might be the vet, but Mason had decades of experience on him. Keegan turned to Izzy. “She can’t have too much of that,” he said, gesturing to the hay. “We don’t know how long it’s been since they ate, and I don’t want her to founder on top of everything else.”

Izzy’s shoulders went tight, and he narrowed his eyes at Keegan. “Thanks for the tip,” he snarked. “Because I’ve clearly never heard of refeeding syndrome.” He turned away with a huff.

Keegan rolled his eyes. Typical. He made a statement of fact, and Izzy took it as a personal insult. “Better not to assume,” he said, keeping his tone mild. The last thing he needed to add to the emotional load of the day was an argument with Split Rock’s resident brat.

“Won’t help. You’re already an ass,” Izzy muttered, loud enough that Keegan was meant to hear him. He adjusted his hold on the mare when she tossed her head in an attempt to shake him loose.

Keegan breathed deep and held on to his fraying patience with both hands. This was proving to be a fantastic start to their working relationship.

The mare's ears went flat against her skull, and her tail swished in agitation. Mason had the hoof tester out and was applying pressure to the sole of one of her back hooves.

"Careful," Keegan warned automatically.

"I know ," Izzy snapped back, deftly stepping out of the way as Mason released her foot and the mare danced sideways. "Any commentary that's not you stating the obvious?"

Keegan should have let him get bitten.

"That's abscessed," Mason stated, ignoring their sniping. "I'll drain it and pack it, but it's gonna need to be soaked daily."

That was disappointing, even though he'd expected it. Treatment would mean opening the sole of the hoof to drain, soaking it in Epsom salts once a day to pull the infection out, packing it with a poultice, and wrapping it. With any luck, it wasn't deep and would heal within a few weeks.

It was getting late, and they had identified two more abscesses—both in the pony. She was the worst off and the hardest to treat, despite her small size. Mason packed up and left, saying he'd done what he could and would be back in a couple of weeks, but to call if any of them got worse before then.

"Dammit," Izzy hissed, gripping the lead rope as the little gray monster hauled backward, kicking over the bucket her foot was supposed to be soaking in. "Little demon." She hadn't given Mason as much trouble while he'd trimmed her hooves,

but it was a different story now that she was more mobile.

Keegan held back his laughter at the sight of Izzy struggling to control a pony whose back didn't reach the top of his thigh. "Need some help?" he called from where he was doing a final check of the gelding. The big guy was underweight but otherwise in the best shape of the three.

"I've got it," Izzy bit out, not looking Keegan's way as he dodged a flash of teeth.

Sure, he did. Keegan returned the gelding to his new stall and went to assist. As soon as he got close enough, the pony kicked out with both back legs, nearly taking out Keegan's kneecaps. "Shit. "

As soon as her back feet hit the ground, her front ones left it. Keegan met Izzy's wide eyes over her head. What the hell? Had she just been biding her time up until now?

As Izzy did his best not to get trampled, Keegan went for his supplies. He hated to sedate her without knowing her history, but—as she flung herself backward again and knocked over a stack of buckets—he decided it was the safer choice.

Estimating her weight, he drew up a dose of sedative. It would take a few minutes to kick in, but it would calm her without making her too unsteady on her feet.

Izzy saw what he was doing and angled the pony against the wall, pinning her there with his weight. Keegan got the sedative injected, then helped herd her into a stall to wait for it to take effect. Izzy slumped against the door and bent forward, palms braced on his thighs, his face flushed as he caught his breath. "Damn," he said, chuckling a little. "She's gonna be a fun one."

Keegan huffed, amused despite himself. Fun was one way to put it.

Things went more smoothly the second time around. She was woozy, her eyes half lidded and her head drooping, but she was otherwise agreeable. After a twenty-minute soak, Keegan got her hooves packed and wrapped, while Izzy kept her still. Working on a horse so small was awkward with all the bending and crouching, and his back and knees ached by the time he was done. Welcome to forty.

With all three horses in their stalls and fed the limited amount Keegan felt safe giving them, he collected his gear. He would have to restock a few things before he came back. “They’ll need to be fed again around two a.m.,” he reminded Izzy as he made one last check that he had everything.

He caught the face Izzy made out of the corner of his eye.

“Is that going to be a problem?”

Izzy gave a lazy shrug and stuck his hands in his pockets. “What if I have...” He paused, then drawled, “Plans?”

Plans. As if Keegan didn’t know what Izzy spent his nights doing. Hell, most of the town probably knew. Izzy wasn’t subtle with his fuckboy antics.

It had been a long day, and Keegan’s patience had been tenuous for too long. “Cancel them,” he said, flatly. “I’m sure your...friends will survive without you for a few nights.”

Izzy’s eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared, but he didn’t miss a beat. “And waste a freshly waxed asshole?” he asked, laying on the drama. “But then, I guess you wouldn’t understand since rumor has it the only assholes in your bed have four legs and a tail.”

Izzy was probably looking for a dramatic reaction, but instead, Keegan snorted with

amusement. “If that was an offer, I’m going to have to pass. You and your waxed asshole are on your own tonight.”

Izzy’s face did something complicated before he schooled it into a mocking half smile. “Trust me, if an offer were on the table, there wouldn’t be any confusion.”

Keegan rolled his eyes. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“No need,” Izzy threw back. “I’d pay someone before I let you anywhere near my ass.”

Keegan barked out a laugh. “As if anyone would take your money.”

Izzy sucked in a breath.

It took a moment for Keegan to register how that had sounded. Great. He shut his eyes and scrubbed his face. “I’m too tired for this,” he muttered. “Why do you have to take everything I say in the worst way possible?”

“Is there some other way I was supposed to take it?” Outrage was thick in Izzy’s voice, but Keegan thought he could detect hurt under it.

“How about as a compliment?” Keegan asked. “All I meant was that guys who look like you don’t pay for sex.”

Izzy was eyeing him like he’d grown a second head. “So, what? We’re stereotyping sex workers and their clients now?”

Keegan wanted to bang his head against the wall. “It was a fucking joke, Izzy. Just forget it.” He picked up his bag and headed for his truck. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“What?” Izzy yelped, his voice cracking. “Tomorrow? Why?”

Keegan stopped, even though he really wanted to ignore the question, get in his car, and drive home to his dogs—who, to be fair, had probably taken over his bed while he was gone. “Do you want to deal with that little demon without sedatives?”

Izzy swore.

Yeah. That’s what Keegan thought. He could only hope the pony healed fast, because if it went on too long—no matter what Ryan wanted—neither he nor Izzy were going to come out of it unscathed.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am

Judgmental prick.

Four days caring for the rescues, and Izzy was one sideways look away from breaking shit. Starting with Keegan Reid's perfect, stubbled jawline.

Why did he have to be so fucking attractive? The guy checked way too many of Izzy's boxes, from his reddish-blond hair that was always tousled like he'd just rolled out of bed, to his perfect stubble and muscular neck. His broad chest. Trim waist. Big...hands. Fuck . Okay. So Izzy had maybe, accidentally, checked out his package. It was habit. That wasn't the point. The point was, looking at him was bad for Izzy's mental health.

He was blaming sexual frustration for any errant thoughts. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gone this long without some kind of human contact. It wasn't even about sex at this point, just someone's appreciative hands on his skin while they danced, or an arm wrapped tight around him at the bar. Izzy thrived on touch. It was his love language, same as Micah, which was part of why they got along so well.

Maybe he could convince Micah to go out with him later. If Ryan or Nick drove them, Izzy could wrangle a quick bathroom hookup and still have a ride home to feed the rescues before bed.

Problem-solving. He was good at it when he needed to be. And after more than half a week of solitude, he needed to be.

Screw you and your judgment, Keegan Reid.

Izzy was doing his best to tune out the low, soothing murmur of Keegan's voice as he spoke to the rescue mare, whom Izzy had named Violet. She was moving better already, her abscess starting to clear up and her spirits higher now that she was getting what she needed.

He had to wonder what the rescues had been through before Keegan found them. Klaus, the big gelding, was calm and unbothered most of the time, and Izzy had secretly draped a saddle across his back and gotten no reaction. It was safe to say he had been at least semi-trained once upon a time.

Violet was a bitch, but in the way a lot of mares were. She pinned her ears and tossed her head, but once Izzy got ahold of her, she calmed down and followed directions for the most part.

Then, there was Sunny, aka Demon Pony.

Keegan set up the low bucket of Epsom salt-water while Izzy retrieved her from the stall. They had tried a soaking bag—the kind that Velcroed around her lower leg—the second day, but Sunny lost her shit and Keegan almost lost his head getting it off her again. Now they were back to buckets and sedatives.

Keegan had given her a little less today to see how it went.

Izzy had to dodge teeth when he snapped on the lead rope, so he wasn't holding out hope.

“Would you rather get kicked today or bitten?” he asked Keegan as he led Sunny from the stall—well, he tried to lead her. She still didn't care for the lead rope, so it was more like herding her in the direction he wanted and trying not to get stepped on by her sharp little feet.

He scowled when Keegan rolled his eyes. So, maybe his tone had been sarcastic, but it was an honest question. Someone needed to hold up her opposite leg while her abscessed one soaked, which would put them perilously close to danger. On the other hand, the person holding her head was at risk of snapping teeth.

Keegan elected to take her head. Five minutes into holding Sunny's leg off the ground, Izzy regretted the offer. His thigh was killing him.

The old injury didn't bother him all the time, but there were certain positions that, if he held them long enough, set off the nerve damage. Izzy's femur was fixed together by a rod, screws, and scar tissue. Breaking your thighbone was a zero out of ten. It was worse in the winter when he swore all the metal soaked up the cold. He wasn't going to let it stop him from doing his job, though. Keegan already thought he was a fuckup—no need to add evidence to that.

"That's twenty," Keegan said, startling Izzy out of the daze he'd fallen into. His voice startled Sunny too, and she flicked her tail, the long strands stinging Izzy's cheek. He flinched back, then had to bite down on a hiss as the pain intensified. Goddammit.

When he managed to get himself to his feet, Keegan was giving him a distinctly unimpressed look.

Izzy tensed. "What?" he asked, trying not to limp as he collected the bandages and poultice.

"If it bothers your leg, you should have said something."

Izzy's skin heated. "I'm fine. It's no big—" He cut himself off at Keegan's raised eyebrow. Ugh. Whatever. He slumped back against the wall and tried to ignore the way the throb was sharpening. Keegan wasn't wrong. Izzy was a fucking idiot. He couldn't remember the last time it had cramped up like this. No, wait. He did. Shower

sex was a hard limit now.

He dug his palm into the spasming muscle, but he couldn't get enough leverage to do any good. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to breathe through it.

“ Isaac. ”

He jumped at his given name, coming from much too close and with a sharpness that told him Keegan had said it more than once. “What?” he snapped back, forcing his eyes open.

The pony was gone, and Keegan was down on one knee in front of him, his expression unreadable. “Are you going to let me help?” he asked, like it was a foregone conclusion.

Help? How was he planning to— Oh. Keegan was trying to push Izzy's hand out of the way so he could get to the muscle. Izzy let him, and a moment later, strong fingers dug into his thigh, right where it was rebelling. Izzy gasped as agony shot down his leg and up into his hip, then groaned as the steady pressure made his head swim and his eyes water. “Fuuuck.” His head fell back against the stall behind him, too heavy to hold up.

He caught the quiet snort Keegan let out and lifted a hand to flip him off. “Shut up,” he said, the words coming out breathless. He didn't care what he sounded like, as long as Keegan kept doing what he was doing. It fucking hurt, but it was fading into the kind of pain that could be mistaken for other things. Things that made his dick hard. “Don't get any ideas down there,” he grumbled as an afterthought, not sure if he was talking to Keegan or to his cock.

Keegan chuckled, and Izzy shut his eyes again, pretending not to hear him.

When the muscle released, the relief made him light-headed, and he would have slid right to the concrete floor without the stall to hold him up. Keegan's hands continued to knead until Izzy was biting back sounds that he hoped he wasn't going to be mocked for later.

"Better?" Keegan murmured, his hands still wrapped loosely around Izzy's thigh, warmth soaking through the thick fabric of his jeans.

Of course his cock would choose that moment to get in on the action and give an enthusiastic twitch. Izzy's eyes shot open and locked on Keegan, who was peering up at him in question. Izzy's heart started to race. Had Keegan noticed? If he had, Izzy would never live it down.

He reined in his first instinct, which was to tell Keegan to get the hell away from him. It wasn't Keegan's fault Izzy's libido was all kinds of fucked up—even if Izzy sometimes blamed him for it. He forced out a gruff, "Yeah." Then a belated, "Thanks."

Keegan's hands were lingering, and Izzy's throat was getting tight. His hands curled into fists without his permission as he fought the urge to shove Keegan away, to put space between himself and the too-attractive vet. Goddamn fight-or-flight instincts. He wasn't in danger—not of anything more than embarrassment—but his busted nervous system wasn't cooperating.

Keegan must have read something in his expression, because his brow furrowed. He pushed himself to his feet and moved back, eyeing Izzy like he was a wild thing.

The space helped calm Izzy's racing heart, but it didn't do anything for his hard-on, which hadn't received the memo that Keegan was the last person on earth Izzy wanted to fuck.

“I’m gonna—” He cut himself off and jerked a thumb in the vague direction of his apartment. “Advil.” He needed to get away, before his flight instincts turned into fight and he lashed out at Keegan. It was one of his worst habits, but as much as he knew that rationally, he wasn’t feeling rational at the moment with adrenaline racing through his body and his cock hard and aching against his zipper.

Thank fuck Keegan just nodded and went with it. “We’re pretty much done here anyway. Go rest your leg. I’ll feed them and clean up.”

Any other time, Izzy would protest. He didn’t want to be indebted to Keegan. He didn’t want to be anything to Keegan. But he was breathing too fast, and he needed to go.

Without another word, he limped away as quickly as his leg would let him. A shower and some painkillers. That was all he needed. And maybe a stranger to fuck him into next week and drive the sensation of Keegan’s warm hands so close to where he wanted them from his stupid, fucked-up brain.

This was all such a huge pain in his ass—and not the kind he enjoyed. Izzy collapsed on his bed, the towel around his waist coming loose, his wet hair soaking the sheets, and glared at the ceiling. What the fuck was wrong with him? He lifted his head and transferred his dirty look to his dick, which refused to behave, despite getting blasted with cold water. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” Ugh. “Keegan’s a bastard and we hate him, remember?”

His dick didn’t respond. Maybe that was for the best. He’d be pretty disturbed if it started talking back.

Somewhere above him, his phone buzzed with an incoming message. He fished around until he found the cord, then dragged it closer. He had a handful of Exchange notifications, but he dismissed them. He wasn’t in the mood to sort through the

people who saw his pics but didn't read his profile. Being DMed by guys who only wanted a virtual plaything while they ignored their wives was exhausting. He ignored ten for every one he considered replying to.

At this point, he was thinking of monetizing his profile. At least he'd be getting something for his time—even if that something was jerking off for money. Nothing wrong with some extra cash, just for doing something he enjoyed.

He switched over to the paid side of the app and scrolled through until he found someone interesting to look at while he took his aching cock in hand. If the guy had messy, reddish-blond hair and big, capable hands, that was no one's business.

When he was done, he used the damp edge of the towel to clean himself up and tossed it in the direction of the laundry closet, then he flopped back with a sigh.

His phone vibrated again where he'd dropped it, startling him.

Samantha.

He cringed but unlocked it anyway. If he didn't answer, she'd just keep texting until he did. She was a bitch like that.

Samantha

Well?

Izzy wished he didn't know what she was talking about. Unfortunately, there was only one option. His stomach swooped unpleasantly.

Izzy

Well, what?

The typing dots appeared and disappeared several times as Izzy's stomach got worse and his skin started to crawl. He rolled to his side and curled around the nausea.

Samantha

Did you even read it?

Izzy

No, I didn't fucking read it. I sent it to junk where it belongs.

And he'd been trying to forget about the email ever since. He didn't even care what the contents were. Josh's name in the preview line was enough for him to block the sender. He had no interest in dredging up ancient history.

Samantha

They're putting him in the hall of fame. They want us at the ceremony.

Izzy barely made it to the bathroom before losing the contents of his stomach. He pressed his forehead to cool white porcelain and fumbled for the handle, flushing as he struggled to breathe. Fuck. Fuck.

Izzy slumped to the tile floor and threw an arm over his eyes, blocking out the world. His pulse pounded against the inside of his skull like the worst kind of hangover as he tried to force his lungs to do their job and get him some goddamn oxygen.

Somewhere in the bedroom, his phone vibrated again—and again—but fuck that. The poor choices of the US Eventing Organization weren't his problem. That wasn't his

world anymore, and he refused to be dragged back into it.

What the hell was he doing here?

Izzy turned his back on the group at the far end of the bar and drained the last of his cocktail. He was going to have words with Micah later. When Izzy invited his friend out, he knew Micah would bring at least one of his men with him. What he hadn't planned on was their third—fourth?—wheel tagging along. After basically a whole week of Keegan up his ass at work, Izzy didn't need him and his judgy stares on his night off too. His skin crawled at the imagined sensation of eyes on him. He scrubbed a hand over his arm in an attempt to make it stop.

Someone calling his name over the music jerked Izzy's attention back to the bar.

Damion, Hunter's newest bartender, gave him a wave, then finished tying on an apron. "Need a refill?" Damion asked, gesturing to Izzy's empty glass.

Damion was great. He was a few years younger than Izzy, with a pretty face and tight little body that earned him excellent tips. He joked that the real skill of his job was turning down customers who thought they had a chance and still getting his 20%.

Watching him do it was actually pretty hot. He tracked Damion's perky ass as he bounced between the front and back bars and tried to picture it swallowing his cock.

He shuddered. Nope. Still not a top. He shook off the image. It was for the best that Damion wasn't Izzy's type and vice versa. Because Izzy was in a mood, and he wasn't feeling very discerning. The last thing he needed to do was make things awkward at his safe place.

Someone familiar stepped up to the bar, and Izzy gave him an appreciative once-over. Fitted jeans and tee, designer shoes, and a watch Izzy didn't need to know the cost of.

He had artful stubble, and his highlighted-blond hair was the kind of celebrity-trendy that showed up on social media reels. Definitely not something you saw often in Split Rock, North Carolina.

Finally, Izzy placed him. Asher. Xavier's personal assistant. Izzy had met him in passing. He was around a lot now that Xavier had his home base on the farm adjacent to the ranch. And, lucky day for Izzy, he was supposed to be single.

Izzy put on a sultry smile and slid closer. "What are you having?" he asked, planting his elbow on the bar top and keeping his body language open and inviting. He waited until the other man looked over before letting his gaze trail lower.

Asher tilted his head. "Probably nothing you're into," he replied, amusement coloring his tone.

Izzy tried not to let the dismissal bother him. "Typical," he said, keeping his voice light and playful. "Hottest guy here and he isn't looking for fun."

Asher threw back his head and laughed. "You're Izzy, right? You work at the ranch?" He traded Damion his credit card for a beer, giving the boy a dazzling smile. "Start a tab for me, would you, beautiful?"

Damion's lips parted, and he blinked a few times, seemingly frozen by the smile and the endearment. So much for Damion's professional distance. He looked starstruck. Izzy chuckled, earning a glare before Damion, pink-cheeked, spun on his heel and hurried to the register.

Asher watched Damion go with a slight smile curving his lips, then turned back to Izzy, his eyebrow raised.

It took Izzy a moment to recall the question. He held out his hand, surprised by

Asher's strength when he shook it. "Guilty. And you're Asher."

"Ash," he corrected. "I'm only Asher at work."

They chatted a little, but it was clear Ash wasn't interested in more. Izzy wasn't even disappointed. As attractive as the man was, Izzy didn't get the feeling they'd be compatible between the sheets—or in a bathroom stall, as the case may be. Tonight, Izzy wanted someone to wreck him, and, while Ash had a certain vibe about it, it wasn't that one.

After Ash got his drink and strolled away again, Izzy scanned the bar for newcomers. For a Friday night, it wasn't very crowded. The recent holiday probably had something to do with that. People were still recovering from their New Year's Eve excesses. That, or some new year's resolution that would be forgotten before February, was keeping them home. Izzy didn't believe in new year's resolutions. Things like that were for people with regrets—Izzy was good with his current life choices.

He fidgeted with his cocktail straw, chewing on the plastic. A few people were dancing, but they were all partnered off and he wasn't in the mood for a threesome. He needed all the focus on him tonight. He pulled out his phone and tapped the Connections app. The "nearby friends" feature didn't offer up any options either. Just one guy he'd chatted with six months ago but wasn't all that into. His knee bounced as he finished his drink and signaled Damion for another.

Damion complied without question, thank fuck. Hunter would have given him a look at the very least and probably a reminder about their agreement. Izzy didn't think it was necessary; he was aware of his own tolerance and where the line was. The fact he chose to cross it as often as possible didn't change that.

The alcohol wasn't doing its job. Instead of making him warm and loose, he was

increasingly jittery. It was the worst feeling. Soon, his skin would start to itch. He needed to find a distraction before that happened. He pulled out his phone again and shot the Connections guy a message. Greedy hands and a pounding hard enough to replace the discomfort with a mix of pain and pleasure was his go-to solution. The app guy claimed to like things rough. Izzy hoped he was telling the truth because he fucking needed it.

The response came through, a little slower than Izzy would have liked, but at least it was an affirmative. App guy was on his way and had offered a detailed description of what he planned to do to Izzy's ass once he arrived.

"Tell me you're bored without telling me you're bored," Micah said as he appeared next to Izzy and slung an arm around his waist.

Izzy rolled his eyes but leaned into Micah's touch, some of the skin hunger settling at his friend's comforting strength. "Have you looked around? It's dead in here."

Micah did as suggested and blinked a little. He clearly hadn't noticed, too wrapped up in his sexy men to recognize the lack of options for the rest of them.

Izzy groaned. "You're so married." He ducked down and hugged Micah a little tighter.

"Yep," Micah agreed as he hugged back. "You don't have to say it like it's a curse, you know."

Izzy wrinkled his nose and rested his chin on the top of Micah's head. Micah didn't fit the way Eli did, but Izzy made it work, grateful for the reprieve the solid heat of Micah's body gave him. "Says you," Izzy replied. "I happen to like keeping my options open. Besides, my fan club would be devastated if I let someone take me off the market."

Micah turned in his arms and put his warm, callused hands on Izzy's cheeks, forcing eye contact. "Iz," Micah started, his gaze and tone serious. "Are you happy?"

Izzy blinked at him. "What kind of question is that?"

"You're with a different hookup every night. I worry. We all do."

Izzy hid the flash of hurt and gave Micah a sly smirk, removing Micah's hands from his face. "I don't think the guy who decided his husband's dick wasn't enough gets to have an opinion on my sex life." He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth, but he didn't take them back.

Micah's eyes narrowed, and his nostrils flared as he inhaled slowly, then breathed out again. "You can't distract me by acting like an asshole," he said, voice steely but calm. "I've been your friend way too long for that to work."

Izzy's next breath ached. "I'm not acting," he said, the closest he could bring himself to an apology. He was an asshole. Everyone knew that. "Yet, you still put up with me," he continued, the joke falling flat.

Micah sighed and shook his head but thankfully let it go. "Ryan commandeered a table. Come sit with us." He pointed to one of the large booths on the far side of the dance floor.

Izzy shook his head. "I'm fine." He gestured to the bar. "Damion's taking care of me, and I have a friend on the way."

It was Micah's turn to wrinkle his nose. "Dude, you're the one who invited us out, and you haven't even said hi to Nicky."

"If you wanted me around, you should have thought through your plus-one," Izzy

shot back.

Micah heaved a sigh and waved Damion down, clearly needing another drink to deal with Izzy's bullshit. "Seriously? Why are you still clinging to this grudge? I thought work went well this week."

"It's not a grudge," Izzy grumbled, annoyance flaring. "The guy just pisses me off. Your husband may have ordered me to put up with him, but that doesn't mean I have to play nice on my night off."

"I don't get you two," Micah said, almost to himself. "If I didn't know it would end in violence, I'd lock you in a room until you got it out of your systems."

Izzy ignored him. He was here to have fun. Keegan wasn't fun. He drained the last of his drink and set the glass on the bar. "Dance with me," he said, taking Micah by the shoulders and steering him toward the flashing lights and writhing bodies. With any luck, app guy would arrive soon and Izzy could put on a show.

Izzy cursed and banged his fist against the tiled bathroom wall, frustration coursing through him. His pants were around his ankles, his asshole wet with lube, and his erection still raging. The stall door slammed shut behind his almost-hookup's retreating back, and the sound of the bathroom door followed it.

"Fucker," he grumbled, dragging his jeans back up, and tucked himself away, not in the mood to take care of his hard-on after that clusterfuck. It wasn't about getting off anyway. If that was all he wanted, he could have dealt with it at home with a lot less disappointment.

The so-called "aggressive top" had been questionable from the word go. He'd insisted on buying Izzy a drink, then seemed annoyed when Izzy declined, not in the mood for chitchat when he was about to vibrate out of his skin. When they reached

the bathroom, things had improved slightly. He'd ordered Izzy to get himself ready, watching with a hungry gaze as Izzy arched his back and spread his legs, stretching himself with two fingers, then three. The dirty talk had been unoriginal, but that was easy enough to block out. In the end, it had all fallen apart when Izzy insisted on protection.

It wasn't the first time he'd had a guy call things off over condoms. It was bullshit. Sure, plenty of guys went without these days. Between PrEP and DoxyPEP, going raw didn't hold the danger it used to, but that didn't mean Izzy wanted some random's come dripping out of his ass for the rest of the night. He always used protection for anal. Always. And, depending on the guy, he avoided swallowing when it came to oral. Most hookups were fine with it—especially once he reminded them that, as good as he was at blow jobs, if they came down his throat, they wouldn't get a chance at his ass.

He scrubbed his face, the guy's parting insults still echoing inside his skull, then pushed out of the stall and ran smack into a firm body that didn't so much as shift at the collision. Izzy stumbled back, an apology on his lips before he realized who he'd run into.

Of course. Just his goddamn fucking luck.

Keegan was a solid barrier between Izzy and the exit, his stance wide and his arms folded across his chest. One arched brow lifted as he took in Izzy's flushed skin and disheveled clothes.

"What's your problem?" Izzy snapped, flustered, and angry that he was flustered. He had no reason to be embarrassed. He turned to the sink to scrub the lube off his fingers and splash water on his face.

Keegan didn't respond, but Izzy could feel the judgment rolling off him.

It made him want to scream. “Well?” he demanded, ripping a handful of paper towels from the dispenser to dry his face, ignoring the ones that drifted to the floor. “You might as well say it. I can tell you’re dying to.” He threw the paper towels in the direction of the trash. They ended up on the floor too, but whatever. He was too agitated to care. His skin was pulsing with a combination of arousal and anger, and if Keegan didn’t get out of his way, Izzy was going to do something stupid.

“You deserve better.”

Izzy flinched. That...wasn’t what he’d been bracing himself for. He blamed the alcohol for the way his eyes started to prickle; it must finally be hitting him. “Gee, thanks,” he snarked. He stormed over to the trash and grabbed the paper towels, stuffing them in the can. “I never would have realized that without your valuable insight.”

Keegan sighed. “Do you have to twist everything I say into an insult? I’m not your enemy, Isaac.”

Izzy saw red. He pushed into Keegan’s space so fast that Keegan’s back hit the exit door. With his fists twisted in Keegan’s shirt, Izzy used his height to his advantage, glaring down at him. “Stop pretending you know me,” he snarled.

Keegan’s hands were hot, tight bands around Izzy’s wrists, but he otherwise didn’t make a move to defend himself, and his expression stayed infuriatingly neutral. Izzy hated it. Izzy was burning up—the anger, frustration, and arousal making his blood race. He wanted Keegan to lose his cool too. To give Izzy something that proved he wasn’t alone in his desperation.

What buttons did he need to push to make Keegan snap?

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“Why do you think I’m pretending? It’s not like we’re strangers.”

Izzy’s nostrils flared, and a muscle in his jaw jumped as he ground his teeth. He was so close to Keegan that their chests brushed with each inhale, and Keegan could pick out all the different shades of blue and gray in his eyes. “You don’t know anything,” Izzy rasped out. Then between one breath and the next, his mouth crashed down on Keegan’s, punishingly hard.

Keegan didn’t know how to respond, and Izzy didn’t give him a chance to figure it out. He hissed as Izzy’s teeth sank into his lower lip. What the fuck? He fisted Izzy’s curls and yanked, breaking the contact—he wasn’t sure he could even call it a kiss—and dragged Izzy’s head back. “Are you drunk?” he asked. It was the only thing that made sense in his waylaid brain.

Izzy glared, panting, his lips swollen and his cheeks flushed. Before Keegan could demand an answer, Izzy sank to his knees, his furious gaze not leaving Keegan’s face.

A jerk, followed by the slap of leather, echoed off the tiles, and it took Keegan too long to realize Izzy had yanked open his belt. Holy fuck. Had he stepped into an alternate reality? Or maybe he was the one who was drunk. Maybe this was some kind of setup. A backward version of gay chicken where he was supposed to get angry and lash out. Prove that he hated Izzy as much as Izzy hated him. While that idea was ricocheting around his brain, Izzy popped the button on his jeans and dragged down the zipper.

“What—” Keegan coughed and tried again. “What are you doing?” he managed to

get out, his tone strangled. He did his best to ignore his body's reaction to having Izzy King on his knees in front of him. He wasn't successful. His cock throbbed and thickened, pressing up against his open zipper and threatening to burst free. He tightened his hand in Izzy's hair and applied steady pressure until Izzy was forced to arch his neck and bare his throat. "Answer me."

Izzy shivered and his pupils blew wide. Keegan didn't know if it was from pain or the demand. "Fuck you," Izzy snapped, color deepening as his blush spilled down his throat.

Keegan gave another sharp tug and got a bitten-off moan in response. Damn, that was a pretty sound. But it didn't tell him what he needed to know. Was Izzy serious, or was he just trying to push Keegan to his breaking point. Or was it both? "Answer my question," he repeated. "Now, Isaac." Keegan slid his thumb across the fullness of Izzy's lower lip, still gripping soft blond curls in the other hand. His reward was a glint in Izzy's eyes before sharp teeth sank into his flesh.

Keegan jerked his hand back with a grunt. "Brat."

Izzy bared his teeth in a grin that made him look like a wild thing. Then, without warning, he jerked Keegan's pants halfway down his thighs, reached through the slit in his boxer briefs, and closed his hand around Keegan's cock, drawing it out.

Keegan was shocked to stillness. Was this actually happening? And, more importantly, was Keegan going to let it continue? Before he could decide, Izzy leaned in and swallowed him to the root. Holy fuck . Tight. Hot. Perfect . Keegan tightened his grip and thrust forward, chasing the pleasure.

Izzy gagged but didn't resist. In fact, he took it beautifully. When Keegan cursed and drew back, Izzy's hands slid to his ass and sharp nails dug into his cheeks, causing pinpricks of pain through the thin cotton.

Keegan hissed. Fine. Izzy wanted it rough? Keegan could take a hint.

When he adjusted his grip and thrust forward again, Izzy let out a muffled groan, pressed his nose to the curls at the base of Keegan's cock, and swallowed around him repeatedly. Izzy looked up, his cheeks red, eyes wet, and lashes clumped but still fiercely determined. Keegan still didn't know what he was trying to accomplish with this little show, but at the moment—with his heart pounding in his ears and sparks of pleasure tightening his balls—he honestly didn't care.

He accepted the challenge and stopped fighting his instincts. Nothing had ever felt better than forcing his cock down Izzy's throat over and over, his hands locked in Izzy's hair while Izzy clung to his thighs and took it like an expert.

Izzy moaned his encouragement when he wasn't gagging. Within minutes, he was a red-faced mess, sweat and tears mixing with the saliva dripping down his chin. Debauched, Keegan thought as he slowed down, tempted to draw things out. He knew he'd never get this opportunity again.

Despite wanting it to last, Keegan was too close. He pulled out and wrapped his free hand around his cock, stroking with intention.

Izzy's eyelids fluttered and he made an unhappy sound as he tried to get Keegan back in his mouth, but Keegan didn't let him. He slapped his cock against Izzy's cheek and gripped his curls again. "Be a good boy, and I might let you have a taste," he said, voice strained as he approached the finish line.

Izzy's laugh was one of breathless disbelief. "When have you ever known me to be good?" he asked, his voice gravelly from Keegan's abuse.

Keegan gave Izzy's hair a jerk and got a wanton moan in response. Izzy's eyes went half lidded as he stopped fighting, opened his mouth, and stuck out his tongue.

The sight swept Keegan straight over the edge, and pleasure pulsed through him. He managed to catch most of his release in his palm to avoid making a mess, but he was also a man of his word. Angling Izzy's head just right, he smeared the wet tip of his cock across Izzy's lips, an extra shiver of pleasure washing over him when Izzy chased after the taste with his tongue.

Slowly, he released Izzy's hair and took a moment to smooth his curls back into place as he caught his breath. Wow. That was...something. He blinked a few times, half expecting the younger man to disappear from in front of him like an alcohol-induced mirage. Except, Keegan had only had two beers, and as he tucked himself away, careful of the mess in his palm, Izzy remained solid and real.

Solid, real, and furious once again.

Izzy stumbled as he lurched to his feet, and Keegan grabbed his bicep to steady him. Izzy stared at the hand for a moment, then jerked away.

Keegan frowned. "Izzy, what—"

The bathroom door opened, hitting Keegan and forcing him forward a few steps. Music and voices poured in from the rest of the bar, popping the strange bubble he had found himself in with Izzy.

Izzy turned abruptly and bent over the sink, splashing water on his face.

The men who had interrupted them were laughing as they pushed into the bathroom. "This is the only bathroom, man," one of them said, giving Keegan's shoulder a playful slap. "At least take a stall so the rest of us can piss." He walked an unsteady path to the row of urinals.

Keegan opened his mouth to say...something, when the second man spoke up.

“Dr. Reid!” he announced, his tone jovial and a little slurred.

Keegan winced. Fantastic. A patient’s owner.

Izzy straightened from the sink, and the movement caught the man’s attention. “And Izzy King.” He looked between them, his surprise replaced by a sly grin. “Niiice,” he said, offering Keegan his hand for a fist bump. “Our Izzy’s always a good time.” He made a crude gesture in Izzy’s direction, then laughed again.

Keegan managed not to punch the guy, who was clearly just as drunk as his friend, but he couldn’t hide the way his lip curled with disgust. He hoped Izzy wasn’t—

“Dr. Reid wishes he could have a piece of this,” Izzy drawled, then slapped his ass for emphasis. “But I’ve got—” he paused “— bigger plans tonight.” He grinned as the man and his friend burst into drunken laughter, elbowing each other like middle schoolers.

Keegan sighed. Apparently, Izzy was fine. Keegan rolled his eyes at the innuendo. He had no reason to be ashamed, as Izzy had just learned.

Izzy continued to joke with the two drunks, firmly ignoring Keegan. Had this been a game after all? A way to ruffle Keegan’s feathers? Or was this just who Izzy was? A fuckboy who did what he wanted and left any consequences for his future self to deal with.

Keegan was just as confused now as he had been when Izzy kissed him.

Izzy looped an arm around the neck of one of the men and let the other grope his ass as he led them from the bathroom without giving Keegan another glance.

The door swung shut, cutting off the din of the bar and leaving Keegan alone, his belt

still loose and ejaculate drying in his palm. What a fucking night.

What Izzy King needed was a goddamn spanking.

He'd disappeared from the bar by the time Keegan left the bathroom, and when Keegan mentioned it, he'd gotten a strange look from his friends. Which, fair enough, Keegan didn't usually keep tabs on Izzy. But what they'd done had been intense, and he still wasn't clear on Izzy's mind-set—before, during, or after—so he'd wanted to check in.

Instead, he'd arrived at Split Rock Ranch this morning to a pissy, visibly hungover ranch hand who wanted nothing to do with him. In fact, the most he'd gotten from Izzy were grunts and one-word replies. Eventually, he gave up, and they spent the next half hour of their Saturday morning caring for the rescues in silence.

During the week, Keegan worked three mornings out of the clinic attached to his house and spent the rest of his time on the road. He didn't technically work on weekends, but as the main vet for the area, he kept his phone on him for emergencies. He had an answering service that knew which calls to send through and which to redirect to the twenty-four-hour clinic forty minutes away. It gave Keegan freedom he hadn't had the first few years after opening his practice.

Today, he was heading up to his cabin. It would be a short trip since he'd put off leaving until after his morning visit to the ranch. He'd swing by again on his way home tomorrow. Keegan already had the truck packed and the dogs loaded. In an hour, he'd be relaxing in front of the woodstove with a book and a cup of coffee while the dogs played outside and enjoyed the extra freedom that came with being miles from the nearest neighbor.

Chance had been especially eager this morning. He was too smart for his own good, like most of his breed, and knew where they were going before Keegan even rolled

out of bed. The roads had been too icy the last few weekends to make the drive, even with snow tires, and the big guy was sick of being cooped up.

Normally, Keegan wouldn't bring the dogs to work, but the fire road that led to the cabin bordered the ranch, and Alice liked seeing "her puppies." She'd keep them company while Keegan worked so they didn't destroy his truck with doggy impatience.

As he worked on wrapping the pony, he made one last-ditch effort to get Izzy to talk. "Why Sunny?" he asked. Even stoned on sedatives, the pony didn't look like a Sunny. More like a Stormy with her gray coat and her perpetually pinned ears.

Izzy was quiet long enough that Keegan didn't think he'd answer. Finally, he admitted, "It's from a book series. Violet, Klaus, and their little sister, Sunny." Keegan couldn't be sure, but he thought he detected the hint of a blush. "She bites."

That sounded familiar. "What's it called?"

"A Series of Unfortunate Events," Izzy said. He stared down the aisle, as if he couldn't bear to look in Keegan's direction.

"Fitting."

Izzy grunted.

Fuck it. "What's your problem, exactly?"

Izzy's shoulders stiffened, and his knuckles went white around the lead rope. "Nothing," he spat out after a slight hesitation.

Keegan shut his eyes and blew out a frustrated breath, then stood.

Izzy tensed further, which only annoyed Keegan more.

“Clearly, you regret what happened last night,” he stated, keeping his voice as even as he could. “But what I’m not sure of is why, because from where I’m standing, all of it was on your terms. Unless I fucked up and you were too drunk to consent.” He waited. Izzy hadn’t looked or acted drunk, despite Keegan’s thoughts in the moment. But maybe Keegan didn’t know him well enough to be able to tell.

For a few long seconds, he didn’t think Izzy was going to answer him, but he did. “I wasn’t drunk,” he admitted grudgingly.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Keegan said, tone more sarcastic than he intended. “So, what’s the problem?” He took a step closer, lowering his voice, just in case someone happened by. The rest of the ranch didn’t need to hear this. “I thought you were the wild one who fucked around with no regrets. If you’re pissed that it was one-sided, that’s on you for leaving. I would have happily returned the favor.”

Izzy’s breathing sped up as he flushed red to the tips of his ears. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. Keegan resisted the urge to slide a thumb across his skin and feel the heat of his blush. Instead, he removed the lead rope from Izzy’s hand and led Sunny back to her stall.

When he returned, Izzy was gone.

Time at his cabin was exactly what Keegan needed after a stressful week. The snow on the ground turned the forest into a muted winter wonderland. He spent a portion of the day hiking, with Lucky and Chance roaming in the woods nearby and returning every few minutes to check in with Riley and Keegan. Being deaf, Riley preferred to stay in sight of Keegan, though occasionally she’d do a loop with Lucky. Chance was more of a loner, typical of his mixed breeding. Keegan was just glad he was protective of their pack and didn’t go as far as he could have.

All three dogs wore bright-orange harnesses and had trackers in their collars. Keegan's land wasn't large as far as mountain properties went, only twenty acres, and it was surrounded on three sides by the national park. This time of year, it was deserted, apart from a few more determined hikers. Hunting wasn't allowed at any time in the park, but Keegan knew three big animals bounding out of the woods could be frightening, and he didn't want anyone to get hurt.

Two days of hiking in winter solitude and a peaceful evening in his cabin with a crackling fire and a good book recharged Keegan. He would have liked to stay longer, but he had another full week coming up, and he wanted to check on the rescues before he headed home. Besides, Micah would fuss at him if he missed Sunday dinner at the ranch.

Hopefully, Izzy would be back to his normal, bratty self. Keegan preferred their sniping to the tension-filled silent treatment from Saturday morning.

Mass destruction would have ensued if he left Chance in the car long enough to eat dinner, so he drove home first to drop off the dogs, then swung by the store for the local beer he and Ryan enjoyed.

Sunday dinner was more crowded in the winter months. It was the only part of the year where they were forced inside. Even in the fall and early spring, they took advantage of the beautiful outdoor space and view of the mountains. A few strategically placed heat lamps keep things comfortable all the way into October. Snow, however, meant gathering at the long table off the kitchen.

Things had gotten tighter with the addition of Finn and Xavier, bringing the total to ten—sometimes eleven when Micah's dad joined them, twelve with Finn's grandfather. Ryan joked about building a bigger table if anyone else brought home a significant other.

The detour home meant Keegan was the last to arrive at the ranch. Inside, he greeted everyone before claiming the open seat at the table. Usually he sat at one end, with Maggie at the head of the table, Alice next to him, and Finn and Xavier across from him. But tonight, Alice had taken his usual seat, and Archer had taken Izzy's, leaving Izzy and Keegan trapped between them. Keegan narrowed his eyes. It wasn't unheard of for the twins to split up, but this seemed a little too convenient. So did Alice's overly normal greeting. She didn't have a subtle bone in her body, and the fact that she didn't overexplain the new seating arrangement was a dead giveaway that someone—either her brother or Micah—had coached her.

Keegan let it go. He wasn't the one who had a problem. Izzy could deal with them being too close for comfort for an hour or so. Though Keegan did question what the twins were thinking. Had Izzy told his friends what happened the other night? Or was this just an inconveniently timed attempt at forced proximity?

The space was tight, and the passing of plates made it even tighter. Keegan was hyperaware of Izzy next to him, close enough to feel his body heat but with an invisible, impenetrable boundary between them. The one time their arms brushed, Izzy startled so hard he nearly dropped the potatoes. Keegan had to steady them as the spoon rattled.

Izzy didn't acknowledge the help, his eyes trained on the food, but Keegan caught the shiver that went through him. He tried not to wonder. For all that Izzy proclaimed his hatred, he'd been doing a piss-poor job of showing it.

Finally, everyone was served. Keegan took a bite of Maggie's famous pot roast and made an appreciative sound as the slow-cooked beef melted in his mouth, the flavors exploding across his tongue. Damn, that was good. Better than any restaurant, that was for sure.

The conversation flowed. Everyone at the table was family. Finn was the newest

addition, but the shy young man fit right in. “Have you given any more thought to your idea?” Keegan asked Finn during a lull. They’d spoken on New Year’s. Finn was trying to decide what he wanted to do with his life. Getting together with Xavier had allowed for opportunities that he hadn’t had while working in his grandfather’s general store. Xavier had suggested volunteering with the rescue, but Finn had something bigger in mind. He wanted to help animals find their forever families and then make sure the animals got to their new homes—which were often in other parts of the country—safely.

Finn started twisting his napkin between his fingers at Keegan’s question. Without pausing his conversation, Xavier palmed the back of Finn’s neck and began rubbing small circles with his thumb. Finn’s tension melted away, even as his cheeks went pink. “Um...” he said, then paused to lick his lips. “Xavi thinks it’s a great idea. He’s going to lend his jet and help introduce me to other people who might help.” Finn had stars in his eyes as he smiled at his boyfriend and got an absent kiss to the temple in response.

They were sweet.

For the last year or two, various people had made attempts at setting Keegan up with Finn—notably Micah and Finn’s grandfather, Mac. It had been a bit of a relief when Xavier had come into the picture. Finn was a great kid, but Keegan would never be able to see him as more than shy little Corey Finnegan, Mac Finnegan’s grandson. He’d been a preteen when Keegan met him, and though he’d matured into an attractive young man, Keegan still saw the little boy. It was partly due to Finn’s demeanor—he was just so damn sweet and innocent. Keegan was much too prickly for someone who wore their heart on their sleeve like Finn did.

If Keegan somehow ended up with a partner, it would have to be someone able to push back when Keegan got in one of his “hate the world” moods. Someone who wouldn’t wilt if Keegan said the wrong thing at the wrong time. Someone who didn’t

mind that Keegan could be pushy and intense in order to get what he wanted.

And as much as Izzy's proximity to Keegan at the table was magnetic, he refused to admit that Isaac King, of all people, checked a few of those boxes. Izzy was a hot mess, and Keegan didn't need that kind of complication in his life.

Objectively, though, it was interesting to note that he'd also met Izzy as a teenager. He'd been around thirteen when Keegan had come to Split Rock for a vet school internship and realized he didn't want to leave. Keegan didn't see that boy when he looked at the man. Maybe because Izzy had left during high school to live closer to his trainer and returned years later as an adult. When he turned up working at the ranch, nothing about him reminded Keegan of the boy he'd been. At the moment, he was grateful for that, considering he'd had his cock in Izzy's mouth two nights ago.

"Do you think he'll get nominated?" Nick was asking. "It was a strong performance."

"It's likely," Xavier replied. "And as much as he'd rather the movie succeeded on its own merits, the scandal only endeared him to the public."

"It has to suck for your work to get overshadowed like that," Micah said. "He's an amazing actor, and he seems like a good guy too." He nudged Nick playfully. "Hey, maybe you can introduce us next time we're in New York?" He waggled his eyebrows, getting an amused smirk from Nick.

They had to be talking about Remy Dalton. The famous actor was one of Xavier's clients—which meant Nick also knew him since he had been married to Xavier once upon a time. Remy had been outed by an ex-boyfriend a few months ago, and even Keegan, who didn't pay attention to things like celebrity gossip, had heard about it.

Next to him, Izzy's knee was bouncing. Keegan could feel the vibration through the floorboards. Without much thought, he reached under the table and gave it a squeeze.

Izzy jumped. His fork, which had been mangling a chunk of potato, clattered to the plate. The noise caught a few people's attention, but Izzy tossed out a sarcastic quip, and they went back to their conversations.

Keegan didn't. Izzy seemed rooted by the touch. His body was strung tight and his chest rose and fell quickly, but he didn't pull away. After a minute, he let out a long, slow breath and resumed eating, shooting an occasional, confused side-eye in Keegan's direction.

Keegan didn't know why he'd done it, or what his plan was now, but he didn't remove his hand.

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Izzy stared at his plate, unseeing, his entire focus on the contact between them. He couldn't remember what he'd been doing or thinking thirty seconds ago. Eating, maybe? He swallowed hard. What the fuck?

What was Keegan doing ?

It was bad enough that his friends decided tonight was the night to change up the seating arrangements, forcing Keegan and Izzy to sit next to each other. The table had never felt so small—even when there was twelve of them. Every shift of Keegan's body brought him dangerously close to Izzy's personal space bubble. Izzy would have been hanging off the far side of his chair, except Archer was on that side, and he'd given Izzy an unimpressed eyebrow when he'd tried it. Instead, he was trapped, Keegan's sleeve cutting through the air and coming within centimeters of him, lifting the hair on Izzy's arms, making his skin crawl.

This was Micah's fault. He was the only one who kept pushing Izzy to get along with Keegan. He'd even made that joke about locking them in a room together until they worked their shit out. But Micah didn't know what had happened the last time they'd been alone in a room together. Izzy had lost his composure, all of his restraint, and his goddamn mind. He was desperately trying not to think about that night. Nothing good would come from dwelling on it. It wasn't ever going to happen again. It shouldn't have happened in the first place.

Apparently, Keegan hadn't gotten that message, even though Izzy had done his best to convey it the next morning, because his hand was still on Izzy's thigh. He rubbed his thumb back and forth, back and forth, barely moving it but stealing every ounce of Izzy's focus. Izzy refused to be turned on.

Finally...finally, the meal ended. Keegan gave Izzy's knee a final squeeze, then pushed back from the table. Izzy released a breath that shook and looked up to see Nick watching him, a hint of amusement on his lips.

Izzy scowled. Was he the one who'd set this up? Did he think Izzy's discomfort was funny? They barely even knew each other. Izzy turned away, gathering his dishes and taking the plate to the trash to dump the mangled remains of a few potatoes and carrots. He didn't remember doing that. He got rid of the evidence, then begged off after-dinner drinks and hightailed it back to the barn and his loft.

It was a short, dark walk—freezing cold since Izzy hadn't bothered to bring his coat up to the house—but the icy winter air managed to clear his head some. He paused once he got inside, gripping the bars on a stall door, and scrubbed his palm against his thigh, trying to erase the phantom touch that wouldn't stop.

That was the second time Keegan had touched him—not counting the thing in the bathroom that Izzy wasn't thinking about. That had been... Well, Izzy wasn't assigning blame, but that time, Keegan hadn't done the touching. This, though—this casual, possessive shit—made Izzy's blood boil. Who did Keegan think he was? The next time Izzy got a chance, he was going to let the asshole know exactly how he felt about it.

The big rolling door slid open behind him, then rattled shut again with a thud. "Fuck, it's cold out here," Keegan said. His voice made Izzy freeze up all over again. All he could hear was the echo of "be a good boy" in that low, smooth timbre. It made his stomach—and other things farther south—clench with want.

Instead of answering, Izzy went to feed the rescues their final meal of the night. They were doing well with refeeding, and Keegan had agreed before he'd left on Friday that they could skip two a.m. and move to late evening and early morning. It suited Izzy's schedule much better.

He tried to ignore the movement behind him as he dumped a handful of grain mixed with supplements into Klaus's bucket, but apparently Keegan wasn't going to let him have any peace.

"Ryan said he helped you with their feet today. I told you I'd be back in time to do it."

Izzy bristled at the reprimand. "Well, I didn't need you," he snapped, ignoring his unfortunate word choice and moving on. "Sunny's getting easier to handle. She only kicked the bucket over once." And tried to eat Ryan's face, but he wasn't going to mention that part.

"Glad to hear it," Keegan said from way too close. "Maybe we can go without sedatives tomorrow."

Izzy swallowed against the tightness in his throat, his skin prickling. "Why are you here?" he asked at the same time that Keegan said, "We should talk about what happened."

"Nothing. Nothing happened," Izzy said, before he could process the question.

Keegan sighed. "Izzy—"

"No," Izzy shot back. No. He didn't want to talk about it. Didn't want to acknowledge it at all. He wanted to pretend it hadn't happened until he couldn't feel Keegan's hands in his hair or the way Keegan's perfect cock filled his mouth. The taste of him. His scent. Izzy wanted it all to go away.

"Isaac," Keegan said more firmly, his tone carrying that hint of dominance that was Izzy's kryptonite.

Izzy shivered, his cock trying to get in on the action, despite Izzy swearing to it that there was no action. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” Keegan was closer.

Don’t come any closer. Don’t call me that. Don’t tell me what to do. Except Izzy couldn’t voice the words.

Every last one of them was a lie.

It was infuriating.

“Go to hell,” he snapped, then tried to walk away.

A hand gripped his arm, firm and unyielding when he tried to shake it off. “I don’t think that’s what you want,” Keegan said, so right that it filled Izzy with rage.

“I told you, you don’t know me.” Izzy tried to sneer his words, but they came out all wrong, tight and desperate. Dammit. He snapped, lashing out, but Keegan caught his other arm too and twisted his wrists behind his back, shocking him into stillness. He trembled, lips parting as his breathing sped up and his cock thickened.

“I think I’ve got your number,” Keegan said, amusement in his tone, his breath hot against Izzy’s ear.

Izzy went light-headed, his skin burning as he gritted his teeth against the whine trying to leave his throat. Goddammit. He struggled but then quickly gave in. Keegan might be a few inches shorter than him, but he was really damn strong. It fucked with Izzy’s brain and made him want . He wanted Keegan to hold him tighter, to pin him down, to make Izzy take whatever he was willing to give. “Fuck you,” he whispered, letting his chin drop against his chest, his head too heavy to hold up at the moment.

Lips brushed the sensitive back of his neck, and Izzy's breath hitched. Keegan squeezed his wrists, sending tingles all the way up his arms and into his brain. "What do you want, Isaac?" Keegan asked, low and amused, like he already knew the answer.

A million responses flooded Izzy's mind, insults and encouragement, protests and fantasies. His mouth was dry, and he was breathing too fast. "Do it," he finally got out, hoping that was enough.

It wasn't. Keegan sighed, sounding disappointed, which just made Izzy bristle. "You can do better than that," he scolded.

Izzy burned, not sure if it was from anger, embarrassment, or arousal. Mostly anger, he decided. Because Keegan knew what he wanted, and he was an ass for making Izzy say it.

"I will fuck you as hard as you want, brat. But not until you ask for it." Teeth scraped Izzy's earlobe. "No more pretending."

That shouldn't be what Izzy wanted to hear. Keegan was calling him out, and Izzy should hate it. Instead, it made him feel safe. "I want it," he blurted on a gasp. "Make me take it." He jerked against Keegan's hold, and the next thing he knew, he was facedown on a stack of hay bales, the stalks scratching his cheek, Keegan's grip on his wrists painful and comforting in equal measure.

"You want me to stop, you call red," Keegan said.

Izzy jerked a nod. "Yes, sir."

Keegan swore under his breath and forced Izzy's hands up over his head. His knuckles bumped the bars of the stall. "Will you keep them there?"

Izzy wrapped his fingers around the cold metal and laughed. “No.”

Keegan let out an exasperated chuckle. “Of course not.” A moment later, Izzy heard the metallic slide of a lead rope clip. Oh god. Keegan wound the rope deftly around Izzy’s wrists and tied it off.

Izzy lifted his head and eyed it, then had to laugh again. Keegan had tied a quick-release knot. The kind they used for securing the horses. Izzy could get out of it without much effort if he tried...but he didn’t want to try. His cock was rock hard and leaking in his underwear, his balls already heavy and aching.

Keegan cut off his laughter by pressing up behind him. Keegan was hard, just as hard as Izzy, his cock a steel shaft against the soft curve of Izzy’s ass.

Izzy pressed his forehead into his bicep and tried to breathe. Fuck, the sounds that wanted to leave him would be goddamn embarrassing if they escaped.

A moment later, Keegan’s hands slid down his back, digging into the muscles and making Izzy arch, a moan caught in his throat. Then they went back up, under his shirt this time, and a sound did escape, a desperate whimper at the sensation of warm skin against his. Izzy’s breath hitched, and he pulled against the rope, squirming with the need to hurry this along. “Stop stalling,” he snapped. “If you’re gonna fuck me, then do it.”

Keegan’s heat left him abruptly, but Izzy didn’t have time to so much as shiver before fiery pain lit up his backside, the sound of the slap registering a second later.

“Oh fuck,” Izzy whined as the sting spread through him and his back arched, his hips searching for more. He fucking loved being spanked.

“Bossy.” Keegan’s chuckle was breathless and aroused. “I’d threaten you with more

where that came from, but I think you'd enjoy it too much."

Izzy nodded. Yes, he fucking would. His thoughts on how to convince Keegan to give him more got derailed when Keegan's hands dipped under him and popped the button on his jeans. He froze as the zipper was lowered and his jeans were dragged down his thighs until they bunched around his knees, exposing his burning skin to the cold air.

"Gorgeous," Keegan said, cupping Izzy's ass in his hands and kneading.

Izzy focused on breathing again when Keegan pulled his cheeks apart and air touched his hole, making him clench.

Whatever Keegan said next was lost when the wet flat of his tongue slid across the sensitive skin. Izzy's moan was embarrassingly loud, and Keegan made it worse by chuckling. Ugh. Izzy pressed his face harder to his bicep, hoping to muffle any further sounds. Bad enough he'd practically begged Keegan to fuck him; he didn't need Keegan to also know how desperate he was for it.

Izzy needed this to be faster. He reached for his wallet, then remembered his hands were a little tied up at the moment. Instead, he lifted his head enough to say, "Lube's in my wallet."

That got him another stinging slap to the ass—still not a punishment—then Keegan was fishing around for his wallet. "Keep trying to boss me around. I like it when I get to tell you no."

Izzy huffed in exasperation and shuffled his feet apart as far as he could with his jeans in the way. "That's not—" he gasped at the trickle of oil against his skin "—the deterrent you think it is." Instead of an answer, Izzy got two fingers stretching him open, then three, before Keegan slowed. His cock was throbbing where it hung,

heavy between his thighs. Keegan dipped down and gave it a few slippery tugs that threatened to send Izzy straight over the edge.

“Condom?” Keegan asked.

Izzy shook his head. He hadn’t replaced the one in his wallet since the asshole on Friday had tossed it on the floor.

Keegan’s next tug was to hair. He pulled Izzy’s head back, forcing him to arch his neck. “Where are your condoms, Isaac?” Keegan asked, voice firm and impossible to ignore.

“Upstairs,” Izzy gasped, and then on the next breath, he said, “We don’t need them. Don’t leave.”

“I’m not leaving,” Keegan said, his voice soothing but his grip tightening.

Izzy winced, then flushed. He hadn’t meant for that part to be out loud. He wasn’t some needy little sub. “I got tested yesterday,” he explained. “I do it every three months. I’m negative, on PrEP, and I have DoxyPEP.” He hesitated, swallowed, then said again, “Don’t leave.”

His back warmed as Keegan draped over him, and Izzy’s breath stuttered. “I’m negative too.” He pressed a kiss to Izzy’s shoulder blade, lined up his cock, and sank inside.

Izzy’s brain short-circuited, every thought flying from his head at the perfect, painful stretch. He wasn’t prepared enough for it to be painless, which was just the way he liked it. “Oh fuck !” he shouted, arching to get more. Deeper.

Startled movement came from one of the stalls, and Keegan slapped a hand over

Izzy's mouth, muffling his next groan. "Hush, brat," he said, hips rocking in tiny increments as Izzy adjusted. "You'll scare the horses."

Izzy had had plenty of semi-public sex—some of it in places he really shouldn't have been. Volume wasn't something he worried about. If he was enjoying himself, he didn't care who knew it. And yet somehow, Keegan's admonishment made his body flush hot with mortification and his cock pulse with precome.

He didn't have a humiliation kink, dammit, and he didn't want one.

Finally, Keegan started to pick up the pace, each thrust accompanied by a tug on Izzy's hair that forced him into an arch. "Fuck, you're so damn tight," he groaned as he pressed deeper, pulled Izzy's hair harder.

With his wrists tied, Izzy was helpless to do anything but take it. He couldn't even stop the way the sharp ends of the hay were digging into his belly, cock, and thighs like a thousand tiny daggers. It was a good thing Izzy was turned on to the point that endorphins were blocking most of the pain, because he knew he was going to be a mess of scratches later. Not that he'd been fucked over a hay bale before, but he'd messed around enough to know the consequences of his actions...and maybe look forward to them a little.

His mouth dropped open when Keegan released his hair and grabbed him by the hips, dragging him back a step. Keegan wrapped a hand around Izzy's cock and stroked with quick, sure movements. Izzy moaned, long and low, then sank his teeth into his bicep to muffle his shout as the pleasure he'd been barely keeping at bay rushed up and crashed over him.

Keegan swore colorfully as he sped up his movements, slamming into Izzy so hard that Izzy's eyes rolled back and he almost came again. "Oh god, oh god, oh god," he whimpered, clinging to the rope tying his wrists to the stall bars. Every time Keegan

drove forward, Izzy lost his breath until he was dizzy from it. In less than a minute, Keegan was coming, his movements slowing as he groaned, then turning smooth and easy with the additional lubrication of his release.

Izzy dropped his forehead to the hay bale, sucking in ragged breaths as he tried to get his head to stop spinning and the spots to clear from his vision.

He felt a tug at his wrists, and then the lead rope loosened and fell away. Izzy didn't care. He left his arms where they were, not sure he had any muscles left to move them. His legs were equally shaky, and he was glad he had the hay bales to support him. Those and Keegan's cock, which was still deep in his ass, were the only things preventing him from melting to the floor.

Except then Keegan was pulling out, nice and easy. Izzy wrinkled his nose and gritted his teeth. That felt different without the barrier of latex muting things between them. The next thing that registered was the trickle of something hot and wet sliding down his inner thigh. Izzy clenched his hole, his heart skipping then starting to jackhammer against his rib cage.

Oh god.

He pushed himself upright fast enough that Keegan had to grab his hips to steady him. Izzy fumbled for his pants, dragging them into place and ignoring the cold, wet spot soaking into the material.

When he turned, Keegan was watching him with an unreadable expression. He'd already tucked himself away, and other than the flush to his cheeks and the unfastened top button of his pants, he looked utterly composed. "Is this the part where you run away again?"

Izzy flinched, then puffed up with righteous indignation. What the fuck? He didn't

fucking run . “No. This is the part where you get the hell out of my barn and we pretend the last ten minutes never happened.”

Keegan lifted an eyebrow. “I guarantee that was longer than ten minutes.”

“You can tell your buddies you lasted an hour for all I care,” Izzy shot back. “As long as you know it’s never happening again.” It shouldn’t have happened in the first place, and Izzy might never forgive himself for it.

“That didn’t take long,” Keegan said, tone somewhere between annoyed and resigned.

Izzy was done. His chest was tight, and all the scratches on his stomach and thighs were starting to sting. He needed to get back to his loft so he could have his mental breakdown in peace. And for that, he needed Keegan to leave. “Yeah, well, I got what I wanted, and I’ll assume you did too. No need to drag out an unremarkable fuck into something it isn’t.”

He didn’t wait for Keegan’s reaction. He brushed past and did his best to ignore his aching joints, sore ass, and the spreading dampness in his pants as he headed for his loft. He needed a shower. That was all.

He wasn’t running away.

Ev

So, weird question, but have any of you ever hooked up with someone you shouldn’t have?

Izzy read Ev’s message in the group chat and laughed so hard he started to wheeze before his knees gave out and he slid down the wall.

Alice paused next to him, a saddle balanced on her hip, and narrowed her eyes. “Are you broken?”

Izzy waved a hand until he caught his breath enough to speak. “I’m fine. Just the guys in the group chat,” Izzy said as he sent back about fifteen laugh-cry emojis.

Izzy

brB. DYING.

Alice shook her head and continued down the aisle to the tack room. She was adamant that she didn’t need to know what went on in their chat. They had a separate work group text that she was a part of. This one was just the boys. Micah, Eli, Archer, and, more recently, Finn and Ev, Finn’s buddy up in New York City. Izzy had only met him once in person, but he was a fun guy. There were even plans for everyone to make a trip up there soon.

Ev

So, that’s a yes?

Izzy didn’t get a chance to reply.

Eli

Izzy could teach a master class, TBF.

Which, rude . Also...true. Eli didn’t even know the extent of it. Izzy hadn’t told anyone about what had happened in the barn—or in the bathroom at the Lookout, for that matter. He still didn’t know what he’d been thinking. The first time was bad enough. At least he could claim that he’d been tipsy and horny after the app guy got

him worked up then left him high and dry.

But the second time... He blamed Keegan. It never would have happened if the asshole hadn't gotten so handsy at dinner. And even then, he didn't need to follow Izzy back to the barn.

He didn't need to make Izzy beg for it. That was almost worse than the fact that it had happened at all. Izzy didn't beg. Not like that anyway. There was nothing wrong with some dirty talk. Begging a guy to fuck him harder, to make him come, was one thing. Telling Keegan he wanted it, calling him "sir," begging him to stay and to fuck Izzy raw... That was something else entirely.

Izzy may or may not have had a small breakdown over it. He'd never gone without protection before, and it had fucked with his head. In the shower with steam billowing around him, he'd meant to wash Keegan off him as quickly as possible but instead found himself fingering his slick opening until he was hard again, and then jacking off all over the tiles as the water ran cold.

Once he came down, he'd stumbled out to sit on the bathroom floor and had one of the worst panic attacks of his life.

There was something really fucking wrong with his taste in men. Where was his self-preservation? Where was his integrity? Where was his fucking self-worth?

He'd made a promise to himself years ago that he wasn't going to fuck Keegan Reid. Izzy had a hard and fast rule. He only went after men who wanted him. Keegan had made what he thought of Izzy crystal clear a long time ago. Izzy refused to give him a second opportunity. The bastard wasn't worth his time.

Except he'd broken that promise. And he'd done it in the worst way possible, because now Keegan knew what a desperate slut Izzy was when it came to the annoyingly

attractive older man, and nothing Izzy said or did could make Keegan unknow it.

Eli

Wait. I think I need to hear more about Finny's bathroom adventures.

Izzy had missed something.

Izzy

You want to hear more about what ?

The conversation seemed to have devolved, but Micah got it back on track. Izzy felt for Ev when he revealed that he'd accidentally fucked his boss. Shit like that was bad news. Ask Izzy how he knew. When the conversation started to go off the rails again, he opened a new chat with Ev.

Izzy

I'd peace out if I were you, man. That power imbalance shit is no joke. Trust me on this one.

Ev

I think that's what I'm worried about. Gabe seems okay, but my track record says my instincts aren't worth crap.

Izzy

Mine are probably worse. LOL.

It was why he steered clear of anything longer than a one-night stand. He'd learned his lesson the hard way, but he'd learned it well. Izzy's type was red-flag. Hopefully, Ev had better taste.

Izzy

Just... Look out for yourself, okay? Call me if you need to.

He tucked his phone away just as the doors to the barn slid open, and Nick walked in, brushing snowflakes out of his hair. When he noticed Izzy sitting on the ground, he stopped. "Do I need to tell Ry to get you guys some chairs?" he asked, his green eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled.

Izzy rolled his eyes and pushed himself to his feet. "We don't need chairs. We have hay bales." His brain supplied an image of what Keegan had done to him over one of said hay bales. If Nick noticed his blush, he'd hopefully attribute it to the cold. Izzy changed the subject anyway. "Shouldn't you be at work?"

Nick pulled off his leather gloves and tucked them into the pockets of his dark wool overcoat. You could take the guy out of the city, but things like fashion sense lingered. "Being in charge means I can take long lunch breaks and no one can tell me no," Nick replied with an amused twist of his lips.

"If you're looking for a quickie, neither of your booty calls are down here," Izzy told him, oh-so helpfully. "Ryan's in a virtual meeting with the accountant, and Micah went to help his dad get ready for the storm." Judging by the snow he'd seen dusting Nick's shoulders, Izzy could tell the storm had already started. They weren't supposed to get much, but it was always better to be prepared up in the mountains. "Little Nicky will have to wait until tonight to play cowboys and city boy."

Nick coughed, but Izzy could tell he was trying not to laugh. "Keegan's right. You

are a fucking brat.”

Izzy’s stomach clenched painfully as annoyance rushed over him. “Well, he’s a judgmental bastard, so I guess we’re even.”

Nick tilted his head, looking bemused. “How so?”

Izzy blinked. “What?”

“How is he judging you? I know I’ve only been around a year or so, but I’ve gotta say, I haven’t seen it. He’s kind of an asshole if he’s having a bad day, but—” He gestured to Izzy. “Case in point.”

Izzy scowled. Keegan judged him all the time. Like when he— Well, he— Izzy pressed his lips together and huffed. Okay, fine. So what if the only example he could think of was a long time ago? It was still valid. “Whatever. He just does. He has judgy eyes.”

Nick laughed, and Izzy kind of wanted to punch him. Jerk.

“Why are you even here?”

“Driving practice.” Nick had been teaching Alice to drive since the previous summer.

Izzy glanced at the closed door of the barn. “In the snow?” That didn’t seem safe. Alice still wasn’t the best driver. Especially when she got anxious.

“That makes it the perfect time. Might as well get it out of the way now instead of waiting until there’s no other choice.”

That sounded like a terrible idea to Izzy.

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Keegan stomped his feet as he came into the barn, kicking the snow off his boots. They'd gotten about six inches. More than what was predicted, but nothing Keegan's snow tires couldn't handle.

The last few days had been awkward, to say the least. Izzy's refusal to acknowledge what had happened between them, again, was getting old. When Keegan tried to bring it up, he got, at best, a snarky reply and a change of subject. Continuing to push resulted in Izzy walking away. Keegan supposed it could have been worse. Izzy hadn't gotten violent or implied that Keegan had done anything he didn't want. He just wanted to pretend that it hadn't happened.

Too bad Keegan couldn't brush it off as easily. It was embarrassing how often Izzy flashed through his mind during the day. What was he doing? How was he doing? Would he find the unhinged comments on a blog post Keegan was reading funny or infuriating? Did he always bottom, or was he vers? How did he like his coffee? What would he do if Keegan brought him coffee?

It was when Keegan was trying to sleep that the darker thoughts crept in. Had Keegan pushed too hard? Was Izzy's consent clear enough? Had he been able to consent when he insisted they go without condoms? Did he enjoy what they did, or was he ignoring the whole thing because he was traumatized by it?

And that didn't include Keegan's other concerns. Things that were absolutely none of his business. He refused to put a name to the feeling that flared when he thought of Izzy's typical nightly routine. Drinking and dancing. Picking up a stranger. All the whimpers, pleas, and moans that stranger would hear as he fucked Izzy in a bathroom stall or a motel bed.

Izzy would laugh in Keegan's face if he knew the direction his brain kept taking him. That, or kick his ass. Izzy had been perfectly clear. He was horny, Keegan was convenient, and what happened between them was "unremarkable." Keegan needed to accept reality and stop trying to sneak imagined intentions and feelings into what amounted to an ill-conceived hookup. This new obsession wasn't healthy.

Keegan had already checked on Klaus and finished with Violet when Izzy sailed in. He was dressed like he'd come from outside instead of his apartment, a knit cap pulled low over his curls, his coat zipped to his chin, snow on his boots, and a travel mug clutched in his hands. His cheeks and nose were pink from the cold. Keegan didn't ask where he'd been or why he was late. That was the last thing either of them needed. Frankly, he didn't want to know. He was just glad Izzy showed up at all.

"Good morning," he said as Izzy came to a stop nearby, keeping his tone neutral.

Izzy's eyes flicked to him, then away again. "I ran out of coffee," he said by way of greeting. "Trust me, you don't want to deal with me pre-caffeine."

Keegan wasn't sure what to say to that, but apparently he didn't need to say anything because Izzy kept going, his defensiveness increasing.

"Archer's not here yet with the good stuff, so I went up to the house to steal some from Nick 'cause he's a coffee snob too, but they went into town this morning, so there wasn't any made and I had to figure it out myself. Their coffeemaker is fucking complicated, okay?" He was snapping at Keegan by the time he finished.

Keegan blinked, wondering at the hostility after days of being mostly ignored. "Good morning," he repeated.

Izzy stared at him, then finally said, "Yeah. Right."

This was off to a fantastic start. “I wasn’t implying anything.”

Izzy didn’t seem to believe him, judging by how hard he rolled his eyes. Keegan wasn’t inclined to defend himself.

“Why do you always assume I’m judging you?” Okay. Maybe he was a little inclined to defend himself. But mostly, he was curious. What the hell was it about him that set Izzy off?

Izzy muttered something that sounded like “Nick the snitch” but continued before Keegan could ask. “You’re the one who thinks I’m a ‘manipulative brat.’”

When the hell had he said that? He racked his brain but came up empty. He’d never found Izzy particularly manipulative. A brat? Yes, clearly. And if he was honest, a bit overzealous about sex, not that it was hurting anyone. He eyed Izzy. “I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Izzy scowled. His face flushed, and he clenched his coffee closer. “When you drove me home,” he said through gritted teeth, his eyes flicking between Keegan and the rest of the barn, like he couldn’t stand to maintain eye contact.

When Keegan drove him home? He tried, but he couldn’t picture a time Izzy was ever in his truck.

Izzy laughed, the sound painfully raspy. “You really don’t remember.” He looked away, but not before Keegan caught the glassiness in his eyes. “Whatever. It’s not important.” He started for Sunny’s stall.

“Isaac,” Keegan said, stopping him in his tracks. “Remind me.”

Izzy’s chest heaved and his shoulders hunched at Keegan’s demand. “When you

drove me home,” he said again.

Keegan shook his head, feeling helpless and not liking it. “When did I drive you home? From where?”

“From here,” Izzy said with a half shrug. He opened Sunny’s stall and got teeth bared in his direction, but she held still for him to clip the lead rope to her halter.

Home from the ranch. That meant Izzy was talking about something that had happened years ago. Izzy had taken over the hayloft apartment when Ryan and Micah had gotten married and moved up to the house. That was five years ago. Keegan vividly remembered telling Ryan he’d buy him a new TV if he didn’t have help him move the old, 200-pound monstrosity he’d had up there. Before that, Izzy had rented a room in town. Keegan was surprised he remembered that. Had he driven Izzy there?

“The night Ryan finally got his head out of his ass about Micah,” Izzy supplied when Keegan was silent for too long. “I made you drive me ’cause Micah was busy getting his ass railed by his dream man. You were pissed about it. About me. Not about Micah’s ass.”

Shit. That night? Most of what he remembered about that time was Ryan talking his ear off for hours while he paced the back room of Keegan’s clinic. His best friend had been a wreck. He’d finally admitted that he’d been in love with Micah for years, and he’d convinced himself in the same breath that he couldn’t have him. Keegan had already been having a shitty day—he couldn’t remember why—but he’d agreed to come out to the ranch for dinner to be a buffer between Ryan and temptation.

He’d been more inclined to put temptation in Ryan’s lap and let proximity do the rest, but he hadn’t needed to. Because Izzy had threatened to do the opposite.

Oh.

“I’d spent half the day trying to convince my devastated best friend that he hadn’t missed his chance with the love of his life. I wanted to strangle you when I realized you’d set the whole thing up to make him jealous.”

Izzy went still, one hand gripping Sunny’s mane, the other clutching the lead rope. “It worked,” he said, tone defensive again.

“It worked,” Keegan agreed. “But it didn’t make me want to do you any favors.” It was six years ago. Keegan didn’t have a clear recollection of much of it, but Izzy obviously did. “You asked for a ride— No, you announced I was giving you a ride.”

The back of Izzy’s neck reddened, and he shifted his weight. “I’m an asshole, and you can’t stand me. I know. Do we need to rehash it?”

“What am I not remembering?”

Izzy made a sound that was somewhere between a bark of laughter and a pained groan. “Of course you can’t let it go,” he muttered, then wiped his face with his coat sleeve. “I asked you inside.”

Keegan shook his head. “I assume I turned you down?”

Izzy laughed again, sounding a little hysterical. “You said that you weren’t into manipulative brats. That there were plenty of easy marks to practice my talents on at the Lookout.”

Keegan’s stomach twisted, and he had to swallow against the nausea creeping up the back of his throat. “Ah,” he managed. Unfortunately, that did sound like something he might have said. He wished he could tell Izzy that he was wrong or that he’d misinterpreted, but past-Keegan hadn’t been one to sugarcoat his thoughts. He still wasn’t, but he hoped he’d matured enough not to take a bad day out on a virtual

stranger. “Izzy—”

“Can we get back to work now?” Izzy cut him off, then didn’t wait for a response. He pushed his way out of the stall, forcing Keegan to move or get stepped on.

Keegan put his arm across the opening.

Izzy stopped just before he ran into it and shot Keegan a furious glare. “Move.”

Keegan stepped closer and lifted his other arm, trapping Izzy between them, his back against the doorframe.

“Seriously?” Izzy rolled his eyes with a massive sigh, but he gave himself away when it shook at the end. He slouched and looked past Keegan, down the aisle. He startled when Keegan cupped the side of his neck, giving a squeeze.

“Are you gonna listen to me now?” Keegan asked, rubbing the soft skin behind Izzy’s ear with his thumb in a soothing motion that was half automatic.

Izzy’s lower lip quivered until he bit the inside of his cheek to stop it. He didn’t answer, but he didn’t push Keegan away either. Keegan figured that was the best he was going to get.

“I don’t remember,” he started.

“Clearly,” Izzy muttered, his cheeks suspiciously pink.

Keegan tugged on one of the curls poking out from under his wool cap. “Let me finish.”

Izzy wrinkled his nose and rolled his eyes again, but he mimed zipping his lips.

Keegan opened his mouth to continue, but instead of an apology, he let out a pained yelp as something grabbed his ass and pinched, hard .

“Ow! Fuck,” he gritted out, staggering back, his hand protecting the spot.

There was a loud snort and the muted stomping of a hoof in deep bedding from beside him. He looked over, his eyes tearing with pain, and found Sunny glaring back at him, her ears pinned flat to her head and the whites of her eyes showing. She pawed the ground with her tiny hoof and snorted a warning.

Then she lunged forward again, teeth bared.

Keegan scrambled out of the way, and a moment later, Izzy slammed the stall door in her face and locked it. Keegan stared at the solid wood, breathing hard and wondering where he could find the nearest ice pack.

Izzy started laughing.

Keegan transferred his glare to Izzy. “You think that’s funny?” he asked.

“Oh my god,” Izzy choked out. He was bent over with his hands braced on his knees, laughing so hard that his face was red. “I knew Sunny was the right name for her.”

Keegan wanted to be annoyed. He was in pain and would have a massive bruise on his ass by tomorrow, but he couldn’t stop his lips from twitching.

Seeing him fight his amusement only made Izzy laugh harder, and soon, Keegan joined him. It really was funny. He knew better than to turn his back on a horse with an attitude problem, and Sunny had given them plenty of warning that she wasn’t a fan of people.

“Fuck,” he managed as his laughter died down. “That’s gonna bruise.”

“Want me to kiss it better?” Izzy asked, smacking his lips at Keegan. Then he lost it again. He staggered back and collapsed onto a hay bale, leaning against the stall behind it. Tears of mirth gathered in the corners of his sparkling gray-blue eyes.

Fuck, he was gorgeous.

Keegan knew it already, but still. Happiness, even at Keegan’s expense, transformed Izzy’s face—his whole body. The tension in his neck and shoulders loosened, his mouth relaxed, and his eyes creased, making him look somehow both older and younger. Keegan definitely wouldn’t mind Izzy kissing his bruises better.

Or kissing other things. That mouth was something else.

When Izzy had calmed enough, he asked, “More sedatives?”

“For now,” Keegan agreed. They were going to have to figure out something else soon, but he was still hoping once Sunny was further along in her recovery, she’d become a little more agreeable. Maybe never enough to be considered friendly, but he’d settle for not actively attacking them.

He went to get the medication—and an ice pack—from his truck, ignoring Izzy’s muffled snicker at his obvious limp. When he returned, Izzy had his phone out, and it was buzzing with incoming messages.

“Is your group chat enjoying my pain?” Keegan asked good-naturedly. He was sure Micah, in particular, was getting a kick out of Keegan getting his ass bitten by a nine-hand-nothing pony.

Izzy didn’t answer. When Keegan looked closer, he realized all of the younger man’s

tension had come roaring back. His shoulders were up around his ears, his breathing was shallow and trembling, and his knee was bouncing hard enough to shake his whole body. What the hell was going on? “Izzy?” He stepped closer, wanting to touch him, to soothe his tension. He knew better, though. Izzy was an affectionate guy with his friends, but Keegan wasn’t one of his friends. When Izzy didn’t respond, he tried again. “Izzy... Isaac .”

Usually, his full name got his attention, but this time, he didn’t even pause in his scrolling.

Keegan set the supplies aside and dropped to a crouch next to the hay bale.

Izzy’s face was alarmingly pale, his pupils so dilated his eyes looked black. This close, Keegan could hear the rapid seesaw of his breathing and see his pulse fluttering in his neck. He was rubbing his palm up and down his thigh over the old injury. His phone screen, when Keegan checked it, showed what appeared to be a social media post.

“Isaac,” Keegan said, resting a careful hand on Izzy’s bouncing knee. “What happened?”

Izzy flinched at the touch and made a sound that wasn’t words so much as a wounded whine. “D-don’t,” he managed.

Keegan removed his hand. “Talk to me, sweetheart,” he said, wincing at the endearment, hoping it didn’t make things worse.

Izzy swallowed rapidly and shook his head. “Nothing,” he choked out. “It’s fine. I’m fine.” His eyes didn’t leave the screen, and his tone was anything but fine.

“Isaac—”

“No.” Izzy shoved to his feet, startling Keegan enough that he had to put a hand down to stop himself from tipping over. “I can’t—” He stopped, his eyes darting like he wasn’t sure which way to run.

“Isaac, breathe,” Keegan commanded, climbing to his feet but keeping distance between them. “I think you’re having a panic attack. You need to slow your breathing.”

“Fuck off,” Izzy snapped, turning on Keegan, his eyes wild, his expression a forced version of his usual sneer.

Keegan blinked, thrown by the sudden hostility.

“I don’t want you here. Why can’t you take a hint? Stick with diagnosing animals since you’re shit with people.”

Keegan took a steadying breath, letting a wave of annoyance roll through him, then fade. This wasn’t about him... At least, he didn’t think it was. Whatever it was about, Izzy was panicking and lashing out. It was a defense mechanism—less violent than Sunny’s biting, but equally effective. “Okay. I’m going to let that go, because I can see how upset you are.”

“Whatever,” Izzy muttered, expression shuttering. He flicked a dismissive hand toward the exit. “I don’t care. Just leave me alone.”

Keegan did as he was asked, feeling helpless and like it was the wrong choice.

Halfway back to his truck, he detoured up to the house. No one was there, and he remembered Izzy saying something about them going to the bakery in town for breakfast. He pulled out his phone instead.

Keegan

How long until you get back? Izzy needs you.

Micah

Why? What happened?

Is he okay?

We're on our way.

Be there in fifteen.

Keegan

I'm not sure. He was reading something on his phone, and I think he may be having a panic attack. He asked me to leave.

Micah

Fuck. Yeah. Sorry if he was an asshole about it. That's what he does.

Keegan

It's fine. He was with the rescues when I left.

Micah

Thanks, man. I appreciate it. And thanks for understanding.

Keegan

It's not a problem. Please tell him I hope he's feeling better soon.

Keegan tossed his phone on the passenger seat and started the truck, getting the heat going before pulling down the driveway. He'd have to come back later to finish Sunny's hooves. Hopefully today hadn't ruined all the progress he'd made—both with Sunny and with Izzy.

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Emma had released a statement.

Izzy wanted to vomit. To scream. Break things. Maybe break himself.

He shouldn't have read it, no matter what Sammy thought. Even all these years later, the guilt was a sledgehammer to the gut.

There was a video too, but he hadn't watched it. Just seeing Emma's face in the little box made his heart pound and his throat squeeze until he could hardly force air through it. He hadn't seen her since the hospital. Even then, he'd been so high on morphine, he didn't remember much beyond her holding his hand and crying. Hell, he barely remembered his twenty-second birthday thanks to the haze he'd been in those first few weeks, even after he was off the strong drugs.

She'd grown up. It had been six years, so of course she had. She was twenty-five now, married—which he knew because his parents had tried to forward him the wedding invitation—and expecting her first child, which he'd just learned from her post. A little girl.

She was letting the USEO save face by claiming the baby was her reason for finally coming forward. That she wanted to bring attention to abuse in sports in hopes of making the world a better place for her child. But Izzy was sure stopping them from putting Josh in the eventing hall of fame was at least part of it.

She'd left Izzy's name out of the message, though she'd mentioned Josh's other students supporting her at the time.

Izzy wanted to smash his phone to pieces so he didn't have to read any more. Had he? Had he really supported her? Had he done enough? He'd abandoned them all in the end. Running, like he always did. As well as a guy with a shattered leg and a rod in his femur could run.

He'd laughed at the hospitalist who suggested therapy. Moving on was the best therapy he could think of. Why should he spend hours a week dredging up and reliving the past? Josh was dead. Izzy never had to think about him or his lies again.

He'd spent a week in the hospital and months in rehab after the accident. He wouldn't have made it through without Micah. Micah had saved him. At least, he'd saved Izzy's ability to walk normally...or possibly bullied him into saving himself—it was unclear. Izzy had tried to quit. He didn't care if his leg wasn't one hundred percent. He wasn't going to ride again anyway. He'd wanted to put everything behind him.

But Micah had made him keep going, promising him a job at Split Rock Ranch if he stuck it out until Micah finished college and they could move home. Izzy had never understood Micah's commitment to someone he barely knew.

Micah had seen the video of his accident and showed up at the hospital to check on him. When he found out that Izzy had kicked everyone out, including his parents, Micah had stayed.

Izzy still wasn't sure why he'd let him. At the time, they'd been no more than two guys who were from the same small town and had some common interests. Namely, horses and hot older men. They'd gone to the same primary and secondary schools, but they were in different grades and only knew each other in passing. Izzy had been caught up in his career, while Micah had been caught up in Ryan Astor.

Micah had married his obsession, while Izzy had destroyed his.

Fuck. He needed to get out of his head.

It was still too early to get drunk. Well, day-drunk was a thing, but he didn't like to drink alone, and he couldn't think of anyone willing to get day-drunk with him without asking a ton of questions.

Sex was his backup plan and was equally problematic. He didn't have a regular fuck buddy he could call up—Braxton might say yes, but he had work, and fucking a hot mess into the mattress wasn't the kind of thing you could put on a time-off request. The apps were out too. With the black hole in Izzy's brain, he didn't trust a stranger.

Eventually, he grabbed an overnight bag, so he'd have a change of clothes later, and tossed it in his car. It had been a while since he'd driven anywhere, so the poor thing wheezed painfully before it started. If it weren't for emergencies like this, he would just get rid of it. He only ever left the ranch to go to the bar or the grocery store, and it was easy to get a ride to the bar and call Archer the next day to pick him up. Maggie would drive him to the store if he asked.

Eli was dressed in a ratty hoodie and jeans, his fingertips black from metalwork when he opened his studio door. He had dark circles like he'd been up all night, so Izzy assumed he was working on a deadline. If he was surprised at Izzy showing up in the middle of the day, he didn't mention it. His jewelry-making space was above the gallery where he worked as a part-time manager. It had been his studio apartment too, but that had only lasted a few months until he'd moved in with Hunter, his Daddy.

Izzy had no interest in that kind of relationship, despite three of his friends—or maybe he should call Finn and Ev Micah's friends—having hooked up with Daddy-type men. He could see the appeal, but he knew he'd bristle and fight the controlling aspect. He might enjoy being held down for a hard fuck from a toppy guy—and he fucking loved spanking—but the bedroom door was where he drew the line.

Izzy's life and the way he ran it were no one else's business. Especially not a Daddy Dom who thought he knew what was best.

Eli didn't ask questions after Izzy gave him some story about a surprise day off and being bored. He was powering through a massive pile of restock orders and not in any position to turn down free labor. He put Izzy to work, polishing finished jewelry, then boxing things up for shipping. The jewelry was gorgeous and polishing was satisfying, but Izzy especially liked boxing orders. It made him concentrate since the last thing he wanted to do was fuck up his buddy's business by sending something to the wrong customer. The polishing was meditative and gave him too much time to think.

Hunter showed up around lunchtime and did a double take at Izzy, but Eli gave him a look and Hunter kept his mouth shut. Izzy could have kissed him for that. Luckily for all of them, Hunter did the kissing.

It got a little heated.

"If you want a lunchtime quickie, I can wait in the bathroom," Izzy offered helpfully. Then added, "Or watch, if that's your thing."

Eli blushed like crazy and called him an asshole. Hunter grinned and didn't look opposed but sadly turned him down. Instead, he took them both back to the Lookout for lunch. Izzy didn't even care if he was a third wheel. Hunter was a good cook, and he would never turn down free food—or booze.

After they ate, Hunter sent his boy upstairs for a nap. By then, other regulars were showing up, so Izzy stayed in the bar, throwing himself at anything that could be considered a distraction.

The pool table was covered for protection in the evenings, but it was popular with the

afternoon crowd. Izzy drank and played until his thigh started to ache from the repetitive bending and stretching. By then, no one would let him at the dartboard, so he started trolling the room for a hookup. He was past tipsy and feeling fantastic when he spotted a possibility. The guy was good-looking and alone, sipping a beer at the bar. Izzy hadn't noticed him before, so he couldn't have been there long. Izzy slid up next to him, waved down Damion for another drink, and then shot the guy a "Can I suck your cock?" look.

The guy smiled and Izzy moved closer.

"Hey," Izzy purred.

"Hi, Izzy," the guy replied.

Izzy frowned. Did he know him? He squinted, trying to clear his blurry vision. Then he got distracted by the glass set in front of him. Water. Ew.

"Hunter says you need a break," Damion told him.

Izzy made a face. "Tell Daddy-Hunter to go to hell." He turned back to the stranger. "Buy me a drink? Hunter doesn't know what he's talking about." He paused. "Also, he's not my Daddy. He's a Daddy, but he's Eli's Daddy, not mine. I'm not into that shit."

The stranger chuckled. "I think I'll avoid pissing off the owner, if it's all the same to you. Especially if he's a Daddy. You don't want to mess with the protective types." He winked at Izzy. He seemed familiar. Where did Izzy know him from?

"Not even for a blow job? I promise, I'm excellent at those." Izzy stepped closer, tilting his head and batting his lashes.

The stranger stood, but Izzy's moment of triumph was dashed when he steered Izzy to take his seat instead. Izzy blinked, not sure what just happened. So, no blow job? Disappointing.

A glass was pressed into his hand and Izzy triumphantly fished around for the straw with his tongue, then sucking down a gulp. Ugh. Water . He sighed but took another sip. Might as well get it over with.

"Thanks, Ash," Hunter said, setting a massive plate of fries and a burger in front of Izzy.

"Ash is here?" Izzy asked, getting a laugh from Hunter and a chuckle from the stranger. Eli covered his face with his hands and shook his head. Hey, Eli was back. "Eli! You're back!"

The stranger reached over and turned Izzy's face with a finger under his chin.

"Oh. Hi, Ash," Izzy said when his vision stopped spinning and the room righted itself. "When did you get here? Did you know Eli's back?"

Ash grinned. "Not long ago. I see you've been having a good night."

Izzy nodded, then shook his head. "I haven't found anyone to fuck me yet."

"I'm sorry to hear that. It's definitely their loss."

Izzy liked Ash. He was a good guy. He knew Damion liked Ash too. He'd seen the way he blushed last time. Damion also liked Marco, but Marco had a rule about hooking up with coworkers. Marco had a lot of rules. "Hey, have you met Damion?" Izzy asked, gesturing to the hot little piece of ass on the far side of the bar. "He's single."

“Izzy!” Damion yelled.

What? Izzy was helping.

Ash nudged the plate of food closer, and Izzy snagged a fry, licking the salt from his fingers. Plain fries were good, but they were even better with vinegar. “Do we have vinegar?”

“I’m particular to hot sauce, myself,” Ash said. He located a bottle of vinegar near the ketchup and helped Izzy flavor his fries, which was good, because too much vinegar was a soggy problem.

“I appreciate the help, man,” Hunter was saying. “Drinks are on the house next time.”

Ash made a dismissive gesture. “I’ve done my time wrangling obstinate baby celebs. This is nothing.”

“Do you know Remy Dalton?” Izzy asked. “Finny said he was hotter in person. Well, he didn’t say he wasn’t hotter. Hey.” He turned on his stool. “Thanks,” he said when he lost his balance, and Ash caught his shoulder to help him stay upright. “So, hey. Does Remy do threesomes?” He gestured at Eli. “Cause El and Hunter are hot too, and Eli has a hall pass.”

“Oh my god, Izzy,” Eli groaned. “Why are you like this? I don’t need or want a hall pass, and I’m not interested in a threesome with Remy Dalton. Hunter is more than enough for me.”

“More than enough?” Hunter asked, tone deep and sexy with a hint of rumbly warning.

Izzy sighed. He wanted someone to talk to him like that.

Hunter leaned against the bar, his palms on the dark wood, fingers spread. “You make it sound like I’m too much.”

“Hunter has a huge cock,” Izzy told Ash helpfully. “Sometimes Eli can’t walk the next day.”

Hunter laughed through a groan, pinching his nose with two fingers, and Eli smacked Izzy’s arm, hard enough that pain filtered through the haze of alcohol and Izzy winced.

“Honestly,” Ash said with a smirk. “Remy isn’t nearly as wild as the press makes him out to be. Maybe when he was younger, but these days, he keeps things lower key. Sorry to disappoint.”

Izzy popped a few more fries into his mouth. “You know what’s disappointing?” he asked while chewing. “The guys with the perfect cocks are all taken or off-limits.”

Everyone was laughing. Izzy grinned too. Meeting up with Eli had been a great idea. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had such a good night—barring the no-sex issue.

“Since when has anyone’s cock been off-limits for you?” Eli asked, sounding a little bitchy. Izzy must have annoyed him with the teasing about threesomes. Oops.

“There’s only one.” Izzy counted on his fingers. “Also, straight guys. I don’t fuck straight guys.”

“Who’s the one?” Damion asked.

“Keegan. He’s the worst. I’m definitely not fucking him again.”

“Again?” Eli parroted. “When did you fuck Keegan ? Why did you fuck Keegan? You hate him.”

“Twice,” Izzy told him. “Would’ve been three times, but he shot me down.” He took a bite of his burger. “S’why I hate him. Also, he called me manipulative.” He used the burger to gesture at Hunter until he finished chewing enough to talk. “You shot me down too. Why don’t I hate you?”

“Because I give you a discount on your drinks, and I don’t cut you off nearly as soon as I should,” Hunter said dryly.

“Yeah,” Izzy agreed. “That’s why I like you.”

“In Keegan’s defense, you can be kinda manipulative. Like when you’re trying to get me to pour you another drink after Hunter cuts you off.”

Izzy’s jaw dropped, and he stared at Damion in betrayal. He turned to Eli. “Do you think I’m manipulative?”

Eli winced. “I wouldn’t call you manipulative. But when you don’t want to deal with something, you turn up the assholishness to get the problem to leave you alone,” Eli said.

Izzy didn’t want to talk about this anymore. It was a stupid, terrible topic. This was Keegan’s fault. Why were they even talking about him? He wasn’t there. He was off somewhere else being all hot with his stupid name and his perfect cock. “Ugh. Keegan,” Izzy mocked. “I need that asshole out of my head. Please tell me there’s someone worth the effort in here.” He tried to focus on the rest of the bar, but when his vision decided to cooperate, it was practically empty. Where had everyone gone?

“They cleared out when the snow got bad,” Damion said, like he was reminding Izzy.

Snow? “It’s not gonna snow until tonight,” Izzy corrected.

Damion’s lips curved up in amusement. “Izzy, it’s almost midnight.”

What? Izzy fumbled for his phone. It hadn’t even been dark the last time he checked. He hit the button a few times before he remembered he’d turned it off so he didn’t have to feel it buzzing in his pocket. “That’s bullshit,” he decided out loud. “I had plans.”

“Pretty sure you abandoned those around drink number eight, hon,” Eli told him. “You shot down everyone who came near you.”

“He’s right,” Ash said when Izzy tried to argue. Izzy had forgotten Ash was there. “You told one guy he was too late. You’ve been ruined for all cock that isn’t attached to, and I quote, ‘a forty-year-old obnoxious asshole with a PhD in horses.’” He paused. “Which sucks for you because I don’t think you can get a PhD in horses.”

Izzy scowled. What the fuck? That didn’t sound like him at all. This was all Keegan’s fault. “This is all Keegan’s fault.”

“You should let him know,” Eli said. “Lord knows I’d worry less if you were with him instead of some random.”

“Why the hell would I do that?” Izzy said, straightening on, and nearly slipping off, his barstool to give Eli the full weight of his glare. “I hate that bastard.”

“So you’ve said,” Hunter replied, tone dry enough to make Izzy want another drink.

“I like Keegan,” Damion announced. The traitor. He was sitting next to Izzy with a beer in front of him. Wasn’t he working a minute ago? “He’s always polite, and he tips well. More than I can say for some of the guys I’ve seen you with.”

“Traitor,” Izzy said then snagged Damion’s beer, getting two gulps before it was stolen back. “Whatever. You guys suck. And not in the fun way.” He slid off the stool, proud that he didn’t waver when his feet landed. Then he realized Ash had his elbow. Whatever. “I’m outta here.”

“Izzy,” Eli said, scrambling down from his own stool. “You can’t leave. The roads are terrible. Stay with us tonight.”

“I’m not driving ,” Izzy shot back, rolling his eyes so hard that he tipped sideways a little. Luckily, Ash still had him. “I can walk,” he told Ash.

“Of course you can, but I’m feeling a little dizzy. Is it okay if I hang on to you?”

Izzy figured that was fine. He didn’t want Ash to get hurt. “Night, guys,” he told his friends. “Don’t do anything I would do.”

“Don’t you mean ‘wouldn’t do’?” Damion asked.

“He really doesn’t,” Hunter said. “Izzy, come on. We’re gonna have another drink upstairs as soon as we finish closing up.”

Izzy dismissed him with a wave. He knew that trick. “Nope. Not tonight, lovebirds.” He started toward the doors, the former celebrity wrangler keeping pace with him.

“I’ve got it,” Ash said to the group behind them. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t end up in a ditch somewhere.”

Izzy didn’t argue. He wasn’t aiming for any ditches—but whatever got him out the door.

He’d almost made it when Marco stepped into his path.

“Izzy,” the bouncer said, a warning in his deep voice that made Izzy shiver a little. It was a shame he and Marco hadn’t been a good fit. There was another man with a sexy cock who knew how to use it. “Where are you going?”

Where was he going? Well, he was leaving. There wasn’t anyone to hook up with here, and Hunter wasn’t going to let him drink anymore. Izzy needed another distraction before his thoughts came back to bite him. “I’m going on a treasure hunt,” he told Marco, patting his bearded cheek. “Night, Marc.”

Marco frowned at Izzy, then turned the look on Ash. “Where are you taking him?” he asked, tone suspicious.

“Yeah. Where are you taking me?” Izzy repeated. “You’re totally sus.” He laughed. Sus was a great word. Props to Gen Z.

Ash stepped closer to Marco. He angled his body, but Izzy didn’t miss the hand that landed on Marco’s ribs, then slid along his side in a petting motion. Izzy blinked a few times, but he wasn’t imagining things. “Hey,” Ash said, voice softer and a little sweet. “Stand down, big guy. You know me.”

Izzy’s mouth dropped open when Marco’s frown deepened, but he mirrored the action, the caress hidden from the rest of the room by Ash’s open winter coat.

“He can be a handful,” Marco told Ash. “And the roads aren’t great.”

“I’ve got snow tires, four-wheel drive, and I grew up in the mountains,” Ash said, eyes on Marco’s mouth like he wanted to kiss him. “But I’ll be careful. Promise.”

Marco frowned. “You grew up in LA.”

Ash chuckled, warm and familiar. “Remind me to give you a geography lesson about

the Grapevine.”

Marco huffed, but it was his amused huff, and his shoulders relaxed, which told Izzy they were golden.

Izzy led the way outside, shivering at the blast of cold air and blinking as snowflakes swirled in his face and stuck to his eyelashes. “It’s snowing,” he told Ash.

Ash laughed. “You don’t say.”

The air helped clear Izzy’s head for the moment, though he knew he’d get fuzzy again once the shock of it wore off. He started walking without a destination in mind, his boots kicking up little snowballs in the half inch or so of powder coating the sidewalks, his breath frosting in the air. The only light was from the streetlamps and what reflected off the cloud cover. Everything else on Main Street was closed and dark. Even the white twinkle lights were off this late. Izzy wondered where his coat had ended up. He couldn’t remember, and going back to look for it would be a pain. He’d just need to keep moving. It wasn’t that cold.

A moment later, he was handed a coat. He almost gave it back. He didn’t want Ash’s coat, and then he realized it was his coat. Surprise! He pulled it on and zipped it up to his chin, shoving his hands deep in the pockets instead of fighting with his gloves.

“Where do you want to go?” Ash asked him.

Keegan’s disapproving frown popped into Izzy’s mind. Izzy pushed it away. “What’s up with you and Marc?” he asked instead.

Ash sighed and muttered. “Halfway to blackout and he notices that.”

“Duh,” Izzy said. “You were noticeable.”

“Actually, we’ve been very subtle,” Ash argued. “We’re just friends...who happen to have some outstanding sex when we’re both in the right mood.”

“I didn’t peg you as his type.”

“What do you mean?” Ash asked, tone careful. He clearly knew what Izzy meant.

“Dude, I’m drowning in Daddies. You think I don’t know what Marco’s into? I just didn’t think I was that far off with you . Usually, I’m better at picking out the subs from the Doms.”

That made Ash laugh. “I’m not a sub.”

Izzy eyed him. “Oh. You’re a switch, then.”

Ash rocked his leather-gloved hand back and forth in a so-so gesture. “I don’t like labels. People in LA are obsessed with them. It gets old.”

“Alice doesn’t like labels either,” Izzy informed him. “She says she’s already got too many.”

“Who’s Alice?” Ash asked, snagging Izzy’s elbow and steering him around the corner onto Cedar. There wasn’t much on Cedar other than motels and B&Bs, but it connected to a few more bars and restaurants at the far end.

“One of my coworkers. You know Archer?” Sometimes Archer came to the Lookout, even though the pickings there were slim for straight guys.

“Xavier’s mentioned him.”

Oh, right. Xavier was Ash’s boss. “Archer and Alice are twins. She doesn’t do loud

places, though, so you wouldn't have met her unless you came to Sunday dinner." He paused. "You should come to Sunday dinner. Ryan needs a bigger table anyway."

Ash laughed and pulled Izzy to a stop. They were standing in front of one of the cottages at the Rainbow Inn. Miss Crystal's B&B was by far the nicest and most popular place to stay in town.

"Miss Crystal makes the best coffee, but I didn't think you wanted to fuck me."

Ash's expression was perpetually amused. Surprisingly, Izzy didn't mind it since it didn't feel like Ash was judging him. "You want coffee at midnight?"

Izzy shook his head. "No. But I want morning-after coffee, and some of these places only serve mud. It's a good morning if I get some from Miss Crystal. Also, I know I don't need to worry about condoms or lube here because she keeps the cottages stocked."

"That she does. But no, I still don't want to fuck you. And I don't think you want to fuck me either." He gestured to the silver SUV beside them. "This one's mine. I've only had two beers, and that was a few hours ago. I figured I'd drive you home." He hit a button, and the vehicle unlocked with a beep, the engine purring to life and the headlights flicking on.

"Fancy," Izzy said.

"Very," Ash agreed, helping Izzy into the passenger seat, even though he didn't need help.

Once Ash was behind the wheel, he asked again. "Where to?"

Izzy bit his lip and tugged on one of his curls, letting it bounce back over and over.

Where did he want to go?

The answer wasn't "home."

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am

Keegan woke to Chance's low growl.

He waited. Chance was the best alarm system money couldn't buy. He heard movement long before anyone reached them and was smart enough to know the difference between normal traffic and something Keegan needed to be woken up for.

Chance was in the center of the room, facing the door with his ears pricked and his hackles raised. He gave a low, warning woof that had Keegan sliding out of bed. Lucky hopped down with him, while Riley continued snoozing away, on her back with all four paws in the air. The perk of being a deaf dog was sleeping through anything.

Keegan pulled on his sleep pants and shoved his feet into his boots. He was looking for a shirt when the rumble of a car pulling into the short driveway reached him. He gave Chance a pat and asked him to stand down.

Chance heaved a sigh but went to his bed in the corner, turning a few times before settling. He trusted his pack leader to protect them if necessary.

Keegan shut Riley in the bedroom as well but let Lucky follow him. There was nothing wrong with having ninety pounds of deterrent when investigating a disturbance at—he checked the digital clock over the stove—one in the morning.

He flicked on the kitchen lights. At the same time, someone started pounding on the front door.

Lucky's hackles lifted, and he gave a single, warning bark.

The pounding paused, then started again, followed by a shout of, “Hey, asshole! Open up!”

Keegan sighed and rubbed his eyes. He knew that voice. What the fuck? He crossed the living room, ripped open the door, and nearly ended up with an armful of tall, blond ranch hand. Fortunately, Izzy caught himself on the doorframe before he fell.

Keegan stared. Even disheveled and wasted, Isaac was a beautiful man. The porch lights turned his hair into a glowing halo. His lips and cheeks were flushed from the cold, and snowflakes were melting on his eyelashes. His blue-gray eyes were half lidded and locked on Keegan as he aimed a wavering finger in his direction.

“You,” Izzy spat out, then paused, his gaze raking over Keegan’s bare torso. He licked his lips, then jerked his glare back to Keegan’s face. “I fucking hate you so much.” He levered himself upright and staggered inside, pushing Keegan out of the way.

Keegan sighed in defeat and looked out to the driveway, praying that Izzy hadn’t driven himself in this condition.

An SUV he didn’t recognize was idling, exhaust fogging the cold air, its wipers flicking snow from the windshield. Keegan squinted but couldn’t see more than a shadow in the driver’s seat. As he watched, the driver put the SUV in gear. Whoever it was better not leave this drunken idiot here with— They pulled away, the silhouette of a hand lifted in a wave that Keegan returned helplessly. Fuck.

He turned back inside, shutting and locking the door behind him, and found Izzy on the floor with Lucky. Keegan’s big, bad German shepherd was attempting to lick the man to death, his tail sweeping back and forth with excitement.

Keegan left them to it and went to get a glass of water. He was too tired for this, and

it was clearly going to be a while before he could get back to sleep.

“This is all your fault,” Izzy declared from behind him while Keegan was at the fridge, filling the glass.

Keegan took a calming breath and counted to five before answering. “How so?” He shut the fridge and leaned against it as he sipped the water.

Izzy was less than steady on his feet as he clung to the edge of the counter and glared at Keegan. He’d discarded his coat somewhere, but not his boots. A trail of wet, dirty boot prints trailed across the hardwood floor.

“Take off your boots, Isaac.”

“That,” Izzy spat out. “That’s why.” His long legs folded as he half sat, half fell to the floor and started fighting with his laces. “You’re so fucking sur-superior.” He grunted as he pulled on the boot. “You think you’re better than me, ’cause you’re smart and e-educated, and you aren’t a fuckup. Why’d you have to be hot too?”

Keegan fought not to smile. Was Izzy insulting him or complimenting him? “Sorry,” he offered, moving closer and crouching down to tackle the laces on the other boot. Someone had knotted them and tucked them inside, adding to Izzy’s struggle.

“You should be,” Izzy grumbled back. “You ruined my night. All I wanted was a good fucking. Just a nice fat cock.” He mimed wrapping his hands around said imaginary cock—Keegan was vaguely concerned at the apparent soda-can dimensions—then groaned in frustration. “But then it snowed! Why do you have to be such an asshole?”

Keegan got the second boot off, then set them under the kitchen table and rested his elbows on his knees as he eyed Izzy. “Are you blaming me for the weather?”

“No,” Izzy said, exasperated. “It snowed and everyone left. How am I supposed to find someone to fuck all these thoughts out of my head?” He grabbed the edge of the table and used it to haul himself back to unsteady feet. Keegan stood with him, hands out, just in case. The last thing this night needed was Izzy cracking his head open and bleeding on Keegan’s kitchen floor.

“So, you came here?” Keegan was starting to get the full picture, and he wasn’t thrilled with being a booty call.

“Yes,” Izzy said. “To tell you that you suck. I can’t find a good cock, and it’s all your fault.”

“Because I made it snow.”

“Because none of them are you,” Izzy snapped. “Fuck.” He turned and stumbled toward the front door again. “I hate you. Why am I even here? Whose dumbass idea was this?”

Keegan caught him before his hand touched the knob. Izzy tried to pull away, but Keegan, with the advantage of both strength and sobriety, wrapped his arms around Izzy and trapped the struggling man against his chest. Keegan held on but didn’t respond to Izzy’s question, mind reeling as he tried to sort through that statement. Izzy was upset because he wanted Keegan?

It shouldn’t be that much of a shock. They clearly had chemistry. Both of their encounters had been off-the-charts hot. But he’d been so sure it didn’t go any deeper. Keegan wasn’t special. Izzy liked sex. Keegan had been convenient. But now, Izzy was saying, what? That he preferred Keegan to his many other available options? That was a mindfuck and a half. He didn’t know how to react.

Well, his dick knew how to react, especially with the way Izzy was squirming to

escape and rubbing his sweet ass all up against it. But Izzy was also wasted, and Keegan didn't fuck guys who were too drunk to consent. The bathroom blow job at the Lookout had skirted the edges of that too closely, and he wasn't going to take the risk again.

"Fuck, I have the worst taste in men," Izzy whined, finally giving up his struggle. "If they aren't lying, deceitful bastards, they're fucking judgmental kidnappers. Let me go. Kidnapping is illegal."

Keegan pressed his forehead to Izzy's shoulder and tried not to laugh. He shouldn't find this funny. Izzy was drunk and angry and saying shit he was going to regret in the morning. But dammit, drunk Izzy was a trip. "I'm only going to let you go if you promise you'll stop trying to leave."

"That's still kidnapping." Keegan could hear his pout.

"Baby, it's snowing, we're ten miles from the ranch, and you're not wearing shoes. If you leave, you'll freeze to death."

"Baby, it's cold outside," Izzy sang, off-key. "I fucking hate that rapey song."

Keegan shook with restrained laughter. "Me too. But I swear, if you stay, you'll be safe from me. We aren't having sex."

"What? Why not?"

Keegan banged his head on the muscled plane of Izzy's shoulder. "Because you're drunk. And because I'm pretty sure you're going to hate me even more in the morning than you do right now."

"Sounds fake," Izzy replied, but when Keegan warily released him, he didn't go for

the door again.

Keegan let out a relieved breath. “The bed in the guest room is comfortable.” He paused, eyeing Izzy, then decided he was probably used to sleeping at an angle or, at the very least, was drunk enough that he wouldn’t notice his feet hanging off the end of the standard-length mattress.

With Lucky leading the way, Keegan showed Izzy where the hall bathroom was, then opened up the guest room while Izzy was relieving himself and using the toothbrush Keegan dug out from under the sink—a remnant from when Ryan used to crash at his place back in the day. Toothbrushes didn’t expire, right?

The guest room was a decent size, but Keegan had never put much effort into it. The bed was made and there was a rug on the floor, but compared to the rest of his warmly furnished home, it was borderline sterile.

Lucky, in typical doggy fashion, trotted into the newly accessible space, leaped up on the bed, and flopped down, dropping his chin to his paws and giving Keegan a pathetic look.

“Off,” Keegan said sternly, pointing at the floor.

His normally perfectly behaved, highly intelligent, search-and-rescue-trained German shepherd yawned and flopped onto his side, then heaved a sigh.

Keegan echoed it. Dammit.

“Ugh,” Izzy said, too loud in the quiet hallway. “You’re doing this on purpose!”

Keegan turned in time to see Izzy, stripped down to a T-shirt and boxers, making his way toward him. Damn, his legs were long. Keegan’s palms itched to slide them

under the loose hem of Izzy's boxers. Even his T-shirt wasn't long enough for him, skin peeking through the enticing gap. Keegan needed to keep his distance.

"Doing what on purpose?" As if the fates were reading Keegan's mind, Izzy caught his foot on the edge of the hallway rug and staggered straight into Keegan's chest.

Keegan let out an "oof" as his back hit the doorframe, but he managed to stay on his feet, gritting his teeth against a pained groan.

A moment later, he was resisting a different kind of sound as Izzy's hands slid over his skin, mapping out the planes of his chest. "Isaac, behave." He caught Izzy by the shoulders, easing him back.

"Isaac, behaaave," Izzy mocked, then stuck out his tongue, blowing a raspberry.

Keegan mimed biting it, making Izzy jerk back with a gasp, unbalanced until Keegan righted him again. All right. That was enough. "Bedtime," he ordered, pointing to the guest room.

"Woof," Izzy shot back, then paused. "I thought you had three dogs." His unfocused gaze was on Lucky, still sprawled across the bed.

"I do. Riley and Chance are down the hall. I try not to overwhelm my guests, even when they're attempting to kick the door down in the middle of the night."

"I'm gonna meet them."

Keegan cursed as Izzy pulled away and stumbled to the only other door on the hallway. "Izzy, wait." He tensed for an explosion, but none came.

Inside the room, Riley was curled into a tight ball at the end of the bed, fast asleep

with her nose tucked under her tail. Chance was in his bed in the corner, head on his paws but eyes alert.

Izzy didn't seem to have noticed him. He beelined—well, as straight as a line could be after however much he'd had to drink—for the bed. “Awww...”

“Careful,” Keegan warned, then stomped his foot on the floor hard enough for Riley to feel the vibrations and crack open an eye. When she saw they had a visitor, she lifted her head, her tail thumping and her tongue lolling in a doggie smile.

Izzy paused and cocked his head, unintentionally mirroring her. “Is he deaf?”

“She,” Keegan corrected. “And yes.”

Izzy nodded and slowed, approaching more carefully, his hand out. “Most white animals with blue eyes are,” he told Keegan, as if Keegan—the veterinarian and owner of said dog—wasn't aware. Izzy crawled onto the bed and settled with his feet tucked under him. “What's her name?” he asked, stroking a soft white ear.

“Riley.”

Izzy nodded. “You're the best girl, aren't you, Riley? Yes, you are.” He bent down, pressing kisses to the top of her head, his long fingers buried in her thick scruff.

Riley's tail thumped faster.

Keegan melted. Damn brat was winning him over just as fast as he was the dog.

He could feel Chance judging him from the corner.

“Izzy,” Keegan said, trying for patience. “It's late. I'm tired. Can we please go to bed

now?”

“Mmph,” Izzy said, slumping sideways until he was curled around Riley, his face still buried in her fur. “Wanna sleep here.”

Keegan swore under his breath and scrubbed a hand over his face. Fuck it. He was too tired to fight. He kicked off his boots and turned off the light, making his way to the far side of the bed in the dark.

Once he was in bed, he shut his eyes and waited. Sure enough, less than a minute later, Izzy wiggled his way up the mattress, stripped off his tee, and snaked himself under the covers, his head landing on the other pillow.

Keegan listened to him breathe and wondered if he was asleep already. Passing out as soon as his head hit the pillow wouldn’t be surprising, considering how drunk he was.

His assumption was proven wrong when the mattress shifted a few times. Then a hand slid across the sheets until it bumped into his arm. He sighed. Now what was the brat up to? “Izzy—” he started.

Izzy cut him off. “Do you really want to sleep?” The bed moved as Izzy inched closer. “‘Cause I could help you with that.” His searching hand traced along Keegan’s bicep, aiming south. Keegan caught his wrist, but that didn’t stop him. He wiggled closer, until his warm, minty breath was fanning against Keegan’s neck. “Orgasms are great for relaxation.”

“‘I’m not fucking you’ wasn’t a challenge, Isaac.” He aimed for stern, but maybe went too far.

Izzy’s breath stuttered. He jerked his wrist out of Keegan’s hold and rolled away, toward the other side of the bed. “Fine. Whatever. Message received.” He paused.

“Sorry.”

Keegan swore under his breath, shifted onto his side, and wrapped an arm around Izzy’s waist, dragging him back into the curve of Keegan’s body. “Does it feel like I don’t want you?” he asked, grinding his erection, which had persisted since he’d had Izzy squirming in his arms at the front door, against his ass.

Izzy let out a wanton moan that had Keegan swearing more urgently and gripping his hip to stop him from making the situation harder—more difficult—than it already was.

“Dammit, Izzy.” Keegan firmed his resolve. “You’re drunk. We aren’t doing this.”

“So what if I am?” Izzy said, tone somewhere between aroused and frustrated. “Why are you being such a prude? It wouldn’t be the first time I got fucked while I was wasted.” He grabbed Keegan’s hand and dragged it down.

Keegan stopped him. “You want to get off?” he asked, feeling Izzy nod before he even finished asking. He reversed their grips, directing Izzy to take himself in hand. “Then you take care of it yourself, brat.” It didn’t require any effort to wrap Izzy’s fingers around his cock and give them a squeeze, before letting go and leaving Izzy to it.

Izzy sighed, the sound turning into a moan as he started to stroke himself. “It’s more fun if you participate,” he told Keegan, breathless already.

“I’m good,” Keegan lied. He’d love to be the one with his hand wrapped around Izzy’s long, hard cock, but it wasn’t going to happen tonight. Maybe in the morning, if Izzy didn’t wake up hating him all over again.

It didn’t take long before Izzy was panting and squirming against him, whimpers and

pleas escaping as he approached the edge.

Keegan gave in, just a little, stroking Izzy's bare belly and murmuring words of encouragement as his tongue traced the shell of Izzy's ear.

Izzy shivered and groaned as he came.

Keegan pressed his lips to the soft spot behind Izzy's ear and breathed him in. "Fucking gorgeous," he murmured, causing Izzy to shiver again in reaction. He grabbed a discarded tee, his or Izzy's, he wasn't sure, and used it to wipe up the mess before it could drip onto the sheets. He tossed it aside, then settled again and hugged Izzy close. "Now sleep, brat."

Izzy sighed and snuggled closer. Despite the drunken exhaustion coloring Izzy's tone, Keegan could hear the eye roll. "Yes, Daddy."

"Isaac," Keegan warned.

"Henry," Izzy threw back.

Keegan stilled. "How..."

Izzy snickered, his voice slurred and fading fast. "Micah...told. Use my full name, 'm gonna... Use yours."

Keegan let out a bemused chuckle. No one had ever called him by his legal name, not even his parents. It was on official documents, like the diploma that hung in his office, but that was it. Micah had either seen it there or Ryan—who also went by his middle name—had told him.

Izzy's breathing finally deepened, and his muscles relaxed. Keegan was aware of

Lucky returning from the guest room and jumping up to lie across their feet, but he was also fading, Izzy's weight warm and comfortable in his arms.

Keegan only hoped he wouldn't be woken up by a fist to the face from a brat who didn't remember how he'd ended up in Keegan's bed.

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Someone was watching him.

Izzy tried to decide whether he cared. He was hot—the body behind him might as well be a furnace—and his head throbbed in a way he hadn't experienced since his last birthday.

Fuck it , he decided, dragging a pillow over his head. They could enjoy the show.

Someone was watching him.

Ughhh.

No.

Someone was watching him.

He should probably do something about that. Izzy shoved the pillow off his sweaty face and sucked in cooler air.

There was a lump behind him in the big bed, breathing deep and even, a heavy arm and a leg draped over Izzy. That wasn't who was staring at him. Izzy peered across the gloomy, unfamiliar room, trying to find the source.

His gaze met unblinking golden-brown eyes. His breath caught, and his blood ran cold. What the fuck?

It was a wolf.

A fucking wolf was watching him. It was massive—easily twice the size of a normal dog. The dim light spilling from the hallway cast shadows against its thick gray-and-tan coat. It had long legs, pointed ears, and eyes that Izzy could swear were staring into his soul.

It was between the bed and the door, blocking the escape route, though Izzy was sure it could be anywhere and still catch him before he made it out.

Out of where was also an issue he needed to deal with sooner rather than later. The man behind him was still sound asleep. Izzy took stock. He was hungover, mostly naked, and a little bit sticky. But his ass was unfucked, and his bed partner was wearing boxers over his soft-but-generously-proportioned cock.

So he didn't get laid. Unfortunate.

He tried to think past the cotton filling his head. He knew it would all come back to him—it almost always did. He just needed a minute to... Fuck.

Keegan fucking Reid.

Izzy shut his eyes, his focus flying to the hand that was suddenly burning-hot against his hip as his hangover-brain begrudgingly supplied him with memories of the day before.

Fuuuuuck.

Maybe he should let the wolf eat him after all.

Someone heaved a sigh, but it wasn't Keegan. Izzy lifted his head and met sleepy eyes. Apparently, the weight across his legs wasn't Keegan either. It belonged to a large, blue-eyed white dog.

She let out a yawn that flashed her fangs and ended in a whine, then smacked her lips. She was deaf, Izzy remembered.

He pressed a finger to his lips, surprised when she quieted down, her alert eyes fixed on him. She must know some hand signals. Useful.

Izzy moved his legs, nudging her until she shifted over, freeing him. Then he inched his way out from under Keegan's hand, replacing his body with a pillow. His boxers were around his thighs, so he pulled them back into place and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

The wolf watched him, statue-still and eerily silent. Was it even real? Or just an elaborate prank? Izzy glanced back at Keegan, but he didn't look like he was faking sleep. He eyed the wolf again. Now that he was slightly more coherent, maybe it was a dog after all? It was still massive. The white shepherd—Riley, his sobering brain supplied—had to be seventy pounds, and she looked small next to it.

What had Keegan called his dogs? Riley and... Riley, Lucky, and... Chance. His name was Chance.

Izzy eased his feet onto the floor and stood, not taking his eyes off Chance and getting the same laser focus in return. He tried to keep his breathing deep and even, hoping his heart rate wouldn't give his nerves away. You weren't supposed to show a wild animal fear, right?

"Hey there, buddy," he said under his breath. He took a step toward the door, some of his tension loosening when Chance didn't so much as twitch. "Let's not wake up your dad, okay?" He kept his voice low and even as he picked his way across the room, swinging wide around the wolf-dog as unblinking golden eyes tracked him.

When he reached the hallway, his breath left him in a whoosh. He spotted the open

door to the bathroom and hurried across, shutting it behind him and collapsing back against the wood, a hand pressed to his pounding heart.

He wasn't usually afraid of animals, but that had been freaking nerve-racking. When Keegan woke up, they were going to have words.

Or not. Because he had no intention of still being there when Keegan woke.

The adrenaline had cleared up his lingering headache, but it also, unfortunately, cleared up his memories of the previous night. What the hell had he been thinking, coming here and throwing himself at Keegan? His stomach rolled, and it wasn't from the alcohol. Some of the shit he'd said—accusing Keegan of ruining his night, calling him a kidnapper, and then begging for sex that Keegan had already declined. Where was some convenient drunken amnesia when he needed it?

Oh god. Had he actually jerked himself off in Keegan's bed like a desperate slut? Izzy wanted to rip the memory from his brain and stomp it into the floorboards. Where had all of his resolve gone? He was supposed to find someone to fuck Keegan Reid out of his system, not throw himself at the man himself and beg for scraps of attention.

Izzy turned on the shower and cranked it as hot as he could stand before stripping off his boxers and stepping under the spray. He hissed at the scalding temperature but didn't adjust it. He needed to burn away the last twenty-four hours.

When he got back out after stealing Keegan's shampoo and body wash, he located a towel on the back of the door and was relieved to see his discarded clothes still in a pile on the floor. He wrinkled his nose at wearing day-old socks and boxers, but it was better than nothing. Commando, he could handle, but boots with no socks? Fuck off.

He wasn't sure what had happened to his tee, but he still had jeans and a flannel button-up. It was more than he could say for some morning-afters.

Not that this was a morning-after—god, no—he told his racing heart. He'd crashed at Keegan's, and it had just happened to be in his bed. Nothing more. Anything he said or did while he was there could be blamed on alcohol and—if he needed to—the weather.

Izzy opened the bathroom door, letting out a cloud of steam, and came face-to-face with the wolf-dog again. He racked his brain for anything he knew about wolves and only came up with keeping his posture nonthreatening and maintaining eye contact. Or was it avoiding eye contact? Awesome. That was going to be super helpful. With “nonthreatening” firm in his mind, he headed for the front of the house, where he would hopefully find his boots and his coat.

His coat was easy enough. It was in a damp pile next to the front door. His boots were harder. As he searched the living room, he dug out his phone and powered it on. He remembered sitting on the floor to take them off, but not where.

His phone buzzed to let him know it was starting. Then it buzzed more and kept buzzing. Izzy slowed to a stop, cringing as notification after notification popped up on the screen. He had missed calls and texts, emails, app notifications—the list went on. His stomach churned.

Sure, he'd maybe-kinda walked out of work without telling anyone where he was going—but it wasn't like he'd been difficult to find. A text to Eli or Hunter would have solved the mystery. Unfortunately, his messages went way beyond the usual suspects. He had a missed call from his dad and a text from his mom. His mom never texted. She claimed she didn't understand how it worked, which Izzy thought was bullshit. She was able to post on social media from her phone, so there was no reason she couldn't answer a text.

It didn't stop there. He had missed DMs from people he hadn't spoken to in years. Not since the accident.

He knew Emma's statement would be a big deal in one little corner of the horse world, but this was out of control. Didn't people have anything better to do with their time?

The answer was no. They didn't. Social media was a dumpster fire, and people loved to watch things burn.

He swiped the notifications away, refusing to think about them. He had bigger problems right now. Like figuring out how he was going to get out of here before Keegan woke up. He needed a ride.

As always, Archer picked up on the first ring. "Hey. Glad you're not dead."

Izzy winced. "Yeah. Sorry. It was... It was a day yesterday." Understatement. "Um... I'm at Keegan's. Can you guys swing by and get me?"

There was a long pause, then Archer said, "No."

Izzy's stomach dropped, and he wrapped an arm around himself to stop its fall. "What?" He coughed. Archer had never said no before. Not even the time Izzy had ended up an hour away in the city by mistake. "Why not? What's wrong?"

Archer sighed into the phone. "Nothing's wrong, Iz. But I'm not coming to get you. I've been at work for an hour already, and the roads are shitty. I'm not going to risk driving more than I need to."

"But..." Izzy floundered. "What the fuck am I supposed to do, then? Walk?" His eyes burned, and his breathing sped up as he paced across the kitchen.

“Izzy,” Archer said, patient in that way he got when Alice was having a hard time understanding something. “You’re at Keegan’s house—which I’m not going to ask about because it’s not my business. Get him to drive you.”

Izzy was already shaking his head, even though Archer couldn’t see him. “Yeah, no. That’s not going to work.” His chest was getting tight. He shut his eyes, trying to focus. “Please, Arch. I’ll-I’ll do all your stalls this week. And I’ll buy you those new boots you’ve been eyeing.”

“Man... You hate stalls, and those boots are three hundred bucks. What the fuck did you do that you’d rather spend three hundred dollars than sit in a car with Keegan?”

“Does it m-matter?” Izzy asked, his voice cracking. He clenched his jaw. He couldn’t catch his breath. “Fuck,” he bit out. “Never mind. I’ll fig-figure it out.” He ended the call and dropped into a crouch, back against a kitchen cabinet. He pressed the edge of the phone to his forehead, gripping it hard enough that his fingers ached.

Fuck. Fuck. His chest hurt, and his pulse was pounding in his ears. He swallowed repeatedly against the bile burning its way up the back of his throat. He couldn’t breathe. His head screamed, and his leg ached something fierce. The room started to spin.

Just when he was sure he had no choice but to pass out, something bumped his arm. He tried to turn away but was followed by a warm, canine nose, then a wet tongue, swiping over his cheek. The weight of a furry body leaned into his side, heavy enough that he was forced to sit, then lie back as the dog—he wasn’t sure which one—crawled on top of him and stretched out, pinning him down.

Instead of feeling trapped, it was like having his own personal weighted blanket. Izzy dropped his phone, not worried about where it landed, and sank his fingers into warm, soft fur.

In response, he got an enthusiastic lick to the face that made him sputter and choke on a painful, wheezing laugh. Dammit, why did everything hurt so much? Was he having a panic attack or a heart attack?

He got another doggie kiss and was curious enough about which dog was loving on him that he pried open his eyes.

Everything was foggy until he blinked a few times and realized it wasn't fog, but fur. Riley was sprawled on top of him, her white muzzle inches from his face, her blue eyes focused intently.

Izzy stroked a gentle finger over her soft ear. Her steady breathing was gusting against his face, and he did his best to match it. The vise around his lungs released in increments, eventually letting him suck in a full breath for the first time in what felt like hours.

“Good girl,” he murmured, despite the fact that she couldn't hear him. He needed to say it. He'd never been so grateful to an animal before. Sometimes at the ranch, Ryan's dog Milo would hang out with Izzy when he was having a bad day, but he'd never been so insistent about getting in Izzy's space, and he'd never pulled Izzy from a full-on panic attack.

Izzy kept petting her, knowing he should get up and figure his shit out, but unable to convince himself to let go of the comfort. He'd only just managed to sit, leaning against the cabinets, when Keegan walked in, barefoot and yawning.

He stopped, looked at Izzy, then at his dog, then back to Izzy. “You know I have chairs, right?” he asked, bemused.

Izzy dropped his gaze to Riley. She turned her head and licked his wrist again in what felt like encouragement. “She didn't give me much choice.”

Keegan paused, seconds ticking by, before asking, “Are you okay?”

Izzy shrugged. Then his phone, which had landed several feet away, began to buzz against the floor. He flinched.

Before he could decide what to do about it, Keegan scooped it up, glanced at the screen, then held it out to him.

Izzy stared at it. He’d rather Keegan have handed him a live snake—and he wasn’t a big fan of anything that didn’t have eyelids.

“What’s wrong?” Keegan asked again, more firmly this time.

Izzy swallowed, then shook his head. “It’s nothing.” He reached for the phone, but Keegan lifted it away, thumbing the screen to drag down the notifications as it buzzed yet again. “Keegan,” Izzy snapped, anxiety tightening in his gut.

“Just a text in your group chat,” Keegan said as he gave it back. “I didn’t read it.” Then he bent farther to give Riley a pat. “I won’t push,” he said, not meeting Izzy’s eyes. “But whatever it is, I hope you’ll let me help.”

Izzy stared at the side of his head. He didn’t know what to do with that. This wasn’t what they did. They snarked and snapped at each other. And okay, apparently they fucked sometimes too, but they didn’t offer support.

Keegan straightened while Izzy was still reeling. He set his hands on his hips and arched his back until it popped, then stretched his arms over his head with a grunt. “Fuckin’ forty,” he muttered.

Izzy’s eyes caught on the strip of skin revealed by his lifted T-shirt hem, the delicious vee of his abs, and the reddish-blond happy trail that disappeared into his low-slung

gray sweats. His gaze dipped. Keegan wasn't wearing anything under those. Izzy's mouth watered. How easy would it be to tug them down and get his mouth on Keegan's perfect cock?

"Over easy or scrambled?"

Izzy froze, his dirty mind glitching as he tried to make sense of the question. Riley licking his hand brought him out of his daze. "What?" he croaked, then cleared his throat self-consciously.

Keegan looked like he was trying not to smile. He walked to the fridge and started pulling things out. "Your eggs. How do you like them? I suppose I could do poached as well. Sorry, I don't have the ingredients for omelets. I didn't manage a grocery run yesterday."

Izzy stayed on the floor, stroking Riley, as Keegan pulled out a cast-iron skillet and turned on the flame. "Scrambled?" he said, hating that it came out as a question.

Keegan nodded. "And your coffee?"

Izzy wasn't going to have another panic attack over Keegan making him breakfast. He wasn't. He breathed deeply and focused on Riley's grounding weight.

"I might have tea somewhere if you'd prefer," Keegan continued, apparently mistaking Izzy's silence.

"Black's fine," Izzy finally managed. "As long as it's decent. If not, all the cream and sugar."

Keegan chuckled. "I might not be as much of a snob as Nick, but I don't think mine's half bad."

Izzy could name a few other things about him that weren't half bad.

Once he had food cooking and coffee brewing, Keegan pulled a large Tupperware container from the fridge. Riley lifted her head, her ears perking, but she didn't get up, even when Keegan started dishing food into three large dog bowls.

"I let the boys out the front," Keegan explained. "They'll be back in a minute. I wanted to warn you about Chance first."

Izzy choked on a laugh that had Keegan shooting him a concerned frown. "The wolf? I met him."

Keegan had the decency to look contrite. "Half wolf, actually," he admitted. "He was a rescue from a backyard breeder who got a little more than he bargained for from his backyard." Something scratched at the door, followed by a single bark. Keegan sighed. "You might want to move to the table. They get excited about breakfast, and you'll end up trampled down there."

Izzy stroked Riley's head a final time, tempted to argue that the sweetest girl would protect him, but instead, he gave her a nudge. She scrambled to her feet and licked Izzy's cheek before trotting over to meet Keegan at the door.

Izzy pushed himself up and waited until he was sure his legs were going to hold him, then moved to the table. He paused when he noticed his boots tucked neatly beneath it. He was hit again with the urge to run.

Fuck. He was giving himself whiplash.

Before he could act on the desire, Keegan set a steaming mug of coffee in front of him, along with some toast. Izzy stared at it.

Was he just supposed to sit here, eat the breakfast Keegan made him, and pretend this was normal? Pretend he hadn't blurted out all kinds of things last night that never should have been said. Especially not to Keegan. Izzy couldn't do it. He couldn't—

“Isaac.”

Izzy jumped, then scowled at Keegan for startling him.

Keegan locked eyes with him, asking “Well?” with a raised eyebrow.

The faucet dripped into a water-filled bowl, the sound deafening in the silent kitchen. Why was it so quiet? Izzy looked for the dogs, only to find them sitting in front of their full bowls, also staring at Keegan.

“They have to wait until we sit down,” Keegan said. He pulled out a chair and gestured to it.

Izzy sat, the alternate-reality feeling continuing.

Keegan came back with two plates, one with a more than decent serving of bacon and eggs, the other with a bowl of fruit. Izzy stared. No way had he cooked Izzy a breakfast that he himself wasn't going to eat. Who did that?

“Fruit?” he blurted.

Keegan huffed a laugh as he rounded the table. “Just wait until you turn forty.” He patted his belly. “Everything ends up right here.”

Izzy scoffed. Keegan didn't need to worry about that. He looked fantastic, strong and solid.

“You don’t believe me?” Keegan asked with an eyebrow lifted.

Izzy shook his head. “No, I believe you. I just don’t think you need to worry.”

Keegan raised a closed hand.

Izzy frowned. What?

Keegan gave a slight smile at his obvious confusion, then opened his fingers.

There was a clatter that made Izzy jump as the dogs dove for their breakfast. The sounds of three very large animals chowing down made Izzy chuckle. Oh. That was the release signal.

Keegan sat across from him. “In that case...” Keegan snagged a crisp slice of bacon from Izzy’s plate and bit into it.

Izzy made a mock-outraged sound and curled a protective arm around his food, but he was laughing too, and Keegan grinned back, bacon grease putting a shine on his lower lip that Izzy wanted to lick off. Izzy’s face went warm at the thought. Stupid, broken libido. He distracted himself with a big bite of eggs.

“I actually got Riley last, but Chance and Lucky are smart. They picked up her sign language within a few weeks,” Keegan told him as Izzy tried not to inhale his food like one of the dogs—the eggs were amazing . It had only taken a few minutes for them to finish, and now Riley was back, lying next to Izzy’s chair. Lucky was near Keegan, and Chance the wolf-dog was sitting at one end of the table, which was freaking hilarious. He was so tall he could easily rest his chin on the wooden surface. It felt like having a third person with them.

Izzy lowered a hand for Riley—definitely not the one with bacon grease on the

fingers—and got some doggie kisses. “Are they all rescues?”

Keegan nodded. “I told you about Chance and the backyard breeder. He was supposed to go to a sanctuary, but he got away from them and showed up back here a month later.” Keegan shook his head at the memory. “I figured he’d made his choice and I shouldn’t fight him on it.”

“Lucky was a surrender to the clinic.” He smiled down at the animal at his side, the only one that looked like a classic German shepherd. “He had some expensive but treatable medical issues as a puppy that his previous owner couldn’t afford to fix. The guy was trying to put him down, so we worked out a deal. Instead of euthanasia, the owner signed him over to me. I took care of his medical needs, and thankfully, he’s in perfect health now.”

“And Riley?”

“She was found wandering on a dirt road in Florida after a hurricane. George, the owner of the rescue I volunteer with, drove a truck down for her and a bunch of other unclaimed dogs.” He sighed. “George does her best to locate their owners, but a lot of animals are just never claimed after these storms. There’s no way to know what happened. Sometimes the owner was a casualty. Others lose their home and can’t care for their pets anymore. And sometimes they just leave the area and don’t come back. It’s hard enough to find homes at the best of times, so George helps bring them to areas where they have a better chance.”

Izzy clutched Riley’s scruff. Poor girl. He didn’t want to think about what she’d been through. “Do you think they left her ’cause she’s deaf?”

Keegan shook his head. “No, actually. I have to believe her owner was a casualty. She was in a remote area that was flattened by the storm. And I can’t imagine someone abandoning an animal with the amount of training she’s had.”

“You think she was some kind of service dog?” Izzy asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Keegan shrugged and stole another strip of Izzy’s bacon, making him scowl. “We think it’s possible. She wasn’t microchipped or tattooed, so there’s no way to know for sure. We tried to find someone to adopt her and finish her training, but her deafness made her less desirable. Since she’d bonded with my two, George and I decided she would be happiest if I kept her.”

Izzy finished his breakfast with a protective hand on Riley’s back and Riley’s chin on his knee. He ignored the little voice in the back of his mind wondering if Keegan had room for one more, not-quite-perfect stray.

“Whatever.”

Keegan sighed. And things had been going so well. It was his own damn fault too. The last week or so had given him a false sense of security. Now, he had the sinking feeling that they were back to square one, all because of one thoughtless comment. He dragged a hand through his hair. He wished he had time for this, but he had appointments to get to—one of them with his least favorite client. “Isaac—”

“Don’t ‘Isaac’ me, Henry,” Izzy snapped back. “You don’t get to do that.” He tossed the brush he’d been using on Violet back into the grooming bucket with a clatter.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Keegan tried, but Izzy just laughed, the sound sharp and bitter.

“You basically called me a slut. How could you possibly mean it that would be better?”

“That’s not what I—”

“You got off twice this morning,” Isaac mocked in an impression of Keegan that was disturbingly good and spoke to more practice than Keegan wanted to think about. “I’ve met rabbits that want less sex than you.”

There were a half dozen things Keegan could say in his defense, but none of them would make Izzy feel better. “I’m sorry,” he said, hoping it came across as heartfelt as he intended it. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

Izzy scoffed and kept his back to Keegan as he grabbed a broom and started aggressively sweeping the aisle.

Wonderful. Keegan was at a loss. The morning had started well. They'd spent the night together, then Keegan had dropped Izzy off at the ranch before heading to an early appointment. When he came back two hours later to help with the rescues—which, if he was honest, wasn't necessary and hadn't been for a while—Izzy had been in a mood.

Keegan should have been better prepared. He'd figured out that sex was Izzy's number one go-to when things became too much. He joked that it was his favorite distraction, but Keegan knew he wasn't joking. He used it as a coping strategy—the off-color humor was a defense mechanism. His backup plan was acting like a complete and utter asshole until the problem went away.

Keegan had turned down the first, so now he was suffering the consequences of the second. It served him right. Keegan was definitely the bigger asshole this time.

"I don't think that about you," he told Izzy. "I shouldn't have implied it."

"I am, though," Izzy said breezily, even as his shoulders curled inward. "Everyone knows my only requirements are a hard cock and some interest."

Keegan sighed. Yes, Izzy obviously enjoyed sex, but he wasn't as nonchalant about it as he pretended to be. "Screw it." Keegan took the broom from Izzy and set it aside. Ignoring Izzy's outraged protest, he gripped his elbow and propelled him toward the loft.

When Izzy balked at the base of the stairs, Keegan landed a sharp swat to his ass.

"Get going, brat," he said. "Before my offer expires."

Izzy hissed through his teeth but did as he was told. “God, you’re such an ass,” he muttered. “I changed my mind. I’d rather sit in a snowbank.”

“Too late,” Keegan told him. “You want this, you’re going to deal with the consequences.”

Izzy was starting to look nervous by the time Keegan got them into the loft and out of their winter gear. Then, Izzy turned downright shocked when Keegan pushed him up against the door and dropped to his knees in front of him. “What are you—ohmygod,” he rushed out as Keegan opened Izzy’s pants and dragged them and his boxers down his thighs.

Izzy wasn’t full hard, but Keegan didn’t care. The best part of blow jobs was seeing and feeling his partner react, and Izzy was giving him that in spades.

He was wide-eyed, his breathing rapid, his fingertips turning white where they were pressed to the door like he wasn’t sure if it was holding him up or keeping him from escape. “Keegan, you don’t have to—”

“Oh, I’m going to,” he replied, leaning in and dragging the flat of his tongue along Izzy’s length and getting a gasp followed by a choked-off whimper for his efforts. “If I have to deal with your father bitching at me for getting to his farm late, it’s gonna be with your flavor on my tongue.”

“What ?” Izzy squeaked.

Keegan didn’t answer him, too busy enjoying the way Izzy’s cock was responding to his attention, twitching and growing thicker. When it was fully hard, Keegan drew it into his mouth.

Izzy let out a shout, and his hands flew to grip Keegan’s head as his knees wobbled.

“Oh god. Oh fuck.”

Keegan wasn't sure why they hadn't done this before, but based on Izzy's reactions, it wouldn't be the last time. Izzy shook and whined, alternating between clutching Keegan's hair and trying to muffle his sounds with his hands. Keegan had been aiming for something quick and dirty so he wouldn't fall too far behind schedule, but he ended up drawing it out, enjoying Izzy's pleasure too much to let him go over the edge before Keegan was ready.

Izzy babbled and begged for release. Finally, Keegan gave in, and Izzy curled over him with a shout, clutching his head as he shook apart.

Keegan swallowed him down, then released him gently and climbed back to his feet. Next time, they weren't doing this on hardwood. He was going to tell Izzy so, when he noticed the shocky look on his face and the way he was still trembling. He fixed Izzy's pants, then maneuvered him to the nearest chair, feeling quite pleased with himself. “I really do need to get to my next appointment,” Keegan said regretfully. “You know how your dad is. But I promise to finish making it up to you tonight.”

“Making what up to me?” Izzy asked, blinking a few times like he was coming out of a daze.

Keegan wanted to smile but refrained. He was started to suspect that Izzy hadn't been on the receiving end of too many blow jobs, and he was torn between concern for how that could be possible and the smugness of knowing he'd blown Izzy's mind. “If you can't remember, I'm not sure I want to remind you.”

It was Sunday again, and they'd just finished up with the rescues and were headed up to the house for dinner with good news. Violet was fully healed, and the pony, whom they both called “Devil Pony” more than her name, was nearly there. A few more days and she would be good to go. Izzy was eager to turn the three out in one of the

fields just as soon as Keegan cleared them. So far, they'd been restricted to walks around the barn, though, in Devil Pony's case, they resembled more of a battle-to-the-death than a walk.

Keegan's limbs were loose, and he was still buzzing from a quick visit to Izzy's loft, ostensibly to clean up for dinner. In reality, he'd fucked Izzy bent over the bathroom counter. He'd suggested "showering" together, but Izzy said it was a limit because of his leg. Keegan wasn't complaining.

This time, it was Keegan who changed up the seating, taking Archer's normal seat next to Izzy, which had the added benefit of putting him closer to Ryan. He didn't see enough of his best friend these days.

Izzy didn't say anything when he reached the table, which was a win in and of itself. Keegan also thought his cheeks might have gone a little pink, and he detected a hint of a smile.

Ryan and Nick behaved themselves, and Keegan only had to shoot Micah a warning look before he mimed zipping his lips and turned the topic to their New York trip later in the week.

"It's gonna be amazing," Micah told Archer and Izzy. "Wait until you get a load of the view from Xavier's balcony. It's obviously too cold to hang out there, but," he whistled, "you can see all the way to the Empire State Building."

"I can always turn on the heat lamps and open up the hot tub if you'd like," Xavier offered from the other side of Nick. "Finn and Ev spent half of our last trip out there. I bought a few more lamps since I was afraid this sweet boy," he pressed a kiss to Finn's temple, "might turn into a popsicle." He lowered his voice, but Keegan still heard him murmur "a delicious popsicle" in Finn's ear before doing something against Finn's neck that had him flushing pink and hiding his face. Keegan thought

he might have heard a hissed “Daddy!”

Xavier wrapped an arm around his shoulders, looking pleased with himself.

“Archer, I hear you have a new client,” Maggie said from the far end of the table as she deftly changed the subject.

“Potential client,” Archer corrected. He paused to finish chewing. “Someone saw the piece Xavier has up and wants to talk to me about a commission.”

“No need to sell yourself short,” Xavier told him. “It’s a done deal. Morgan was obsessed. He keeps messaging, wanting to know when he can meet you.”

Archer shrugged, gave a crooked smile and admitted, “If it’s all the same to you, I’m gonna keep being nervous. I’ll believe it when the check clears.”

“First of all,” Xavier said, “for the amount Morgan can afford to pay, it will be an e-transfer. And second...” Xavier placed his elbows on the table and steeped his fingers. “We need to work on your confidence. You’re extremely talented, Archer. I have friends asking when your next gallery show is and if I can get them in in advance.”

Archer blinked at Xavier, looking stunned. “Gallery show?”

“Get ready, Archer,” Nick said, laughing. “You’re about to find out why Xavier is the best in the business.”

Finn hugged Xavier’s arm and gazed up at him with his heart in his eyes, while Xavier smiled and took a sip of his wine.

Keegan couldn’t imagine living that life and didn’t particularly want to try. While

Ryan, his men, Archer, and Izzy were in New York living it up, he would be spending a week at his cabin. It was something he did every winter. He'd arranged for Josie, the other nearby vet, to cover for him. He'd done the same for her when she went to visit her family for the holidays. They had another swap planned for the summer.

As he listened to Micah and Izzy discuss all the things they wanted to get up to in the city, the clubs they wanted to check out and the sights they wanted to see, he found himself dragged down a rabbit hole of overthinking. What would Izzy be like, turned loose on the New York City club scene? Men would be falling over themselves to talk to Keegan's gorgeous brat. To do more with him. And Izzy had always proved to be willing.

The thought of random strangers' hands on Izzy, their bodies pressed up against him, inside him, made Keegan's stomach churn. And that, in turn, made him realize just how close he'd let himself get.

Keegan knew it wasn't his place to make demands. They had never discussed what it was they were doing, much less exclusivity. And more than that, he knew Izzy would react badly if he brought it up now—hell, if he brought it up at all. But dammit if he didn't want to pull Izzy aside and beg him not to let another man fuck him. To be with Keegan and only Keegan.

Izzy's knee was bouncing under the table, and it drew Keegan's attention back to the conversation. Micah was in the middle of explaining some kind of viral video. It took Keegan a few minutes, but he clued in that Ev, the boy they were going to visit, was the subject of the recording. Micah pulled out his phone to show Izzy and Archer the video, posted by Remy Dalton, of all people, of a redheaded young man and a beautiful blond woman performing at a black grand piano. It was taken on a cell phone, but, despite the low quality, their talent was clear. Others obviously agreed, based on the number of views that was nearing the millions.

Izzy was playing along with Micah's excitement about hanging out with celebrities, but Keegan could feel the tension rolling off him.

Something was wrong. Keegan wished he knew what to do about it.

Keegan wasn't great at feelings. More accurately, he wasn't great at talking about feelings. His own or other people's. Sure, he could dole out advice or point out when someone was missing the obvious—like when a certain ranch manager wasn't getting the hint that his employee was in love with him. But putting a name to the swirling mix of stuff that flared in his chest as he watched Izzy speak quietly to Klaus, their foreheads pressed together, was beyond him.

Keegan knew one thing. He couldn't let Izzy leave for New York on Thursday without saying... something. Except, he'd spent the last two days obsessing over it and he still didn't have a goddamn clue what.

Izzy stepped out of Klaus's stall and caught Keegan staring. "What?"

Keegan opened his mouth, then paused. What was his plan here? The only thing he knew for sure was that asking Izzy to stop sleeping with other men would end in a fight. And he didn't know what Izzy would take more offense to—the implication that he was sleeping around too much, or that Keegan had any right to make the request in the first place. Probably both.

Izzy shifted under Keegan's scrutiny and looked away. "Are you pissed about this morning? I didn't mean to snap at you."

Keegan was taken aback. "Why do you think I'm upset?"

Izzy waved a hand at him. "You're making a face."

Keegan shut his eyes and covered said face with his hand, a huff of amusement leaving him even as his skin went warm.

“Uh...” Izzy said, sounding out of his depth. “You’re...blushing.”

Keegan just shook his head. How the hell was he supposed to tell Izzy that he’d been staring because he couldn’t look away? He lowered his hand and opened his mouth.

“Keegan, can I borrow you?”

Keegan shot Ryan a look that spoke volumes about his timing, but his best friend was unreadable. After checking with Izzy, who rolled his eyes in response, Keegan followed Ryan to his office, shutting the door to keep the heat in.

Ryan dropped into his chair behind the scarred wooden desk that had been an antique since long before Keegan’s time. “Coffee?”

Keegan never turned down coffee—and especially not since Nick had moved in and taken over the making of it. Ryan filled two mugs from the thermos on the corner of the desk. He kept the one that read “Don’t make me use my horse trainer voice”—a decade-old gift from Micah—and slid the other to Keegan.

Keegan turned it and snorted.

Printed under a large rooster were the words “Horses are cool, but have you ever ridden a cock?”

Ryan grinned. “I’m sure you can guess who Micah bought that one for.”

Keegan didn’t need to guess, and his best friend knew it. He sprawled back in the other chair, the worn leather familiar and comforting. He’d spent a lot of time in this

office over the years, both for work-related reasons and not. He had a feeling which one this was. “Tell me this isn’t a shovel speech.”

Ryan gave a bark of laughter. “Izzy would kill me. He bristles when anyone gets protective. I’m still surprised Hunter gets away with it, but I think it’s because Izzy doesn’t want to risk Hunter banning him from the bar.”

“Meanwhile, I almost got my head bitten off for daring to ask how he was feeling this morning.” Keegan took a careful sip of coffee, letting the warmth spread through him, then dropped his head against the seat back. “It’s not like I wanted his deepest secrets. He had a headache last night. I was gonna offer him some painkillers.”

“Pretty sure you knew what you were signing up for, buddy,” Ryan said, a gentle tease in his voice.

Keegan chuckled. “Yes and no.” The window next to the desk had a view of the snow-covered riding ring and, beyond it, the fields that led to the base of the mountain. His cabin was up there, just below the ridgeline, though it wasn’t visible. “I thought I did, but he hides a lot. I’m pretty sure he never said one real thing to me after—” Keegan hesitated, the pause awkward between them. He’d never had something relationship-related he didn’t mind telling Ryan about, but he needed to remember that Ryan wasn’t just his best friend. He was also Izzy’s boss, his friend, and, when it came down to it, his landlord. Keegan didn’t want to accidentally betray a confidence. “But he’s been opening up a little more. And I think I’m learning to read between the lines,” Keegan finished.

“Did he happen to tell you why he backed out of the New York trip?”

Keegan stopped with the coffee mug halfway to his mouth. He was ashamed to admit that his immediate reaction was relief. He wouldn’t have to figure out how to ask Izzy for—he hadn’t even decided what. Exclusivity? To be his...boyfriend? Yeah, right.

Izzy would laugh in his face. “When did that happen?” he asked.

“He texted Micah yesterday.”

Yesterday, Izzy had been off but claimed it was because of his headache. Now Keegan had to wonder if that was true. “He didn’t mention it.”

“So, he’s not going to the cabin with you?”

Keegan shook his head, a rock settling in his stomach. “He isn’t.”

“Damn.” Ryan sighed and turned his gaze to the window. “To be honest, we were hoping that was why he was cagey about canceling. The two of you haven’t exactly been open about—” Ryan waved a hand between Keegan and the general direction of where they’d left Izzy in the barn.

That was because Keegan still had no idea what they were doing. Maybe it was time he sucked it up and actually talked to his...whatever they were.

“Fuck you.”

At least Izzy was consistent.

Keegan raked a hand through his hair and didn’t give in to the desire to rip it out at the roots. This conversation was going swimmingly . “Pretty sure we’ve determined that you aren’t the one doing this fucking in this relationship,” he shot back.

“Whatever,” Izzy grumbled as his cheeks flushed. It was his go-to insult when he didn’t have an argument. “I’m not talking about this with you.”

Keegan was surprised Izzy let the relationship comment slide. And as dismissive as

Izzy's words were, the fact that he hadn't walked away yet gave Keegan hope. "Why not?"

Izzy froze. "What?"

"Why not with me? What's stopping you?" He moved closer, making Izzy retreat until his back hit the stall wall, then caged him in with hands braced on either side of him. "I'm not going to judge you, Izzy. If that's what you're worried about."

He expected a hundred different brush-offs and excuses, not for Izzy to look away and say, "It's complicated."

Keegan caught Izzy's chin between his thumb and forefinger and turned his face back. "I don't mind complicated."

Izzy let out a breath that ended on a rough chuckle, and his eyes dropped to Keegan's mouth. "Yeah," he murmured. "'Cause there's something wrong with you."

"Brat," Keegan murmured back, then gave him what he wanted, catching his lips in a slow, searching kiss.

Izzy's mouth was warm, sweet, and oh-so soft. Keegan needed more. He deepened the kiss, sweeping his tongue inside to chase Izzy's intoxicating flavor.

Izzy melted, clutching the lapels of Keegan's coat for balance as he opened his mouth to let him in deeper.

Keegan did his best to pour all of his mixed-up emotions into the kiss, needing Izzy to understand all the things Keegan was still trying to figure out how to say.

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Izzy let Keegan deepen the kiss, sinking into it and reveling in Keegan's warmth and strength. He wondered how much convincing it would take to get him upstairs. Bonus points if fucking Izzy into the mattress made Keegan forget the line of questioning they'd been on. Izzy didn't want to go there. He was barely holding shit together as it was.

The house of cards that made up Izzy's life was swaying precariously, and for some reason, the solid foundation his fucked-up brain had decided to latch on to was his worst enemy.

Except, that wasn't fair. Keegan wasn't his enemy anymore. Maybe he never had been. Maybe he'd been the scapegoat for all the crap Izzy didn't want to deal with. Either way, Keegan had seen Izzy at his worst, he knew what Izzy was capable of, and despite Izzy's best efforts, he was still there.

The past week had felt like a series of back-to-back panic attacks interspersed with Izzy desperately searching for distraction—often finding it in Keegan. It had reached the point that he'd dug up an old bottle of anxiety meds. The doctor at the hospital had prescribed them after his accident to help him sleep. Izzy had tried them once, hated how foggy they made him feel, then shoved them into his medicine cabinet and promptly forgotten about them. They didn't seem to be doing much this time, but Izzy wasn't sure if that was because his brain was too screwed up for even medication to fix or because they were really fucking expired.

Keegan worked better than anxiety meds anyway.

Izzy had already begged off the New York trip—there was no way he could fake

being fun-Izzy for four days with his anxiety on a hair trigger and a panic attack just a stray thought away. More than that, Ev was apparently the viral celebrity of the moment and had even been seen in the company of Remy Dalton. The last thing Izzy needed was to be linked to someone famous and have some reporter start digging into his past. His only goal was to keep his head down until all of this blew over and people forgot they'd ever heard the name Joshua Martin.

Keegan broke the kiss in increments, coming back for more several times before he chuckled and stepped away. "You're more addictive than caffeine," he said.

"And I can get you up faster too," Izzy shot back with an exaggerated wink.

Keegan laughed through a groan, then dove in for another kiss that made Izzy's head swim, his toes tingle, and left him panting. "Such a brat," Keegan said when he stepped back again. "But you're not wrong."

Izzy grinned, warmth pooling in his belly. He dropped his gaze to the front of Keegan's pants. "Want me to do something about that?"

His phone buzzed with an incoming text, and Izzy's warmth evaporated. Sammy had been keeping him up-to-date on the media firestorm. It had only gotten worse when she'd released her own statement, backing up Emma's story and telling the world that she had also been victimized by Joshua Martin.

He thought about ignoring the notification until later, but just like every other time, he couldn't do it. The anticipation was more than he could handle.

It wasn't from Sammy. It was from his father.

Dad

A reporter called the farm earlier today with questions about you and Josh Martin. A newer member of the office staff gave him the number for the ranch.

Oh god. Izzy fumbled the phone and watched as it fell, landing faceup in the bedding.

Keegan stooped to retrieve it.

Izzy wanted to push him away, yank it from his hands, shout at him to go away and leave Izzy to have his mental breakdown in peace. Except he was frozen. Numb. A dull roar filled his ears, and he blinked spots from his vision. It had finally happened. Someone was putting the pieces together, and now it was just a matter of time before the truth came out. Before the whole world knew the part Izzy had played in what Josh had done.

“Isaac,” Keegan said, his hands cupping Izzy’s cheeks. “Take a deep breath for me, baby.”

“My phone,” Izzy croaked.

“It’s in your hand. I didn’t read it.”

Izzy could have cried with gratitude. Instead, he pushed Keegan away. He needed space. He didn’t want Keegan to see him like this.

The winter air was frigid on his cheeks, the world blindingly bright. Izzy sucked in one icy breath after another, hoping to numb the nausea crawling up his throat. He could see Josh’s smile, hear his laugh, feel his hands. Izzy coughed, folding at the waist, elbows braced on his knees as he spat out the saliva pooling in his mouth.

Izzy’s leg throbbed, pain radiating outward from the break. Emma held his hand and cried. Izzy hated that he couldn’t cry with her. Everything was so fucked up. Josh was

laughing at him, mocking him for how naive he was. Izzy wanted to punch him in the face, but he couldn't. His arms were too heavy.

None of this was real. He was spiraling. Clinging to his moment of clarity, Izzy shoved his hands into the snow. He hissed as the cold bit into him, but he didn't pull them back. He needed the shock of pain to help him focus.

"Izzy." Keegan's warm hands were on his cheeks. Izzy wasn't sure where he'd come from, but he didn't fight him, just shut his eyes and focused on his breathing and the icy cold burning his hands.

Izzy didn't even realize they were on the ground until Keegan eased back and asked him if he thought he could stand. Izzy shrugged, then nodded, so Keegan helped him to his feet. His knees were as wobbly as a newborn foal—and he'd seen enough newborn foals to back that statement up—but he managed to stay vertical.

"Easy," Keegan said, gripping Izzy's elbow when he stumbled. Izzy focused on putting one foot in front of the other instead of the sudden desire to tell Keegan he was fine. To push him far, far away.

Keegan led him to Ryan's office and got him settled in the big armchair in front of the desk. It was Archer's favorite napping spot when he'd had a long night. Archer's long nights were nothing like Izzy's. Archer had a habit of getting sucked into a project and forgetting what day it was. Izzy loved to give him shit for his "wild all-nighters with his muse."

Someone was talking. Izzy tried to blink the world back into focus. Everything was fuzzy and far away, almost like he'd had a few too many drinks, except Izzy was pretty sure he hadn't been drinking.

"I'm not comfortable leaving him," Keegan was saying.

“I’ll talk to Micah,” Ryan replied. “But I know he’ll feel the same way. We can go to New York another time.”

Crap. Izzy fought the brain fog. “Don’t fucking cancel your trip,” he snapped, his voice not nearly as strong as he planned. “I’m fine. I don’t need babysitting.”

Keegan was frowning, his arms folded over his chest in a way that made his biceps bulge and would have distracted Izzy in any other situation. Ryan just looked unimpressed.

“You might not want to tell us what’s going on,” Ryan said evenly, “but no one is convinced that you’re fine.”

Izzy pushed himself upright and gripped the armrests until the dizzying wave of exhaustion passed. “What, are you the feelings expert now?” he sneered. “Cause I know for a...for a fact...that...” Izzy stumbled to a stop, eyeing Keegan.

Keegan’s arched eyebrow dared him to continue, and as much as his gut was screaming at him to raise his defenses, he couldn’t do it.

He deflated, slumping back. “I don’t need a fucking babysitter,” he grumbled.

“I guess you’ll have to settle for a kidnapper then,” Keegan said, tone desert-dry.

Izzy gaped at him. “What?” he squeaked.

“You don’t want Micah and Ryan to cancel their trip, and you made it clear you aren’t going to New York, so your only other option is coming to the cabin with me.”

Izzy was already shaking his head. “That’s bullshit. You can’t make me do that.” The last thing he wanted was to be stuck up on the mountain with Keegan for however

many days. There wasn't nearly enough to distract him. He'd go stir-crazy. "Who's going to take care of the horses?"

"The same people who were going to when you were coming to New York with the rest of us. Alice, Maggie, and two of the summer part-timers."

"And the rescues?"

"They'll be fine, Izzy."

Izzy tried to find the energy to argue, but he was just too tired. Apparently, he was getting kidnapped. Was it still kidnapping if you didn't fight it?

"What do you mean, there's no reception?" Izzy asked, aghast. What the fuck was he supposed to do up here with no phone?

"I didn't say that," Keegan replied, tone unbothered, which Izzy thought was bullshit. "We don't get internet, but calls usually go through."

"Usually?" Izzy was going to have another panic attack. He was sure of it. "Worst kidnapping ever," he grumbled as he tossed his phone down on the coffee table in front of him.

He could feel Keegan's amusement from across the room where he was unloading groceries. Prick. Izzy flopped over and pulled up his feet. There was a hole in his sock. Had he packed other socks? He couldn't remember. Most of the time between when Keegan and Ryan had given their ultimatum and when they were bouncing up the fire road in Keegan's truck—Chance and Lucky climbing over each other in the back seat and Riley sprawled across Izzy's lap in the front—was a blur of dissociation.

Izzy let his arm hang off the side of the couch until his hand brushed fur. Riley had been glued to his side since they'd picked her up, and Izzy loved her for it. Resting his hand on her back and feeling the steady rise and fall of her breathing was comforting. It had been a few hours since his meltdown, and even now, all he wanted to do was sleep.

Keegan had given him a brief tour of the cabin—well, as much of a tour as you could give when the place was basically one room, a bathroom, and a sleeping loft. It was cozy. Well, it was freezing at first until Keegan got the woodstove going, and then it warmed up quickly. Now it was cozy. And toasty enough that Izzy had shucked out of his winter gear. He was down to his jeans and a long-sleeved thermal shirt. Keegan had done the same and hung their outerwear on hooks by the door.

Everything was wood—the floors, walls, and vaulted ceiling all made out of the same stuff. The living area was open to a small kitchen made of more wood, both the cabinets and countertops, though those were a different color at least. An eating nook was just off the kitchen holding a small table and two chairs.

In the living area, a woven rug warmed up the space, along with a few tables, also wood. Izzy was stretched out on the only comfortable piece of furniture in the cabin—barring whatever was in the sleeping loft—a massive leather sofa with deep, squishy cushions. It had been cold, too, at first, but now it was warming to his body temperature. The woodstove helped with that.

The walls held several bookshelves packed with titles that Izzy couldn't make out from his vantage point, but they seemed to be a mixture of colorful paperbacks and big, hardcover textbooks. Izzy had the sinking suspicion that those were Keegan's main source of entertainment up here. God, Izzy was going to be bored to tears. Maybe he could just sleep the week away. At least he could avoid his thoughts that way since doomscrolling wasn't going to be an option.

Well, there was always sex too. He might not remember if he'd packed socks or not, but he'd been sure to include a large bottle of lube and—because he'd wanted to see the look on Keegan's face—a few toys. Sex and sleep. It didn't sound bad when Izzy thought of it that way. And if it gave him a break from the shitshow happening out in the real world, all the better.

He'd just need to get Keegan on board with his plan.

He blinked as a steaming mug was lowered into his field of vision, then rolled to his back to meet Keegan's eyes.

Keegan looked soft in his worn sweater and jeans, his reddish-blond hair more rumpled than normal from his hat. His cheeks, more scruffy than stubbled at the moment, still held a hint of pink after unloading the truck and carrying in a few loads of firewood from the covered front porch. Izzy had offered to help, but Keegan had been firm that all he wanted Izzy to do today was sit his ass on the couch and warm up. Apparently, Izzy's panic attack had freaked Keegan out a little, and now he was in overprotective, papa-bear mode. Izzy...didn't hate it.

He pushed himself upright enough to lean against the armrest and took the steaming mug. He expected coffee but was startled by a whiff of cinnamon instead. Tea? He took a careful sip. No. Not tea, but cider. Warmth settled in Izzy's chest, and he sighed. "Thanks," he told Keegan as he returned from the kitchen with his own mug and sat at the other end of the couch. Izzy shoved his toes under Keegan's thigh.

Instead of grumbling like Izzy thought he would, Keegan gave his ankle a squeeze. "Need a blanket?" He nodded to the throw over the back of the sofa. "I have a thicker duvet in the cabinet too, if you want."

Izzy suddenly felt much too warm. He shook his head. "I'm fine." He needed a different topic. "Where are the other dogs? Do you just let them run wild out here?"

As if sensing his attention, Riley pushed herself up to sitting and dropped her head to the cushion next to Izzy. He stroked the soft spot between her snowy ears.

“They don’t go far without me,” Keegan explained. “They all have trackers in their collars and orange safety vests so no one mistakes them for hunting targets. Not that hunting is allowed up here or we see any people. It’s more for my peace of mind than anything.”

That helped Izzy’s peace of mind too. He knew from the drive up that Keegan’s land was bordered on three sides by national park and on the fourth by the top edge of the ranch. Still, it was better to be safe. “So with you, they do wander?”

Keegan shrugged and sipped his cider, drawing distracting circles on Izzy’s ankle bone with his thumb. “There’s a ten-mile loop that we take in the summer. It has a gorgeous waterfall at the halfway point that hardly anyone knows about. The water comes straight out of the mountain, so it’s freezing, but it feels great to strip down and dive in after a few hours of hiking.”

Izzy bit his lip to keep from telling Keegan he wanted to see it. That felt too personal somehow. “Aren’t you worried about shrinkage?” he said instead.

Keegan chuckled and gave Izzy’s ankle a squeeze that sent tingles up his leg and caused the opposite problem from shrinkage. “It’s never been something I needed to worry about.”

Izzy scraped his teeth across his lip, wondering if Keegan meant because he was big enough that he didn’t care, or that he’d never had anyone up here with him for size to matter.

“Speaking of cocks,” Izzy started, causing Keegan to sputter around the next sip of his drink then start coughing, his eyes tearing up with pain. Izzy winced. “Sorry,” he

said.

Keegan waved him off. "I should have expected that," he rasped, clearing his throat and wiping at his damp eyes.

Izzy tensed. What was that supposed to mean? That Keegan should have known Izzy would segue into sex? "I feel like I should be offended," he said, then paused. "But I guess that's fair." Izzy did change the topic to sex a lot, but he didn't see it as a problem. He liked sex. He liked feeling good. Feeling wanted. Anyone who had a problem with it should probably look for a different friend, because Izzy didn't plan to stop. "But, speaking of cocks," he kept going, ignoring Keegan's pained chuckle, "I hope you're staying hydrated. Because, as my kidnapper, you're gonna have to keep me entertained while I'm trapped with no internet."

Keegan's eyes shone with mirth. "That's an interesting view you have on kidnapping."

"I mean, you can let me get bored," Izzy said. "But I don't think you want to be responsible for my actions if I am. Just ask Micah what happens if I'm cooped up too long."

"I could always tie you up and gag you," Keegan suggested.

Izzy's skin warmed, most of the heat rushing south. He shifted on the sofa cushion, pretending he was just trying to get comfortable instead of trying not to let his squirming arousal give him away. "Kinky," he teased. "But I think you underestimate my ability to drive you crazy without words."

"I definitely don't," Keegan murmured, his gaze focused on where he was rubbing his palm over the rough blond hairs on Izzy's calf.

Izzy squirmed again. Dammit. Now he was really horny. That hadn't been the plan, but Keegan was too good at getting him worked up. He set his mug aside and crawled into Keegan's lap.

Keegan sucked in a breath but didn't protest. His hands found Izzy's hips, and he helped position him over his cock. Keegan wasn't fully hard, but he was getting there.

Izzy rocked his hips, a pleased hum slipping free. Yes. This was what he needed to chase away the last of the unsettling feelings from earlier. He was already anticipating the burning stretch of Keegan's cock splitting him open while Izzy rode him on the couch.

"Izzy," Keegan said, his tone all wrong for where Izzy's brain was at. Izzy ignored him until he tried again. "Isaac," he said, a clear order to stop. Izzy sighed but slowed the undulation of his hips.

"Yes, Henry?" he said, half teasing and half liking that he could call Keegan something that was just his. Pet names felt too weird, and Kee was a terrible option. It made him think of Ghostbusters . I am Zuul .

Keegan huffed. "I'm not saying no," he told Izzy, voice firm.

Izzy didn't like where this was going. He looked down to where Keegan's bulge was pressing against the front of his pants, matching his own. "Yeah? 'Cause that would be a stupid thing to do," he replied, trying not to get huffy.

Keegan slid his fingers into Izzy's hair and gave a tug that made him shiver, even as he was forced to make eye contact again. "You've had a rough day."

Izzy scowled, his warmth fleeing. "Fine. Whatever." He tried to extricate himself

from Keegan's lap.

Keegan tugged on his hair again, hard enough to make Izzy wince. "Are you going to listen to me, or are you going to jump to the worst possible conclusion?"

Izzy's nostrils flared, but he stopped trying to get away. "I'm listening."

Keegan loosened his grip, stroking his fingers through Izzy's hair in a way that made him want to melt. "You've had a rough day," Keegan said again, then paused and seemed to rethink what he was trying to say. "I'm going to say something you might not like, but I want you to think about your answer before you get pissed at me." He cupped the back of Izzy's neck and gave a brief squeeze.

Izzy rolled his eyes. "I suppose I can do that."

Keegan's expression warmed with amusement. "Thank you."

Izzy took a steadying breath and waited for whatever Keegan had to say that was so terrible.

"Do you really want sex right now? Or do you just want closeness?"

Izzy frowned. That was Keegan's big, scary question? He didn't get it. "Sex," he answered easily.

Keegan nodded slowly. "All right. Can you tell me why?"

What the hell was Keegan going on about? "Look," Izzy huffed. "If you aren't interested, I can take care of myself. I packed toys."

"You packed—" Keegan looked like he didn't know whether to laugh or give Izzy a

shake. It was an expression he was used to. “We’ll come back to that. I’m not asking because of anything I want or don’t want. I’m asking because you had a panic attack this morning that scared the shit out of me, and then you spent half the day dissociating. I’m having a hard time believing you’re anything other than exhausted.”

An electric shock of adrenaline shot through Izzy, and the only reason he didn’t do everything in his power to escape the conversation was Keegan’s steady, questioning gaze and the strong hand on the back of his neck. He blinked and swallowed, searching for words but coming up empty.

“Can we try something?” Keegan asked, stroking Izzy’s arm with his free hand.

“I...guess,” Izzy said, still reeling and unsure.

Keegan nudged Izzy from his lap. “Stay right here.”

Izzy did as he was told. Riley was curled up on the rug again, her nose tucked under her fluffy tail. She was too cute, and it was a struggle not to crawl off the couch and bury his face in her fur.

Keegan returned a minute later and dropped a pillow on the couch. After some rearranging, Izzy found himself playing little spoon under a thick, fluffy duvet, with his head on the pillow. Keegan wrapped his arms around him and squeezed.

“So we’re just...gonna cuddle?” Izzy asked, more confused than anything. Cuddling without sex seemed weirdly foreign, though he knew it shouldn’t. Plenty of people just cuddled with their partner. Not that that was what he and Keegan were, even if Keegan was acting like one at the moment. It was probably just cause of what he’d said—that Izzy’s panic attack had freaked him out. Maybe Izzy just needed to convince him that he was fine and it wouldn’t happen again.

The problem with that plan being, it was going to happen again. Oh well. He'd deal with that shaky bridge when they were forced across it. For now, he was cuddling with Keegan Reid. What even was his life?

Izzy's tension started dropping in increments. Keegan was solid and strong behind him, his breath warm on the back of Izzy's neck, his arms tight around Izzy's torso and applying the perfect amount of pressure.

God, it felt good . It was enough to put him to sleep if he wasn't careful. He trailed his hand along Keegan's forearm, enjoying the coarseness of arm hair against his palm.

Maybe Keegan was onto something with this cuddling stuff. The itchy need under Izzy's skin, something he'd always assumed could only be fixed by getting fucked nice and hard, was melting away. Izzy wasn't sure how he felt about that. Well, he felt good, obviously, but he also didn't want to think too hard about what it meant.

He was distracted from his thoughts by a soft kiss to the back of his neck. "It's okay. Don't overthink it," Keegan murmured, slipping one of his hands under Izzy's shirt and stroking his chest, skin on skin. He placed another kiss on the soft spot behind Izzy's ear.

Izzy shivered, and his eyes welled up. He tried to blink the tears away, but they just kept coming, sliding silently down to drip onto the pillow.

"It's okay," Keegan said again. "I've got you."

Izzy shut his eyes and let go.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am

It had been a wild, risky guess, but Keegan had been proven right. Izzy, his brat, who searched out sex like it was his calling and never lacked for a willing partner, was touch-starved.

It made a lot of sense once Keegan thought about it. Izzy was an affectionate guy. When Keegan saw him out, he always had his arms around one of his friends, either on the dance floor or while they were chatting at the bar. Even at Sunday dinner, he was often in Micah's space. He'd even seen Izzy pull Finn into his lap, making the shy young man blush and shoot Xavier "save me" looks until his Daddy came to extract him.

Keegan wouldn't go so far as to say Izzy was trading sex for touch, but he did wonder if it was the reason for some of his desperation when it came to hooking up.

The tears hadn't been a surprise either. In fact, Keegan would have been more shocked if Izzy hadn't fallen apart at some point. What was surprising was that he didn't try to hide them. When they eventually slowed and Keegan offered to get him water, Izzy just shook his head and gripped Keegan's arms tighter around him. Keegan didn't deny him.

Riley, who Keegan thought was sound asleep on the floor, stretched, then pushed herself up to sitting and laid her head on the couch, her blue-eyed gaze focused on Izzy, her nostrils flaring as she scented the air.

Izzy loosened his grip on Keegan so he could stroke her head. He was quiet for a long time before saying, "There's something wrong with me."

Keegan didn't startle at the statement, but it was a near thing. Izzy had made that joke about Keegan earlier, but this was different. Izzy wasn't joking. "Why do you think that?" he asked, instead of voicing all the normal platitudes. If Izzy was going to open up, Keegan didn't want to screw up and say something that might stop him.

Izzy was silent long enough that Keegan worried he'd screwed up anyway. Finally, he said, so low Keegan had to strain to hear, "I fell in love with a predator."

Fuck. Keegan swallowed hard. What was the right response to that? Luckily, he didn't have to come up with one.

"I thought he was so cool. He knew everything about horses and training, but he didn't treat me like a dumb kid. He listened, and he respected my opinion. He saw something special in me, and he wanted me to be the best."

He was talking about his former trainer. Josh something. Martin. That was it. Keegan's stomach twisted. "Baby, did he—" But Izzy was already shaking his head.

"He wasn't into kids." He let out a hollow laugh. "I actually respected him for that. Plenty of guys tried to get with me before I turned eighteen, but Josh never did. He chased them off and told me to concentrate on my goals. There would be time for dating later."

If Keegan remembered right, Izzy had gone to train with the former Olympian when he was in high school, moving his horse to New England for it. The arrangement was mutually beneficial for Josh Martin and Izzy's father, who bred horses for high-level competition. His son got training from one of the best in the world, and Martin got access to the cream of the crop of Frank King's Irish Sport Horses.

"I didn't mind," Izzy continued. "I wasn't interested in anyone else. And I was too busy anyway. Josh and Birdie took up all of my time."

Blackbird. The mare had been one of Keegan's first foals back when he was still interning for Dr. Haller. She was a beautiful creature. Izzy had sold her after his accident. Now Keegan was wondering how much more there was to the story.

"Things didn't change until I was older. I was almost twenty when I finally wore him down. We won the Eventing European Championship. I was old enough to drink there, so we were celebrating. He let me suck him off. As a reward. I'd never done anything like that before, but I loved it." Izzy's laugh was painful. "He didn't say anything after, but he started treating me differently. Longer touches, more hugging. More blow jobs. I should have clued in sooner. But I believed what I wanted to believe."

Keegan squeezed him tighter, dreading what was next, but needing to hear it as much as he suspected Izzy needed to get it out.

"We—Josh's top students—were getting geared up for the Olympic qualifying competitions. Josh was the favorite for Chef d'Equipe—" Keegan made a questioning sound, and Izzy paused to explain. "Olympic team manager, basically. They choose the team members, train them, develop competition strategy, manage logistics, work with the media... They do it all. They're the reason a team wins or loses." His next breath shook. "Josh was a shoo-in. He'd been to four Olympics and brought home three golds. He was ranked in the top ten worldwide, and the horses he trained won numerous international competitions." Izzy recited Josh's accomplishments like he'd had to explain them before.

"Your horse included," Keegan stated more than asked.

Izzy nodded. "He called Blackbird and me his masterpieces." Izzy's voice cracked, and he had to clear his throat before he could continue. "I was so fucking naive." He lifted a hand to dash at his eyes.

Keegan's control was hanging by a thread. The only thing stopping him from losing it was the fact that Izzy needed him to hold it together. Also, the asshole was long dead, and as much as he wished it, Keegan couldn't kill him all over again. "You were young," Keegan told him carefully, knowing he didn't have the full story yet, but needing to somehow reassure Izzy that he wasn't at fault for what the bastard did.

"Not as young as Emma," Izzy bit out wetly. "Or Sammy. When he got them drunk, then told them to keep their mouths shut if they ever wanted a chance at the Olympic team."

Keegan's breath hissed out of him. That sick bastard. "That's why you called him a predator," Keegan said, trying and failing to keep the rage from his voice.

Izzy jerked his head in a nod. "And I fell for it. Fell for him."

Keegan wanted to force Izzy to look at him, to reassure him that he couldn't have known, but he had a feeling Izzy was only still talking because he didn't have to see Keegan's reactions. "Then what happened? I know the fucker offed himself—which is the only reason I'm not halfway to a murder charge right now."

That made Izzy laugh, the sound bordering on hysterical, before he cut himself off. "Emma happened." He pressed back into Keegan and squeezed his arms tighter until Keegan worried he wouldn't be able to breathe. "Josh had been getting away with it for who knows how long, but Emma was so fucking brave." Izzy sniffled, and it took him a few tries to get the next words out. "She came to me first," he said like it was an admission. "I— I didn't believe her. Josh had warned me that she was jealous of what we had. I was so stupid..."

"He manipulated you," Keegan corrected, tone hard and unyielding. "That wasn't your fault."

Izzy kept going without acknowledging Keegan's statement. "She told Stew next. Stewart, our assistant trainer. He believed her. He always thought something was off about Josh. The two of them warned me Emma was going to the IOC. That's when Sammy told me he'd done it to her too." Izzy was crying openly now, his breath choppy and his voice getting more difficult to understand, though he kept pushing. "I confronted him."

"Baby, it's okay. You can tell me the rest later," Keegan soothed, worried that Izzy was going to push himself straight into another panic attack.

"No. I need to do this now," Izzy insisted. "I confronted him, and he fucking laughed in my face. He told me that was how the game was played. That I'd made it easy by throwing myself at him. Emma and Sammy felt safe because they didn't think a guy who already had a boyfriend would hurt them." Izzy barely got the next sentence out. "It was all a lie, though. He never even fucked me. He didn't care about me one way or the other. I was just convenient."

Keegan was going to find out where Josh Martin was buried and piss on his grave.

They both jumped when Riley barked, the sound short and sharp. She was standing now, her eyes still focused on Izzy. Her nostrils flared, and she lifted a paw and tapped Izzy's arm, then stayed hovering for a moment before doing it again.

Shit. Keegan guessed his suspicions about her service dog training were correct. That was a clear alert.

"Hey," Izzy murmured to her, despite her inability to hear him. "What's wrong?" His hand was trembling as much as his voice when he lifted it to stroke her shoulder.

"She's worried about you," Keegan told him.

Izzy's laugh was wet and shaky. "I'm fine. It's not like this shit is anything new."

Keegan moved the hand on Izzy's chest in slow circles. "Can you do us both a favor and take some deep breaths anyway?" While Izzy did, Keegan gave Riley the sign for "good girl" several times. He wished he had treats in reach, but he didn't want to leave Izzy to retrieve them.

Riley's tail wagged with excitement, and she swiped her tongue across Izzy's face, making him sputter, then laugh again, the sound stronger this time. "Ew," he said, hugging Riley as close as he could.

Keegan could hear the other dogs out on the front porch before one of them, probably Chance, scratched at the door. Keegan gave Izzy another squeeze. "I need to let them in, but I'll come right back, okay?"

Izzy waved him off, and as soon as Keegan managed to untangle himself and climb off the couch, Riley scrambled up in his place, flattening herself on top of Izzy.

Keegan chuckled. "Or maybe I'll make dinner."

Izzy wrapped his arms around Riley and pressed his face to her fur.

Keegan paused, ignoring the dogs at the door for the moment, and ran careful fingers through Izzy's hair. "It wasn't your fault, Isaac. You didn't do anything wrong."

Izzy's arms tightened on Riley, but otherwise, he didn't acknowledge Keegan's statement. That was okay. Keegan would tell him as many times as he needed to until Izzy believed it.

Keegan knew he was still missing parts of the story, because nothing Izzy had told him explained the sudden increase in panic attacks—and he was sure it was an

increase and not just the fact that he was spending more time with Izzy. Micah and Ryan would never have let this go on if this level of anxiety was Izzy's normal. It also didn't explain the cell messages that sent Izzy spiraling. Keegan wished he'd attempted to read the text from Izzy's father that had set Izzy off, but Izzy's reaction had made the choice for him. Keegan wasn't going to betray his trust, even if it was for his own good. He had time, and he could wait until Izzy was able to tell him.

The rest of the night was dinner in front of the woodstove, the boys curled up in their dog beds, and Riley still plastered to Izzy's side. Keegan was a little amazed that she didn't so much as glance at his plate, only inches from her muzzle. He also didn't say anything when he caught Izzy feeding her scraps of chicken. She deserved all the treats tonight. It was pretty safe to say that his dog was now Izzy's dog, at least for the time being.

After dinner, they climbed up to the loft. The steep stairs with their open risers were closer to a ladder than anything, and he kept the dogs downstairs with a gate at the base. After Izzy went up, Keegan got the dogs settled and banked the woodstove, adjusting the air vents to keep it burning all night. Riley got a few extra treats and pats before Keegan showed her a new sign, one for off duty. He'd keep an eye on their boy for the rest of the night.

He turned off the downstairs light and visited the bathroom one last time before climbing up the stairs. Izzy was sitting cross-legged at the end of the bed, dressed only in sleep pants, his phone in his hand. Keegan was about to ask if he wanted to plug it in when he noticed the items lined up on his dresser. He froze. "What the fuck, Isaac?"

Izzy cackled, and when Keegan turned his incredulous look on him, he realized the brat was taking pictures or maybe filming him.

Keegan turned back to the items on the dresser, examining them more closely. When

Izzy said he brought toys, plural, he wasn't exaggerating. "Was there anything in your duffel bag other than dildos and lube?" Keegan asked, voice tight, his body undecided on whether to send his blood to his cheeks or his cock. He wasn't entirely sure what a few of the items were. The dick-shaped ones were obvious, of course, but— He picked up a hard, plastic object the size of his palm with several small balls on it. It kind of looked like a—

"Remote-controlled prostate massager," Izzy said, tone gleeful.

Huh. Well, that sounded fun. He had some ideas for that already. Keegan turned to the next item, which Izzy supplied was a "monster stroker." The opening of the green-and-purple tube was surrounded by terrifying rubbery teeth. Evidently, you were supposed to imagine you were fucking an alien sandworm. Then Keegan noticed something that made his breath catch and Izzy crack up again. He wrapped his hand around the narrowest part and lifted the hefty silicone replica of a freaking arm with a cone-shaped hand at the end of it.

When he turned back to the bed, Izzy was laughing so hard that he'd fallen over and dropped his phone. He had tears streaming down his cheeks, and he was clutching his belly. Keegan couldn't fight his answering smile, and he didn't want to try. It felt freaking good to hear Izzy laugh.

Keegan returned the arm-dildo to the dresser and crossed the small space. He crawled up and rolled Izzy onto his back on the low mattress, straddling his hips. Izzy grinned at him.

"Your face," he told Keegan. "That was priceless."

Keegan shook his head and dropped down to his elbows, their noses inches apart. Izzy went quiet, his chest rising and falling faster than usual from laughing. Keegan nuzzled their noses together in a bunny kiss, then dipped farther and caught Izzy's

lips with his.

Izzy moaned into the kiss and wrapped his arms around Keegan, trying to draw him closer.

Keegan had intended to keep things slow and gentle, but Izzy had other plans. He squirmed under Keegan, fighting his way out of his sleep pants, then starting on Keegan's clothes, getting him naked with an efficiency that shouldn't be surprising. This was Izzy after all, and in the grand scheme of things, despite Keegan being over a decade older, Izzy was probably the one of them with the most experience. Not that Keegan was without a few tricks of his own.

Once they were both naked, Keegan caught Izzy's wrists and lifted them toward the top of the bed, pressing them into the sheets. "Keep them there," he told Izzy, getting a pout and a needy whine in reply. "If you do, I'll make it worth your while."

Izzy's pout melted into intrigue. He bit his lip while he thought, then asked, "How?"

Got him. Keegan smirked. "I'm not going to tell you."

Izzy's nostrils flared. He glanced at the dresser where Keegan had seen a set of leather cuffs.

Keegan chuckled. "No outside assistance. That's cheating."

Izzy narrowed his eyes in determination. "Fine. But this better be good," he grumbled, clearly out of his depth.

"Oh, it will." Keegan leaned down and pressed a kiss to the center of Izzy's smooth chest, right on the defined line between his pecs. "Do you wax here too?"

Izzy nodded. “Figured I was already at the waxing place, I might as well.” He squirmed while Keegan trailed kisses to his nipple, then moaned when Keegan caught the bud between his teeth and gave it a gentle tug, followed by a slow suck.

Izzy’s cock was rock hard and sticking up between their bodies, the wet tip smearing in the coarse reddish-blond hair of Keegan’s happy trail. Izzy rocked his hips, obviously liking the sensation. “Come onnn. Pleeease,” he whined when Keegan released his nipple and made his way to the other. Keegan hid a grin. It was going to be a long night for his brat if he was already begging. Because Keegan had no intention of being rushed. He was going to taste every inch of Izzy’s body before he gave in to what they both wanted.

Izzy only forgot his hands once while Keegan explored and teased him to the brink, and a stern look had him putting them back with a murmured “Sorry, Henry,” that almost made Keegan abandon his plans. He didn’t know why, maybe it was Izzy’s tone, but hearing his given name on Izzy’s lips set off all of his possessive instincts.

As a reward, he sucked Izzy’s balls into his mouth, one, then the other, until Izzy was writhing and nearly sobbing with pleasure. Then Keegan pressed Izzy’s knees toward his chest and ate him out until he was sobbing, tears streaking his cheeks, his cock red and bobbing in the air. Keegan checked Izzy’s hands and found them white-knuckled and twisted in the sheets. “Good boy,” he said, earning a full-body shudder as precome beaded on the tip of Izzy’s cock and dripped to his belly.

With Izzy’s hole thoroughly wet and loose, Keegan didn’t bother to get the lube. He pressed in with two fingers at the same time that he swallowed Izzy’s cock to the root.

Izzy let out a shout that made one of the dogs bark in response, causing Keegan to laugh and nearly choke before he got himself together again. Izzy was begging, broken-off words tripping over each other as Keegan massaged his prostate and

sucked him, slow and steady, controlling the pace to build the pleasure for as long as possible. When he decided Izzy had earned it, he lifted his head enough to say, “Hold on to me,” then doubled down.

Izzy made a relieved sound as he sank his hands into Keegan’s hair and hung on for dear life. Keegan worked him over, alternating between slow sucks and thrusts of his fingers until Izzy spilled. He shook, his chest heaving, his hands tugging Keegan’s hair rhythmically as he babbled thank yous interspersed with hitched moans. When he fell to the sheets, limp and sweaty, Keegan crawled up and gripped himself, fucking into his own hand until he shuddered and came across Izzy’s perfect skin while murmuring praise into Izzy’s throat.

They’d made enough of a mess the night before that Keegan had to change the sheets after cleaning them both up. He was glad he had a spare set, but they’d need a new plan if they were going to be up here for a week. Maybe towels. Keegan pictured Izzy’s writhing body, the toys on the dresser, and all the things he wanted to do to his brat. They might not have enough towels either. Maybe there was an old canvas tarp in the storage closet?

Izzy was still out cold, his head on Keegan’s shoulder, an arm and a leg draped over him, despite it being several hours past the time he was usually up for work. Keegan wasn’t surprised; it had been a long and emotionally draining day yesterday. And while the sex had been satisfying and just what they both needed, it had worn Izzy out to the point that Keegan had been cleaning up his mostly unconscious body by the end.

Keegan debated sneaking out from under him and heading down to start breakfast. The dogs were being patient, but he could hear them beginning to move around, and they’d need to go out soon. If Keegan didn’t open the door, Chance, the escape artist, would. The issue being that he never had learned to close it behind him and it was in the negative digits out there.

Eventually, he pressed a kiss to Izzy's bare shoulder and eased out from under him, replacing his body with a pillow that Izzy hugged to his chest. He stroked a final caress over Izzy's defined cheekbone, then pulled on a hoodie and thick socks before climbing down the stairs.

The dogs went out and did their business, while Keegan did his own in the downstairs bathroom. When he let them back in, Riley was the first to make her careful way up the steps in search of her new favorite person.

Keegan got the coffee going and started breakfast, wondering if he was going to end up feeding Izzy in bed this morning. He was still debating when Izzy appeared at the top of the stairs, dressed in a pair of sweats and one of Keegan's hoodies. His hair was a mess, and he was still rubbing sleep from his eyes.

Keegan smiled at the picture he made. "Make sure you get some socks. It's warming up, but the floor is still cold. And please help Riley on the stairs. She can go up, but getting back down is harder."

Izzy nodded, disappeared for a moment, then came back and helped Riley half walk, half stumble down to the first floor.

When they made it to the kitchen, Keegan handed Izzy a cup of coffee and stole a kiss. "There are extra towels in the bathroom if you want to shower while I finish breakfast."

Izzy hummed and kissed him again, then took his coffee with him to the bathroom. A moment later, Keegan heard the shower cut on.

Izzy returned when Keegan was plating their breakfast—eggs, thick-cut sausage, biscuits and gravy. He looked much more awake and made an appreciative sound when he sat down at the small table across from Keegan. "I thought you did the

healthy breakfast thing,” he said as he dug in. Then he moaned. “This is amazing,” he mumbled around a bite.

Keegan had to agree with him. This was one of his favorite things about coming up to the cabin. “I indulge up here. And I can get away with it, thanks to all the work that needs to be done to keep the place in shape, plus the hiking.”

Izzy nodded. “Makes sense. Did you, um—” He hesitated, taking another bite of food and then a sip of coffee while Keegan waited. “Were you going hiking today? I can totally entertain myself while you do.”

For a minute, Keegan thought Izzy was trying to avoid a hike, then he realized what he was actually asking. “I was planning to, but I hoped you’d come with me. There are some beautiful views.”

Izzy was focused on his plate, but Keegan could still see the edges of his smile. “Sure,” he said with a shrug. “Why not?”

An hour later, they were out on one of Keegan’s favorite winter trails. At this elevation, they were still below the tree line and protected from the wind. There was about eight inches of snow on the ground, enough to turn everything into a perfect white wonderland, but not so much that they’d struggle to walk. The dogs bounded ahead, but Riley came back a few minutes later and attached herself to Izzy’s side. Izzy tried to convince her to go play with the others, but she wasn’t buying it.

“She usually sticks close,” Keegan told him. “I think she feels more secure when she can see us.”

“That, or she doesn’t trust you not to get lost up here,” Izzy teased, flashing Keegan a smile that made him wish for a camera. Izzy’s cheeks and nose were rosy from the cold and framed by his blond curls, poking out from beneath his dark, knit hat. He

was bundled up in Keegan's spare winter gear, which fit him well enough, despite the few inches of height difference between them. Keegan liked the look of Izzy in his clothes, even if it was just a winter coat, neck gaiter, and thermal gloves. It set off that same warm, possessive thing in his chest that he'd felt the night before.

They hiked out for around forty minutes before they reached the first break in the tree line. Izzy made a sound of surprise as he stepped out onto the large, flat boulder that made up the overlook. He held up a hand to shield his eyes from the sun as he looked out over the layers and layers of blue-tinged mountains. The wind was stronger here, whipping the ends of his hair around his face.

Keegan looked on in confusion as Izzy used his teeth to pull off his glove, then dug around in the pocket of his coat.

He grinned around the glove when he caught Keegan watching. "Ha!" he said in triumph as he pulled out his phone. "I might not have any signal, but I don't need one for the camera." He took a few photos of the view, then crouched down to get some of Riley. Eventually, he motioned Keegan over and had him pose for a selfie. At the last moment, he turned and kissed Keegan's cheek, startling him, but not stopping him from pulling Izzy in for a real kiss as soon as the photo shoot was over.

The kiss tapered off, their breaths fogging in the air between them as they watched each other for a beat. Then with a wink and a grin, Izzy turned and went after Riley, who was waiting at the start to the rest of the trail. Keegan followed, bemused by this new side to his normally surly brat. If this was Izzy when he was happy, Keegan was in even more trouble than he'd realized. He would do a hell of a lot to keep that smile on Izzy's face.

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“I’m not sure why you’re so against it,” Keegan said for the millionth—okay, second—time.

Izzy crossed his arms over his chest and hunched his shoulders, glaring at his feet as he curled and uncurled his toes inside Keegan’s thick wool socks. They were finally starting to feel normal again. They’d been numb when they got back from their hike, then burned with pins and needles as they thawed. His thigh was still aching too, the metal attracting the cold, but it would fade in a few minutes as well. The hike had been worth it. The views were spectacular, and getting his heart rate up, out in the fresh air, had felt amazing. Izzy hadn’t realized how much he needed it. Back when he still had Birdie, they used to go out on the trails near his parents’ farm all the time. Not in the winter, though. This was his first time experiencing the backcountry covered in snow.

At the moment, Izzy kind of wished he were still out in the snow-blanketed silence. Even though it was dark now and the temperature had plummeted, he’d rather be freezing his toes off than arguing with Keegan about this. “Because I barely know him, and I definitely can’t afford him.”

Keegan lifted the spoon from the spaghetti sauce he was stirring and pointed it at Izzy, a splat of tomato hitting the floor between them before vanishing under Lucky’s eager tongue. “First things first, you’re part of the ranch family, and it might be a little convoluted and incestuous over there, but Xavier isn’t going to say no to family. And second,” Keegan continued before Izzy could come up with a plausible argument, “if he did charge you, which I doubt will happen, there are a lot of us who would be more than willing to help pay for it.”

Izzy didn't want Keegan's money, and he was starting to regret telling Keegan the rest of the current scandal. He'd been nothing but understanding and supportive, but he also wouldn't leave Izzy alone about it so he could ignore the problem until it went away. Izzy should have expected it. Keegan, the overbearing asshole, saw something he thought he could fix, and he wasn't going to take no for an answer.

Luckily, Izzy was just as stubborn, because no way was he letting Keegan win this one. He didn't need Xavier, in all his part-time-publicist glory, coming to his rescue. Izzy had things under control. He hadn't had a panic attack since before they got to the cabin. Forty-eight hours was a record at the moment.

"Isaac," Keegan sighed, returning the spoon to the little ceramic rest on the counter.

Izzy narrowed his eyes. "Don't do that."

Keegan raised his eyes to the ceiling, like someone in the loft was going to help him deal with Izzy's bullshit. "Izzy," he tried again, abandoning their simmering dinner and walking over to cup Izzy's cheek in one of his big, warm hands.

Izzy leaned into the touch helplessly, his eyes trying to fall shut. Dammit, why did he let Keegan play him like this?

"What are you scared of? Do you think Xavier is going to blame you for what happened?"

Izzy clenched his jaw and shrugged, not able to meet Keegan's gaze. Of fucking course he was. Xavier was a rich, powerful guy who'd probably never had someone look at him wrong, much less been fucked over like Izzy had. At best, he'd think Izzy was a fool. At worst, he might believe, like so many people on the internet did, that Izzy was in on it. That he'd been helping Josh hide the abuse. He'd never even told Micah the whole truth. What if Micah found out and didn't believe him? Or Ryan? Or

Maggie? Izzy's eyes burned and he tried to pull away before Keegan could see it, but Keegan had him backed against the counter and just stepped closer, trapping him.

"Look at me, Isaac," Keegan said, tone unyielding even as he brushed a gentle thumb below Izzy's eye, catching the dampness on his lashes.

Izzy braced himself and glanced up, but Keegan's eyes held only soft compassion.

"We know you, baby. No one is going to think you helped that monster hurt anyone. You were young and, I'd guess, probably groomed to trust him."

Izzy flinched at that word. Groomed. That felt...heavy. And much more deliberate than what Izzy remembered. His breathing got tight, but a moment later, a weight pressed against his legs.

He and Keegan both looked down at the blue-eyed dog that had squirmed her way between them and was now sitting on their feet, looking at Izzy imploringly. Izzy cracked a smile and unfolded his arms so she could nuzzle and lick his hand.

Once Riley was sure he was okay, Keegan caught the back of Izzy's neck and pressed their foreheads together. "I know you're having trouble believing it, but baby, you weren't his accomplice. You didn't help him. You were one of his victims."

Izzy pressed his lips together to keep from arguing. Somewhere in his head, he knew Keegan was right, but it didn't do anything to stop the guilt that kept creeping up and trying to choke him.

It took the rest of the night, all of dinner, and until they were sprawled on the sofa, sated and a little sticky, for Izzy to say, "Fine. You can call Xavier. But if he says no, you're the one who has to deal with impending breakdown."

Izzy was floating on an endorphin high, his ass on fire while exhilaration coursed through him in ever-building waves. Keegan's palm came down again, jostling the plug up against his prostate and lighting him up with equal parts pain and ecstasy. He groaned and thrust his oozing cock into the too-wide gap between Keegan's thighs.

Keegan, it turned out—much to Izzy's delight and dismay—loved edging. Izzy hated edging...right up until he got to come, at which point, he adored it and would eagerly consent to doing it again. That eagerness wore off fast once his cock was dripping an overstimulated puddle on Keegan's hardwood floors.

"Keegan," Izzy whined, his head swimming. He couldn't get any friction like this, sprawled across Keegan's thighs, face down, ass up on the bed while Keegan tried out a few of the toys he'd packed. The plug was thick, because Izzy liked the stretch, but he'd never been spanked with something inside him, and clenching down on the toy with every swat was fucking with his head in the best way. He never thought he could trust someone to push him to this point of desperation over and over again. Not until Keegan. Izzy wanted more. He wanted it to stop. He wanted to cry, and beg, and come. He wanted to keep riding this wave until Keegan decided to let him get off. "Keegan."

"You're doing so well, baby," Keegan said, smoothing his hand up and down Izzy's back, pausing to tug Izzy's hair just as his palm smacked down again, right over the plug.

Izzy let out a shout, his cock throbbing as he teetered on the edge. He spread his legs and arched his back. "Please, please, please," he begged. He rubbed his hot, damp face against the bedding, his fingers twisting in the towel Keegan had thrown down to protect their only remaining clean sheets.

"Please, what?" Keegan asked, his voice gravely with arousal. His erection was pressed against Izzy's belly, but he wouldn't let Izzy do anything about it.

“Please...” Izzy said again, his words floating away while he tried to grasp them.

Keegan chuckled, warm and low. “I need a little more than that, baby.”

Baby. Izzy flushed. Keegan had been calling him that, and Izzy liked it too much. Baby. Keegan didn’t say it like Izzy was a little or a boy, and he’d promised Izzy he didn’t want to be “Daddy,” but other than that, he hadn’t given him any direction. Izzy licked his lips. He’d already said what he wanted to say once. It would be okay to say it again, and if Keegan didn’t like it, he’d let Izzy know. “ Please, sir . Please make me come.”

Keegan groaned and rolled Izzy onto the mattress, then gathered up Izzy’s legs and pressed them up toward his chest. “Hold them there,” he said.

Izzy whimpered at the scratch of the towel against his burning skin but did as he was told. A moment later, he was rewarded by the plug being removed and replaced by Keegan’s fat cock. He clung to Keegan’s shoulders, his lungs heaving as he adjusted to the new stretch.

Keegan cursed as he sank in to the hilt in one swift motion. “Damn, you take me so well,” he praised thickly. “I can’t wait to see that fist you brought wreck this pretty hole.”

Izzy’s vision blurred, his breath stuttered, and his body throbbed. “Gonna come,” he managed to gasp out.

Keegan cursed again and was quick to wrap his hand around Izzy’s cock and work it, fast and firm, while Izzy flew off on a cloud of ecstasy. Keegan’s speeding thrusts only intensified it, dragging out Izzy’s orgasm until he was sure he was going to pass out from too much of a good thing.

He might have, actually, because when he blinked back to awareness, he was sprawled half on top of Keegan's chest, his sore ass in the air and his face pressed to the curve of Keegan's shoulder. "You broke me," he mumbled, lips moving against Keegan's skin. His muscles were wrung out, and he was pretty sure he'd never be able to lift his head again.

Keegan chuckled, his voice sleep-soaked. "Good, 'cause you broke me too." He rubbed Izzy's back, then scratched his scalp, making Izzy wish he could purr like a cat.

Izzy drifted like that for a while, but eventually, he remembered Keegan's comment about the fisting toy. He shivered and let Keegan mistake it for cold, tugging a blanket over him. Should Izzy tell him he'd never used the toy? He'd had every intention of trying it when he'd bought it, but when it arrived in the mail, the size was too intimidating, and he'd never gotten the guts to do more than tease himself with it.

In the end, he decided not to say anything. Keegan was just talking in the heat of the moment, right? He wouldn't actually try to fit that massive thing inside Izzy's body. Izzy shivered again and snuggled closer. Would he?

Izzy laughed as Lucky bounded through the snow, chasing a snowball that had dissolved upon impact. Lucky didn't care, though. He just chomped down on the spot where it had landed, then looked to Izzy to throw another one.

Chance had played with them for a while before he got bored and started patrolling the edges of the yard. Izzy's sweet girl, Riley, was up on the porch with Keegan, taking a nap.

Keegan was sipping coffee, settled under the single heat lamp—that didn't make things warm enough for Izzy's taste—with a book. He'd offered Izzy one as well, but Izzy wasn't much of a reader. He preferred movies in his downtime, or, you know,

going out and partying.

Not that he wasn't enjoying himself. The peace up at the cabin the last few days, just Izzy, Keegan, and the dogs, had done wonders for his stress levels. Izzy didn't know if it was the quiet, the company, the fact that he couldn't obsessively check his social media, or the high-quality orgasms, but he wasn't going to complain. Honestly, it was probably all of the above. He never thought he could be happy out in the woods like this. Hell, his friends would have laughed if he suggested it. He was a party boy. It was what he did. Peace and quiet and alone time? No thank you.

Except. He glanced at Keegan, only to find him watching them with a soft smile curling his lips. Maybe Izzy was losing it, but at the moment, he'd trade a hundred nights at the bar for a hundred nights of Keegan smiling at him, talking to him, touching him. Izzy ducked his head and gathered another snowball. Was this real? Or just a fantasy bubble he'd fallen into that would burst as soon as they were back in the real world?

Something smacked him in the chest, hard enough that Izzy let out a startled shout, his head jerking up, his eyes wide.

Keegan was at the bottom of the steps, grinning at Izzy as he packed another snowball. "Think fast, brat," he called before throwing the next one with surprising accuracy.

Izzy froze a moment too long, and it smacked him in the shoulder. He gave an outraged shout, then let fly with his own snowball—that missed and scattered across the decking when Keegan dodged.

"Is that the best you've got?" Keegan asked as he loaded up again. "You're clearly a catcher, not a pitcher."

Izzy groaned at the bad joke, but he was also laughing. Hell no was Keegan going to win this battle. Izzy was younger and, well, he wasn't stronger and he'd spent his childhood riding horses, not playing catch, but it wasn't like Keegan was more athletic. He was a vet, for fuck's sake. That required a lot of school and didn't leave much time for sports.

The snowballs flew. Lucky went bounding between them, trying to snag them out of the air. Chance, when he joined the fun, had better luck and a higher reach. Riley even got in on the action, chasing after the balls that missed Keegan and hit the front porch.

"What the fuck?" Izzy squawked when he dodged one snowball, only to get a mouthful of snow when the second one nailed him right in the face. He was still wiping his eyes when a heavy weight slammed into him, knocking him off his feet and into a snowbank.

Keegan's arms went around him, cushioning his fall with help from their thick winter gear. The snow was a couple of feet deep where it had drifted up against a small shed, so they ended up mostly buried, just the bright blue sky visible behind Keegan's head. "Gotcha," he laughed.

Izzy glared at him but couldn't hold it in the face of Keegan's warm smile. He pouted instead. "You're cheating. I'm not sure how, but you are."

Keegan ducked down and nuzzled their cold noses together before letting Izzy in on the secret to his success. "I went to college on a baseball scholarship," he admitted, chuckling at Izzy's outraged gasp. "Baby, you never stood a chance."

Izzy grumbled and pulled him in for a cold kiss that quickly turned heated. No. He really hadn't.

Izzy paced across the small cabin, his skin itching and prickling as he grumbled curses under his breath. How had he survived being crammed in this tiny shoebox for so many days? The walls were closing in on him, and the air was thin and stale. Izzy was two minutes away from saying screw it, going outside, and throwing himself face first into a snowbank, to hell with the freezing rain that had been falling all morning.

Riley was glued to his side, and as much as he loved her furry little face, he was too jittery to stop and give her attention right now. Keegan was in the shower, Lucky was sprawled out in front of the woodstove, and Chance was sitting regally in his dog bed, tracking Izzy's progress.

Izzy was still a little wary around Chance, though Keegan had assured him that the wolf-dog was well trained, and while Izzy needed to respect his space, he was still a dog for the most part. Which was great. Cool. But it didn't stop Izzy from being extra aware of those gold eyes tracking him with way too much intelligence.

Chance wasn't the problem right now. The cabin was the problem. That, and the fact that Izzy had just learned that Xavier was coming tomorrow. How had they been up on the mountain for six days already?

It felt like the time had passed glacially slow and also way too quickly. Izzy wasn't ready to go back. He wanted to stay in their isolated bubble forever. But also, he needed to get out of this cabin and find some fucking air. Was it the heat from the woodstove making it hard to breathe? Maybe Izzy needed to open the door for a few minutes and let in some oxygen. He was heading in that direction when Chance stretched and then stepped into his path.

Their eyes locked, and Izzy jolted to a stop, his breath leaving him in a shaky gust. "I just need some air," he told Chance, like he would both understand and agree.

Chance sat on his haunches and yawned, revealing a lot of sharp-looking teeth. He

licked his chops as he locked eyes with Izzy again.

Right. Not going outside. Izzy was looking for a window to open when he realized Riley was alternating between poking him with her wet nose and pawing at his thigh.

Oh. He was having a panic attack. That was why he thought there wasn't enough air in the room.

Riley pawed him again, then gave a short bark, using her body to herd him toward the sofa.

He sat and dug into his pocket for one of the treats Keegan had had him start carrying. "Good girl," he said and signed as he fed it to her.

She took it daintily, then crawled up into his lap, leaning against his chest until he relaxed back and lifted a hand to pet her.

He heard a loud huff and turned to see Chance watching him again. The wolf-dog gave Izzy a look that said "About time you noticed," then turned and wandered back to flop on the floor, back-to-back with Lucky, who woke up long enough to lick Chance's ear before dropping back to sleep.

When Keegan exited the bathroom in a cloud of steam a few minutes later, he zeroed in on Izzy and Riley on the couch. Izzy was starting to think that everyone in the cabin had some kind of extra sense when it came to his moods. It would be annoying if Izzy didn't appreciate it so much.

Keegan tightened the towel around his waist and came around the couch to crouch next to Izzy and cup his cheek. "Shit," he said on a sigh. "I shouldn't have told you."

Izzy leaned into his touch and shrugged. "Not your fault. If I can't predict when I'll

lose my shit over something stupid, how are you supposed to?”

Keegan shook his head, then leaned in and kissed Izzy’s forehead. “What do you need?”

“Distract me,” Izzy replied, the words coming out faster and more desperate than he intended. “Get me out of my head. I can’t handle feeling like this.”

Keegan kissed him again, on the mouth this time. “Okay. Give me a minute. I know exactly what I’m going to do to you.” He pushed himself up, his knees popping. Izzy would have given him shit about it, but he was too busy trying to figure out what Keegan meant.

“Do to me?” he asked Keegan’s retreating back. “What does that mean?” He twisted around, dislodging Riley, who hopped off the couch, satisfied her job was done for the moment. Keegan was halfway up the stairs and clearly didn’t intend to answer him. What was he planning? And how had he come up with it so fast? Was Izzy going to like this plan, or did Keegan intend to make him suffer? Crap. Izzy flopped back on the couch. He shouldn’t have said anything. He should have come up with his own distraction—at least that way, he’d be in control of it.

By the time Keegan returned, dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved thermal shirt that clung to his biceps and the planes of his chest, Izzy was ready to demand details. Luckily for his continued mental health, what little of it he had left, he recognized the items in Keegan’s hands. “Oh crap,” he said.

Keegan chuckled, his grin wicked. “You ask, I deliver,” he told Izzy. He leaned down and caught Izzy’s chin, tipping his face up for a kiss that ended too soon. “On your knees, hands on the back of the couch,” he said. “Oh, and drop your pants.”

Izzy gulped, eyeing the remote-controlled prostate massager, but he didn’t hesitate to

do as he was told. He lifted his hips and shoved his sweats halfway down his thighs. He was soft for the moment, but that wouldn't last long once the toy was buzzing against his sweet spot. He rolled to his knees and dropped his elbows to the back of the couch, arching his back and sticking out his ass.

Keegan gave an appreciative hum, and Izzy couldn't help but show off—his ass was one of his best features after all. The little wiggle earned him a sharp smack that was more noise than sting. “Brat,” Keegan said, warm and fond in a way that made Izzy melt. Who knew “brat” could be an endearment?

Izzy shivered when cool, lube-coated fingers rubbed over his hole, raising goose bumps on his skin. “Ugh,” he whined. “You couldn't warm it up?” That got him another smack, and he fought a smile at how easily Keegan got played. Spanking still wasn't a punishment.

Keegan pressed his fingers inside, first one, then two, but he didn't stay long enough for Izzy to get into it. Instead, they retreated, and the hard plastic of the toy replaced them. Izzy squirmed a little as Keegan got it seated, then squirmed some more at where it rested, just close enough to be felt, but without enough pressure to do him any good.

Izzy made himself still and waited, the lack of anything happening almost worse than the threat of the remote control. Keegan's eyes were on him, measuring, judging, and Izzy didn't care. No, that was wrong. He cared a lot, and he wanted every minute of it that he was able to get. His body heated, despite the slight chill in the room, his cock plumping in anticipation. Izzy bit his lip and tried to focus on his breathing. He needed to relax and go with the flow. If Keegan did what Izzy thought he was going to, it was going to be a very long day.

The first time the toy buzzed to life, Izzy wasn't the least bit ready for it. He'd started to suspect that Keegan didn't know how the thing worked. But apparently, he did. It

pulsed three times, just enough to have Izzy's hips arching and chasing the sensation before it vanished again. Izzy's breath shook on the exhale, but he stayed firm. He wasn't going to let Keegan win this time. Izzy might not know what round they were on—he'd only started keeping score after the snowball fight—but he was determined to come out on top.

Then Keegan was tugging Izzy's sweats into place. Once he was decent again—as decent as he got anyway—Keegan helped him off the couch. Izzy stood in the center of the living room, waiting for instructions as he tried not to shift in a way that pressed the toy against his prostate any harder. He wasn't going to give Keegan any advantages.

“What would you like for lunch?” Keegan asked, then hit the button on the remote.

Izzy's knees nearly gave out, and he had to grip the arm of the sofa to remain upright. “Oh fuck,” he gasped, his eyes shutting and his lips parting as the toy pulsed over and over and over again.

Just as his cock started to press against the inside of his sweats, the vibration stopped. Izzy sagged. He peeled his eyes open and caught Keegan failing to hide his amusement. He glared back.

“Lunch?” Keegan prompted again.

Izzy heaved a sigh. It was going to be a long fucking day.

Keegan Reid needed to die. It was going to be justifiable homicide because Izzy was So. Goddamn. Fucking. Horny. If he didn't do something, he was going to die. He braced his palms on the side of the sink and glared at his flushed and sweaty reflection in the bathroom mirror. This was torture. It had been hours, and Keegan wouldn't let him come. Izzy had tried everything, from begging to pleading to the

sloppiest, most enthusiastic blow job he could manage, and he still got denied.

Izzy's chest heaved, and his fingers tightened on the white porcelain. He knew he could end this right now. It wasn't like Keegan was in the bathroom watching, and there was nothing preventing him from slipping a hand down his pants and jerking himself off in two point three seconds.

But he didn't. He'd love to say it was because he was proving that he could handle anything Keegan threw at him. But in reality, he just wanted Keegan to be proud of him. He wanted to make Keegan happy, and the only thing he was interested in proving was that, when he wanted to, he could be good.

Izzy splashed water on his face and dried it off before limping his way back to Keegan on the sofa and easing himself down next to him. His asshole was one big, throbbing nerve. A whimper slipped free as the toy shifted.

Keegan hit play on the movie they were watching—one of a small selection he had saved to his laptop. What movie? Izzy didn't have a fucking clue. There could have been talking, rainbow-colored dogs, and he wouldn't know it. Right now, he was just trying to breathe and not come.

Izzy's torturer sat back and opened his arms.

Izzy slumped against his chest and got a hand in his hair and another rubbing his back as a reward.

"How are you doing?" Keegan asked, his tone half amused, half concerned.

"I'm never going to forgive you for this," Izzy told him frankly as he snuggled closer. "My dick is purple, and I had to stuff a freaking hand towel down my pants cause the wet spot was making me cold."

Keegan's chest shook with his laughter, and he squeezed Izzy to him. Fuck, that felt good. "Want to move this upstairs? Or do you want to finish the movie first?"

"What movie?" Izzy asked, already fighting his way off the couch.

Keegan laughed again, and he slid his hand over the curve of Izzy's ass, just brushing the end of the toy.

Izzy's legs almost gave out. He forced himself to stay upright, even as his head swam, and started for the stairs, not looking to see if Keegan was following. If he wasn't, Izzy wasn't responsible for his actions.

At the top of the stairs, Izzy stopped and blinked.

Keegan had been up here at some point, maybe while Izzy was in the bathroom, regretting his life choices. The overhead light was off, but a lamp to the side was on, its warm light spilling across the bed, lighting the blankets and deepening the shadows. There was some kind of cloth spread across the surface and a huge lump dead center. Izzy licked his lips as Keegan stepped up behind him and wrapped his arms around Izzy's waist.

"Strip down. Then I want you on your knees with those pillows under your hips."

Izzy had never shucked out of his clothes faster. He left them in a pile on the floor and hurried to get into position. It took a little shifting, but he managed it, folding his arms under his head and resting his cheek on them so he could still see Keegan out of the corner of his eye.

Keegan slid a hand down the curve of his spine, then carded his hand through Izzy's hair. "Beautiful," he murmured, making Izzy flush and squirm. Then he trailed his hand back to cup Izzy's ass cheek and rub it down his thigh, so close to where Izzy's

cock was hanging down between his legs. “Is your leg okay like this?” he asked, his fingers tracing the small scar from his surgery.

“Yep,” Izzy answered, flippant.

That got him a hard squeeze to his ass cheek that made him groan. “Answer me seriously, Isaac. Because you’re going to be here for a while, and I don’t want you uncomfortable.”

Izzy could have made a quip about already being uncomfortable, thanks to his raging hard-on, but he bit it back and said, “Yes, sir. I’m good.” It was the truth. Keegan had stacked the pillows just right to support Izzy’s hips without leaving him feeling unstable.

“Good boy,” Keegan answered, the phrase raising goosebumps on Izzy’s arms. Then he dragged a finger along the underside of Izzy’s cock.

Izzy squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to go off then and there. Fuuuck . He’d gotten this far—he wasn’t going to lose it now. He whimpered and fisted his hands in the heavy cloth covering the bed.

A moment later, Keegan was easing the prostate massager from Izzy’s body. Izzy slumped and sighed, hoping all of this meant he was about to get something bigger. Like Keegan’s perfect cock.

Keegan stepped over to the dresser where Izzy’s assortment of toys had been tucked into a drawer after the first night. Izzy couldn’t see him, but he could hear him rooting around in there. He bit his lip, trying to picture what Keegan might choose. Was Izzy getting cuffed to the bed again? They’d done that a few days ago. Or maybe Keegan was going for the cock ring. Izzy might call the whole thing off if he did. The last thing he wanted was more pressure on his cock. Other than that, he had a couple

of dildos and a string of anal beads. Ooh. Izzy hoped it was those. The bigger ones gave the best stretch, and they felt incredible when pulled out in the middle of an orgasm.

He was wrong on all counts. Keegan knelt on the bed and set the toy Izzy hadn't even considered between them. Then he clicked open the lube.

The goddamn fisting dildo.

Izzy's heart started to race. He'd had every intention of fucking himself with that thing when he'd bought it, but he chickened out every time he tried. It wasn't even a real fist. The hand was cone-shaped, but the girth was intimidating, and Izzy had never gotten it past the second set of knuckles.

Keegan pressed his lips to Izzy's ass cheek, then scraped his teeth across the skin. "I can't wait to see your hole stretch around this monster and swallow it. I haven't been able to think about anything else all day."

Izzy trembled, wondering again if he should tell Keegan he'd never successfully used the toy. If he did, would Keegan stop? Izzy kept his mouth shut. He didn't want Keegan to stop. He wanted Keegan to do what he promised. Izzy swallowed hard and shifted his knees wider.

Keegan hummed in approval, and Izzy felt the cool trickle of lube on his heated skin. It dripped over his hole and slid down his balls. Keegan was being generous with it. That was good. Izzy kind of hoped he used the whole bottle.

Izzy sighed, relaxing into the mattress as Keegan began to massage his thighs and ass, spreading the slippery stuff closer until his fingers were dipping inside, tugging and stretching with each pass. Izzy moaned. After so many hours of pure prostate stimulation, having these new nerve endings teased was blissful, like he was riding a

gentle wave instead of fending off a swarm of bees.

He was grateful that Keegan left his sore prostate alone as he opened Izzy up. He made it to three fingers—he was keeping Izzy informed—before Izzy even felt the stretch.

“You’re so perfect for me,” Keegan told him, the praise making Izzy’s head swim with happy chemicals. “You take my fingers so well. Once I’m done fisting you, I’m going to fuck your sloppy hole nice and slow while you tighten back up around me. Maybe I’ll stay there all night. Every time you wake up, I’ll be deep inside you. Tomorrow morning, I’ll fuck you awake, make you come before you even know where you are or what’s happening.”

Izzy’s brain was short-circuiting. Who the fuck was this dirty bastard, and what had he done with Keegan?

He must have said something to that effect, because Keegan chuckled and said, “It’s your fault. You bring it out in me. I want to say and do the filthiest things to you.”

Izzy trembled. God. Fuck. He wanted that too. He wanted Keegan to let loose on him. He wanted Keegan to take everything he had to give. He wanted to tell Keegan he—

Izzy managed to cut off that thought. It was probably just the endorphins. There was no way he’d managed to fall in— Nope. Not going there.

Luckily, Keegan distracted him by removing his fingers. Izzy’s whine of disappointment got him soothing words in response as Keegan slicked lube over the silicone hand that was looking larger by the second. Izzy hid his face in his arm, not sure he wanted to see this.

He took deep breaths as Keegan positioned the fingers at his opening and applied

gentle pressure. They slid in easily at first. Izzy was well prepared, stretched and swimming in lube. It felt good. He pressed his face harder to his bicep and fought not to tense up. He could do this. Keegan wanted him to do this. Izzy wanted to do this.

“Isaac,” Keegan said at the same time that Izzy gasped, “Wait.”

Everything in the room went still, quiet apart from the way Izzy’s breath was seesawing in and out.

“I’m not—” Izzy managed. Keegan waited for him to finish. “I haven’t done this before,” he rushed out. “I—I tried, but I couldn’t do it.” Keegan swore and started to ease back with the dildo, but Izzy flailed behind him and caught his wrist. “Don’t. Don’t stop,” he said, clinging to Keegan to keep him in place. “I want this. I do. God, so bad . I just—please—” Izzy was running out of words, the buzzing in his brain and under his skin making them impossible. “Please...”

“Shh,” Keegan soothed, his free hand returning to rub Izzy’s back, grounding him. “Don’t worry. I’m not stopping unless you ask me to. This is at your pace, baby.”

Izzy’s tension unraveled, and his lungs started to work again. “Thank you.”

He could feel Keegan’s smile against his skin when Keegan kissed his upturned ass. “How about you thank me after? Right now, I want you to focus on relaxing and letting me in.”

Izzy gave a nod and peeked back at Keegan, whose eyes were dark but his smile warm. Izzy didn’t know how he could look so composed when he had half a fist up Izzy’s ass, but he figured the fact that it was a toy helped.

Damn, what Izzy wouldn’t give for it to be the real thing. He’d much rather have Keegan, flesh and blood and heat, inside him, stretching him past what he thought

was possible. His fingers clenched on Keegan's wrist, feeling the girth of it.

"Tell me," Keegan said, apparently reading the hesitation on Izzy's face. "We can stop and do this another time, when you're ready. It's fine, baby."

Izzy shook his head. "Not that. Just...I want it to be you." He bit his lip, hoping Keegan understood. He did, if Izzy was reading the mixture of warmth and desire on his face correctly.

Keegan dipped down and pressed a slow, sloppy kiss to Izzy's slack mouth. "My hand is bigger than this toy," he warned softly.

"Don't care," Izzy replied. "It'll be better if it's you." Which, for all Izzy knew, was a complete lie. He'd never done this after all, but he knew what his heart wanted, and that was Keegan's fist, not a silicone substitution.

"All right, baby," Keegan said, voice rough with anticipation. "I'm gonna finish stretching you first, then we can try it. But if you aren't ready, we'll stop and work our way up to it. I refuse to hurt you."

Izzy let Keegan's wrist go and dug his fingers back into the sheets. "Yes, sir," he breathed, relief flooding him.

Keegan started working the toy deeper again, twisting it gently back and forth. Izzy's body was giving in, opening farther. Izzy gasped when the knuckles slipped inside, the hand feeling impossibly large. Keegan kept it there, at the widest point, rocking gently and murmuring praise.

Then, just when it was becoming too much and Izzy thought he couldn't take anymore, Keegan removed the toy, coated his hand liberally in lube and started to press inside again.

The sensation was totally different, warm, hard but soft, and a little bit rough where Keegan's calluses scratched against Izzy's delicate skin. He stretched Izzy to the point he'd been at before, then he kept going.

Izzy broke, a stream of babbling, pleading sounds leaving him, alternating between please-more, oh-god, and so-much, too-much. His eyes teared and his lungs heaved, but he did his best to stay still and, more importantly, relaxed.

When his hand finally slipped inside, Keegan cursed. He sounded awed, turned on, and overwhelmed.

Izzy felt like he'd stepped sideways into an alternate state of being. He was riding an endorphin high and he wasn't sure what was pain and what was pleasure, but he knew for a fact that he needed both. He loved both. He never wanted Keegan to stop. He felt like he'd lost complete control of his body; he was a puppet for Keegan to play with. The mental image made him giggle. Hand puppet. Laughing made him tighten around Keegan's wrist, and they both groaned.

Keegan was moving his hand in tiny, rocking thrusts, his knuckles bumping against Izzy's prostate and reminding him of how sensitive he was, how badly he needed to come. He didn't have any words left to explain himself, but Keegan knew. He fucked Izzy's ass, slow and steady, grinding his knuckles into Izzy's prostate as he finally, finally, gripped his cock and pumped it. Izzy was flying, and Keegan's command to "Let me feel you come on my fist, baby," sent him over the edge into endless, rolling waves of bliss.

He barely noticed when Keegan removed his hand, other than the fact that he was left open and aching. Keegan vanished for a moment, but when he came back, Izzy begged for his cock. He was too empty. Keegan's weight pressing him down into the mattress as he filled Izzy's ass again and again was exactly what he had been missing. Keegan always gave him what he needed.

That was his last thought before darkness stole him away.

Holy fuck.

It had been hours since Izzy passed out. He'd woken briefly when Keegan was cleaning them both up. He'd given a thumbs-up, without lifting his head from the pillow, in response to Keegan asking how he felt, then passed out again. He hadn't so much as twitched since.

Keegan, however, was still staring at the ceiling, deep satisfaction mixed with a some trepidation keeping him from sleep. He hadn't meant to go so hard, but as always with Izzy, he got carried away. Some of the things he'd said would probably make him squirm in the light of day, but he didn't have any intention of taking them back. The only reason he wasn't holding to his promise to still be inside Izzy when he woke up was because his promise not to hurt him took precedence.

There was no way Izzy wasn't going to be sore as hell. Keegan had abused the fuck out of his ass, first by edging him long past when a sane person would have tapped out, then with what turned out to be his very first fisting.

If Izzy wanted sex again anytime in the next week, Keegan would suspect he was an incubus. Those were the insatiable sex demons, right?

The sky was starting to lighten. He wasn't sure what time Xavier would be arriving, but he wanted to make sure Izzy was functional again before he did. Hell, he needed to make sure they both were.

He pressed a lingering kiss to Izzy's bare shoulder, breathing in the scent of him—sweat, sex, and lube. He quirked a grin. Not the most pleasant smell, but the

reminder of what they did set off something Pavlovian that made his dick twitch.

Izzy grumbled in protest. “No way,” he slurred. “My ass is closed for business.”

Keegan had to laugh, sure those words had never passed Izzy’s lips before in his life. He got a deserved pinch to the side for that.

“Asshole,” Izzy said, though amusement was clear in his tone as well. “I know what you’re thinking.”

Keegan kissed his cheek. “Is it that, if I had my way, your ass would be for private parties only?”

Izzy lifted his head and squinted at him in the brightening room. “Like orgies?”

Keegan shut his eyes for a moment, lips twitching with restrained laughter before he tugged Izzy into a closemouthed kiss. He needed several minutes with a toothbrush before anything else. “No, Izzy, not orgies. I’m thinking smaller.”

“Threesomes?”

Keegan frowned, unsure. Was that what Izzy wanted? Something open? Could Keegan handle it if he did?

Izzy chuckled and returned his kiss. “I’m fucking with you. I know I have a reputation—and it was hard-earned—but it’s never been about the number of guys.” His expression turned sheepish. “Most of the time, it wasn’t about them at all.”

Keegan nodded slowly. He’d come to that conclusion on his own. “So, if I asked you for—” He hesitated. He was going to say exclusivity, but that sounded too cold and didn’t nearly cover everything he wanted from Izzy. “I want you to be mine,” he said

finally. “I want to be yours as well. Your boyfriend or your partner. Whatever you want to call it that means we’re both off the market.”

Izzy’s face lit up, happiness mixed with relief. “Yeah?” he asked.

Keegan nodded. “Yeah.”

Izzy’s cheeks flushed, and he tried to hide the reaction by kissing Keegan again. “Okay,” he said.

Keegan kissed him back, morning breath be damned, then retaliated for the pinch. “Okay, he says. After I pour my heart out.”

Izzy let out an outraged grunt and broke the kiss to smack Keegan’s shoulder. “If that was you pouring your heart out, you have some work to do.”

Keegan decided to let his actions speak for him. He rolled out of bed and dragged Izzy after him, supporting him while he remembered how his legs worked, then directing him downstairs to the shower.

He let the dogs out while the water heated. He was pretty sure they were all judging him for what he and Izzy had gotten up to the day before, but they would just have to get used to it. He wasn’t letting his brat go anytime soon.

Just after lunchtime, a familiar SUV drove up the fire road and parked next to Keegan’s truck. He was pretty sure it wasn’t Xavier’s.

“Oh,” Izzy said, glancing out the window. “Ash drove.”

Keegan gave him a questioning look.

“Asher, Xavier’s PA. I remember his SUV from when he drove me to your place that one night.”

Ah. That’s where he recognized it from. The mystery person who’d dropped Izzy off the night he’d shown up wasted to tell Keegan how much he hated him. It felt like years ago instead of weeks. It was a mindfuck how much things had changed.

Asher and Xavier got out of the front, then Xavier circled around and helped Finn down from the back seat. He kept hold of Finn’s hand as the group started for the cabin. He’d expected Xavier on his own, but he supposed it made sense. They had come straight from the airport.

Keegan hoped the extra people wouldn’t set off Izzy’s anxiety, not that he’d ever shown signs of his trouble being social. But he’d been hesitant to tell even Xavier his story, to the point that Keegan had suggested Xavier do some of his own research on Joshua Martin beforehand.

Keegan let their visitors in, directing them as to where they could hang their coats and leave their boots. While they did that, Keegan turned to check on Izzy.

Izzy was waiting in the space between the kitchen and the living room. He had his hands shoved in his pockets, and he was rocking on his heels, hiding his reaction behind an unconcerned mask. Keegan was taken aback for a moment, but of course Izzy would protect himself. The bigger surprise was Izzy’s walls being so far down that it was a shock to see them raised again.

Keegan shook Xavier’s hand and thanked him for coming. Despite Xavier’s power and money, he was a good man who took care of his friends and family. When Keegan had reached out, he hadn’t hesitated to offer his help. In fact, he’d expressed remorse that Izzy hadn’t come to him sooner.

Xavier turned to Izzy, who returned his handshake somewhat reluctantly. “Thanks for driving up,” he said, tone bored. His gaze drifted to Finn, and Keegan saw the deflection coming a mile away. Instead of letting Izzy act like an ass, he cleared his throat and gave him a pointed look.

Izzy’s eyes narrowed, and his nostrils flared like a horse that was deciding whether to lash out.

Keegan raised an eyebrow and Izzy winced, deflating.

He turned back to Finn. “Good to see you, Finny. Sorry to fuck up the end of your vacation.”

Finn’s eyes went wide. “You didn’t,” he exclaimed, then stepped forward and flung his arms around Izzy’s waist in a hug that had Izzy freezing in shock before slowly returning it. Finn was blushing when he stepped back.

Izzy ruffled his hair, then nodded to Asher. “Hey, Ash.”

Asher smiled, showing off his perfect teeth. “Good to see you again, Izzy.”

Keegan bristled at the look the two of them exchanged, then scolded himself. There was no reason for him to act like a jealous idiot. The look was nothing. Just because Asher had driven Izzy that night didn’t mean there had been anything between the two of them. In fact, it made it less likely. Keegan’s inner caveman needed to cool it with the possessiveness. It would be ridiculous to get worked up every time he encountered someone Izzy had potentially slept with. Not to mention exhausting.

Instead of stewing in his thoughts, Keegan offered everyone drinks.

They got settled in the living room. Keegan had to pull the two kitchen chairs over so

they'd have enough seating. Izzy had claimed a spot on the sofa, and Riley had commandeered the space next to him, her chin on his thigh as he stroked her head. Asher took one of the chairs, while Xavier took the other and tugged a blushing Finn to sit on his knee.

When Keegan finished handing out the drinks—cider for Izzy and Finn, coffee for himself and Xavier, and tea for Asher—he took the open space next to Izzy. He stretched his arm along the back of the couch, surreptitiously giving Izzy's neck a supportive squeeze.

They indulged in a few minutes of small talk, Keegan asking about their trip and how Asher was enjoying living in Split Rock. Izzy was quiet through most of it, fidgeting with his mug, his knee bouncing.

Once the polite part was out of the way, Xavier surprised Keegan by suggesting he and Izzy take a walk. Keegan's first instinct was to protest. He wanted to be there to help keep Izzy calm and fill in any gaps. And he especially wanted to make sure Izzy wasn't taking on any blame for Josh's actions.

Except Xavier knew what he was doing, and Izzy looked relieved that he wouldn't have to tell the story in front of the entire group. Keegan relented but insisted that Izzy take Riley with him, just in case. He kept his voice low, but Izzy still made a face and shifted uncomfortably. In the end, he agreed, and Keegan felt better about having Izzy out of his sight.

Once they were back in winter gear and out the door, Xavier promising they were only walking down the fire road and back again, Keegan tried to relax. This was good. This is what he'd hoped for and what Izzy needed. So why did it feel so wrong that Keegan wasn't part of it? It wasn't as if Keegan had some kind of savior complex. He didn't need to personally fix the issues in Izzy's life. But he did want to be there to support him, to give Izzy someone to lean on, to remind him he wasn't

alone anymore. That Keegan loved him.

Keegan should probably tell Izzy that he loved him.

Finn had abandoned his cider on the coffee table and gone to pet Lucky. Within seconds, he was on the floor with a lapful of excited German shepherd, getting his face covered in doggie kisses. After a few minutes, Chance wandered over to greet Finn as well. Finn was careful to stay calm and let Chance come to him, and he ended up with the wolf-dog stretched out next to him getting pets while Lucky did his best to become a lapdog.

Finn's easy way with animals reminded Keegan of George. It was part of the reason Keegan was looking forward to working with him on the Fly Away Home project, as Finn had dubbed it. They were still in the early stages, but George was enthusiastic, and Finn had already identified several people with private planes who were willing to help transport rescue animals to their new homes.

"When's your last day at the store?" Keegan asked Finn.

Finn did all the deliveries for his grandfather's feed and general store, but with the new venture, he was stepping back so he could devote more time to it, with Xavier's complete support—both emotional and financial. "Two weeks," Finn said, his eyes alight with excitement. "Pops has agreed to work part time and let Grace take over the day-to-day. And Grace's son, Jamie, has been looking for a second job when he isn't at the café, so I'm going to train him to do the deliveries."

Keegan's eyebrows went up. "Jamie? I didn't realize he could drive."

Finn cocked his head. "He's twenty-three."

Keegan huffed. That wasn't what he meant. He knew the Cabots well, and Jamie was

notoriously clumsy. He'd failed his driver's test three times, and the last Keegan heard, he was trying to convince his parents to let him borrow the car so he could attempt it a fourth time. He must have finally passed. "Well, good for him. I'm sure he'll do his best." He tried hard to keep that from sounding condescending, but he knew he'd failed when Asher snorted.

Moving on. Keegan changed the subject to Asher's plans now that Xavier had relocated from Los Angeles to Split Rock.

As they spoke, Keegan found himself checking both his watch and the door repeatedly. How long had they been gone? Was the conversation going well? Was Izzy getting anxious? Keegan was grateful he'd sent Riley with them, but she could only do so much. He should have warned Xavier that Izzy could get vicious if he felt cornered.

He tried to keep in mind that Xavier was excellent at his job and had dealt with clients much more difficult than Izzy was at his worst. And Izzy wouldn't be at his worst. Probably.

As time dragged on, Keegan's fretting turned to other things. It was cold, and the temperature was dropping as the afternoon stretched on. Izzy's leg would start to ache if he was out there for too long, and he would never say anything to Xavier. Was he in pain? Why didn't Keegan suggest they talk in the car where it was warm and they'd be in eyesight.

"Man," Ash said, the laughter in his tone catching Keegan's attention. "Here." He held out his cell phone to Keegan, who took it, despite his confusion. On the screen was a map with just one road on it and a steady blue dot. "I'm tracking the boss's phone," Ash explained. "They're on their way back."

Keegan grunted in acknowledgment, then cleared his throat and handed the phone

back. “Thanks,” he said, a little embarrassed at being caught. “He’s had a rough few weeks. I’m sure I’m overreacting.”

“Is that why he didn’t come with us to New York? Micah said he was dealing with personal stuff.”

Keegan shot him a surprised look. “Xavier didn’t explain?”

Finn shook his head. “He said you asked for his advice and it was up to Izzy to explain more than that.” He shrugged and glanced at the door as well. “I don’t like to pry.”

Damn, he was sweet. Xavier had lucked out with that one. Not that Keegan hadn’t. Izzy, for all his prickliness and mood swings, was much more Keegan’s type.

“I don’t know what Izzy is comfortable with people knowing,” he told Finn kindly.

Finn nodded. “He’s been really anxious the last few times I’ve seen him. It seems like Riley helps with that.”

“She does,” Keegan said.

“That’s great,” Finn replied, looking relieved. “I wish I had something like that.” He tilted his head thoughtfully. “Though, I have Xavi. He’s good at helping me stay calm.”

Asher let out a bark of laughter. “Did you just compare your billionaire boyfriend to a service dog?”

Finn froze, flushed red, and hid his face in his hands. “Oh my god , Ash,” he whined.

Ash didn't seem inclined to let the comment go. "We should get him a vest. Day-Glo orange with 'Finn's Emotional Support Daddy' embroidered on the back."

Finn was saved from more embarrassment by heavy boots on the front porch. Xavier and Izzy entered in a swirl of flurries.

Keegan was halfway to Izzy before he realized he'd stood, and by then, it was too late to stop. He continued into Izzy's space instead, cupping his cold cheeks and searching his expression. "You okay?" he asked softly, his words obscured by Finn exclaiming about the unexpected snow.

Izzy looked tired and sad, but he wasn't on the verge of a panic attack like Keegan had feared. Riley was getting so many treats, they would have to roll her down the mountain. "I'm okay," Izzy replied. "Xavier says he's gonna take care of everything. A few more days and any links between Josh and me will be buried." Izzy didn't sound as enthused about that as Keegan would have expected. It was probably just too much to process. Keegan wished for nothing more than to kick everyone out of his cabin and bundle Izzy back into bed.

"I'm sure Josie can cover for me for a few more days—" Keegan started, but Izzy was shaking his head.

"No," he said. "It's fine. I need to go home anyway. I figured I'd catch a ride with Xavier."

Keegan went still, the heaviness that had been sitting in his stomach all afternoon forming into a solid rock. "I—" He stopped. He didn't know what to say. "Oh. Of course."

Izzy stepped closer and wrapped his arms around Keegan's neck, tucking his face into the curve of his throat, keeping his voice low as he spoke close to Keegan's ear.

“I just need a couple of days, okay? I feel like we’ve been in a fantasy bubble that just burst, and I’m not sure which way is up.”

Keegan hugged him back, just as tightly. He understood. He felt the same way to an extent. “On one condition,” he told Izzy.

Izzy heaved a put-upon sigh. “Seriously? You have conditions?”

“Yep,” Keegan said. “I’m still your kidnapper, after all.”

He felt Izzy’s smile against his throat. “All right, lay it on me.”

“Take Riley with you.”

Izzy stiffened. “I can’t—”

“She’ll be devastated if you don’t,” Keegan insisted. “I have enough food and water for her here to last you a week. Which, by the way, is all you’re getting.”

Izzy lifted his head, expression incredulous. “Oh, really?”

“Really,” Keegan said, daring him to argue. “You agreed to be mine, Isaac. I’m not letting you back out so easily. Deal?”

Izzy’s smile was hesitant, but real. “Deal.”

Four days.

That was all Keegan had lasted before he found himself locking up the clinic early and driving over to the ranch in search of his wayward brat.

It wasn't as if they had cut all communication since the cabin. Izzy had texted a picture of Riley with her head out the window of the SUV as they made their way down the mountain. Keegan had reacted, after a brief search, with a heart-eyed dog emoji that got him a string of laughing faces in return.

It had lightened some of the heaviness in his chest as he had packed, loaded the other two dogs into the truck, and closed the cabin. It wouldn't be the last week Izzy spent there with them, Keegan was sure of it. Even if he had to talk to Ryan into letting Keegan kidnap his ranch hand again.

That first message was followed by multiple "Riley" updates a day. There was usually just enough information in the background so that he knew Izzy was also okay. Like the photo of Riley in bed, stealing Izzy's pillow, along with the caption "I think I'm gonna need a bigger mattress."

Keegan responded with a screenshot of a room with two king-sized mattresses pushed together.

Or the picture of Riley on the back porch up at the ranch house with Milo, both of them with tongues lolling and mud up to their bellies.

Brat

Milo is a bad influence on our sweet girl.

Keegan had set the photo, along with the text, as his lock screen. He was holding Izzy to that "our."

That had been yesterday and, since then, radio silence.

Which was why Keegan was walking down the main aisle of the barn three days

early, in search of Izzy. It was quieter than usual for a weekday afternoon, but there could be several reasons for that. Izzy's car was outside, at least, so he was around somewhere. Hopefully he wouldn't be too pissed off at Keegan for breaking his word about giving him a week. If he was, Keegan had half a dozen ways in mind to make it up to him.

He tried the loft first, but his knock went unanswered. He called out as well, just in case, but was met with more silence.

Back in the barn, he headed for the far end, where the rescues were still stalled. Turning the corner, he came to an abrupt halt at the sight in front of him. What the hell?

It was Alice, which was only a little surprising because the last he'd heard, she was avoiding the rescues until they were healthier and didn't trigger so many feelings. That must have changed in the week Izzy and Keegan were gone. Alice had Sunny, the demon pony, in the crossties and was crouched in front of her, dropping loud kisses on her nose.

"Who's the goodest girl?" she asked in a voice that Keegan often heard her use on her foals and his dogs. "You. Yes, you are," she said, giving Sunny several more kisses before standing, grooming brush in hand.

Keegan had to admit, Sunny looked great, her coat as clean and well-groomed as he'd ever seen it, her mane and tail brushed and tangle-free. Even her fuzzy ears were up, perked in Alice's direction and swiveling to listen to her as she moved around, cleaning up.

"Um. Alice?" Keegan called, keeping his voice low but afraid to get any closer, lest he startle Sunny and Alice got hurt in the process.

Alice turned, noticed him, and gave a little wave. “Hi. Are these guys on your schedule today?” Her gaze shifted to the side as she went through her mental calendar.

“No,” Keegan said. “I was just stopping by.” His eyes went back to Sunny. “I know you have the magic touch,” he told her. “But that pony was vicious a week ago. What happened?”

“What happened with— Oh, this sweet girl?” She leaned down and wrapped her arms around Sunny’s neck, half draped over her back in a way that made Keegan cringe internally and fear for her safety. “She just hates men,” Alice told him bluntly.

Keegan stared. “She...”

Alice stayed where she was, while Sunny stood patiently—like she hadn’t nearly taken off Keegan’s balls with her teeth a month ago. “Hates men,” Alice repeated. “Izzy couldn’t believe it either, but it’s true. It was just the ladies here while you and Izzy were doing whatever two guys do locked in a cabin in the mountains for a week. We figured it out pretty fast, and Micah tested it when they got back. He’s still limping a little.” She stood and flicked her messy braid over her shoulder. “Too bad we didn’t know sooner. I guess it could have saved you some time.”

Keegan shook his head, bemused. If it weren’t for Sunny and her apparent man-hating ways, Keegan might never have taken the time to get to know Izzy. And Izzy sure as hell wouldn’t have let Keegan in. So, really, he was grateful, even if the process had been painful for everyone involved. “It’s fine. It was time well spent, either way.”

Alice nodded. “Yeah. That’s what Izzy said too.”

“Speaking of Izzy,” Keegan said. “Is he around?”

“No,” Alice replied, unclipping Sunny to return her to her stall.

“Do you know when he’ll be back?”

“Why would I? I’m not his secretary.” Alice sounded a little exasperated, and Keegan bit back a chuckle. “After the interview, I guess.”

Keegan stilled. “Interview?”

Alice didn’t answer, and Keegan had to wait impatiently while she finished putting Sunny away and shut the stall door.

“Alice,” he tried again. “ Who’s interviewing him? And where ?”

Alice frowned at him. “I don’t know. Some reporter.” Her eyes narrowed. “Are you freaking out?”

Keegan ran a hand through his hair, trying to keep his sudden worry and frustration to himself. “I’m not freaking out,” he told her. Which might be a lie in about two minutes if someone didn’t tell him what the hell was going on. “I just need to find him.”

“Okaaaay,” she said, clearly not believing him. “If Izzy isn’t telling you, why don’t you ask Xavier? He drove.”

Keegan was going to have words with Xavier for keeping this from him. But first, he needed to make sure Izzy was okay. He pulled out his phone and opened the contacts.

“Or you could ask Riley,” Alice offered.

Keegan looked at her blankly. “Last time I checked, my dog couldn’t talk.”

Alice rolled her eyes hard enough Keegan was surprised it didn't make her dizzy. "Not like that. I mean check your app. Wherever Izzy is, Riley's right next to him. It's pretty cool. I think I'd like to have a service dog."

Fuck. Keegan was stupid. He'd completely forgotten that Riley had a GPS tracker in her collar. It was supposed to keep her safe when they were out in the woods, but in this case, it could help him find his wayward boyfriend. He'd worry about the ethics of it later. "Thank you, Alice," he called over his shoulder as he ran back to his car, already bringing up Riley's tracker in the app.

She was in town. Keegan drove faster than was safe, but he couldn't shake the vibrating under his skin that told him Izzy needed him, and he was going to get there too late. As he got closer, the app narrowed in on the location until Keegan could see the little dot with her photo was somewhere inside the Lookout.

Keegan parked out front—illegally, but he would pay the ticket without complaint—and hurried for the front door, eyes on his phone screen.

"Hey."

Keegan glanced up at the familiar voice. It was Asher, leaning against the wall next to the door where Marco, the bouncer, usually stood. "Where are they?" Keegan asked, his heart pounding and a lump in his throat that made breathing a chore.

"He's fine," Asher said, instead of giving Keegan the answer he wanted. Then he moved to block the door. Keegan stepped toward him, body tensing, and Asher raised his hands. "I promise. He and Xavier have been prepping for this for days."

Keegan clenched his teeth and debated shoving past Asher, consequences be damned. "I need to see him." His voice cracked.

Asher's typically unflappable expression went soft. "Yeah. I know. Come on." He waved for Keegan to follow him, then made his way around the side of the building to a door that Keegan didn't know was there. "Just stay quiet. The interview is being recorded, and we trust the reporter, but we also don't want Izzy to get distracted and say something he doesn't want on the record."

Keegan jerked a nod. Quiet. Right. He could do that. Probably.

Okay. He could do it for Izzy's sake. He was discovering that he could do a lot of things for Izzy's sake.

They cut through the kitchen and walked down a long hallway, stopping at a curtained opening. Keegan could hear voices but not make out what they were saying.

Asher held a finger to his lips, then led Keegan through. They stepped out into the main area of the bar, over near the booths. Xavier was standing with his arms folded, watching a spotlit table that held a woman with immaculate, white-blond hair and, across from her, Keegan's brat.

Izzy was dressed simply but casually in a gray button-down and jeans. His hair had been trimmed, the curls in perfect order the way they only were when he was just out of the shower or he'd spent a lot of time and product on them. He was pale but otherwise seemed composed. Keegan couldn't tell from a distance how much of that was a mask.

Riley was at his side, her chin on his knee. She was freshly groomed as well, her white coat brushed until it shone. Someone had been shopping because she was wearing a very professional-looking vest labeled SERVICE DOG. DO NOT PET. Keegan wondered if that was legal, then put it out of his mind. It was something that could be dealt with later.

“Can you explain what happened after Emma and Samantha confided in you?”

Izzy let out a slow, measured breath, his fingers buried in Riley’s scruff. “After Emma told me what he’d done, and Sammy backed her up, I went to confront J-Josh.” He fumbled for the glass of water on the table in front of him and took a quick sip. Then he cleared his throat. “He was in his office. I think he was doing paperwork.” Izzy’s gaze was focused in the middle distance as he spoke. “I asked him if it was true. If he’d really done the things they were accusing him of. I’d known him for years, trained with him, I thought he was my friend. I didn’t want to believe he was capable of what they were saying.”

Keegan got stuck on the word “friend.” He hoped that was a sign that they were keeping Izzy’s real history with Josh out of the story. Izzy didn’t need that trauma dredged up for the world to see and potentially judge.

“It’s been difficult for everyone to believe,” the interviewer continued, her voice professional but kind. “He was a beloved member of the eventing community. His death was seen as a tragedy.”

Izzy nodded along, his eyes going glassy. “He laughed.” Izzy paused, letting the impact of that statement sink in. “He said it was all part of the game, and if I wanted to be a top-level competitor, I would have to learn to look the other way.”

The reporter shifted in her chair, her eyes sharpening like a hawk that had just spotted prey. Keegan stepped forward, the urge to protect Izzy stronger than his agreement to stay quiet. Xavier stopped him with a hand in the center of his chest and a shake of his head. “Was he implying others knew about his behavior and allowed it?” the reporter asked.

Izzy paused again, and Keegan realized it was practiced, calculated. “I believe he was. Yes.”

“Did he give you any names?”

Izzy glanced at Xavier, his eyes widening when he caught sight of Keegan.

“We have a list for you,” Xavier said. “But let’s remove that question. We don’t want to open the door for retaliation.”

The reporter nodded and made a note on the pad in front of her. “Of course. That’s the last thing anyone wants.” She gestured to a cameraman Keegan hadn’t spotted before. “Delete that clip from the drive, please.”

Xavier and Keegan watched the cameraman do as instructed. When he was recording again, he gave a thumbs-up, and the reporter turned back to Izzy.

She smiled, warm and motherly. “Let’s back up, okay, hun?”

“Yeah, okay,” Izzy said, taking a steadying breath.

“Did Joshua Martin threaten you?” she asked.

“He tried,” Izzy admitted. “But I had something the girls didn’t.”

“What was that?”

“My father.”

“Your father is Frank King of King Farm. He’s bred and raised horses competing at the top levels of the sport, including the horse you rode to a Young Rider Championship when you were seventeen.”

Izzy nodded. “Dad has lifelong connections to people that are very influential. Josh

knew that if Frank King turned against him, there was no coming back from it. And I made it very clear that my father would learn the truth. About everything.”

“Were you able to tell your father what had happened? What did he say?”

Izzy didn’t answer immediately. Finally, he said, “I wasn’t. When I threatened to tell my dad, Josh... He proposed retirement instead. I wanted—” He stopped and took another sip of water.

Out of the corner of Keegan’s eye, Xavier was nodding his approval.

“I thought we should tell the USEO and the IOC anyway, but Emma and Sammy weren’t sure.”

“Emma and Samantha have both stated that they were still deciding whether to pursue charges when Josh died. Afterward, they agreed they would rather move on than deal with the stress of an investigation.”

Izzy took a steadying breath. “I was injured, so I don’t really know about anything that came after.”

Riley shifted closer to Izzy and poked his hand with her nose until he started to pet her again.

The reporter’s eyes were compassionate. “This was the accident that forced you to stop competing.”

Izzy shrugged, uncomfortable. “I got hurt during the cross-country portion of the US Equestrian Open Final at Oxford Park. I’d just heard about Josh’s death, and I wasn’t thinking clearly. I misjudged a turn and fell. Birdie bowed a tendon, and I broke my leg.”

“That fall ended both of your careers, and you sold your horse soon after.”

Izzy’s jaw trembled. “Yeah,” he rasped before draining his water. The reporter, who Keegan kind of wanted to punch for continuing this line of questioning, refilled it from a pitcher on the table.

“I’m sure that was extremely difficult. You sound emotional.”

Izzy let out a rough laugh. “No shit.” Then he coughed. “Sorry. I mean, yes. It was difficult. She was an amazing horse, but she was better off with someone who could properly care for her.”

Keegan frowned. Was that the real reason? Something in Izzy’s voice told Keegan there was more to that decision than he was admitting.

“I just have a few more questions, Isaac,” the reporter said. Keegan bit back the desire to correct her on Izzy’s name and could see Izzy doing the same. “I know it’s impossible to say for sure since Josh didn’t leave a note, but do you believe that fear of exposure was what led to his suicide?”

Izzy glanced at Xavier and got a nod. “I can only guess,” he said, his words careful. “And make assumptions based on what I know of Josh’s character after training under him for four years.”

“I think our viewers would like to hear your thoughts as the person who knew Joshua best—and yet didn’t learn his dark secret until the end.”

“Joshua Martin cared about three things. Being the center of attention, having complete control, regardless of the situation, and winning at any cost. I believe he realized he’d lost all three of those, and taking his own life, especially so publicly, was his last-ditch effort to get them back.”

The reporter looked like she'd won the lottery and was trying to control her excitement. "And finally, if you could say something to Josh now, what would it be?"

Izzy gathered himself and turned his intense blue-gray eyes on the camera. "You lost anyway," he said, voice steely. "We won. I hope you rot in hell."

As soon as the camera was off, Keegan brushed Xavier aside and beelined for Izzy. He crouched next to him, careful not to get in Riley's way. "Baby?"

Izzy's eyes were dull with exhaustion when he looked at Keegan. "Hey," he said softly. "What are you doing here?"

Keegan cupped his cheek, and Izzy leaned into it with a sigh. "I came as soon as I found out you were giving an interview. I know you asked for space, but I couldn't stay away."

"How'd you find us?"

Keegan braced himself. "I used the GPS tracker in Riley's collar."

Izzy's brow furrowed, and his hand went to Riley's neck.

Keegan cringed. "Sorry, I forgot to remind you about it. I promise I haven't been stalking you."

Izzy huffed and fiddled with the strip of leather until he found the tracker tag. "Good to know," he said, then let it drop again.

"You did well, Izzy," Xavier said as he made his way over. "They have everything they need, and in the event they have follow-up questions, they know to come to me."

Keegan stood, keeping a hand on Izzy's shoulder. "What happens next?" he asked Xavier.

"The interview will be part of an exclusive special on Joshua Martin's abusive behavior and the cover-up of it, which we believe goes higher in the organization than anyone realized. The focus will be on the young women he hurt, but Izzy's account of his confession is the final nail in the fucker's long-buried coffin. Just from the current publicity, there are already calls for the IOC to posthumously strip him of his medals."

Keegan wished they could do more. Destroying the man's legacy didn't feel like enough. "And for Izzy?" Keegan asked, squeezing Izzy's shoulder.

"There may be a few more reporters poking around with questions, but it's my job to handle that. We've made it very clear that this was an exclusive interview. Izzy has moved on. And because I'm also representing Emma and Samantha, who are both ready and willing to talk, I'll be able to control a good chunk of the narrative moving forward to keep Izzy's name out of it."

Thank god for that. Hopefully that meant Izzy could stop flinching at every ringing phone and notification buzz.

Izzy covered Keegan's hand with his own and squeezed. "Henry?"

"Yeah, baby?" Keegan caught Xavier's eyebrow going up but ignored it. Xavier wouldn't start any rumors, and even if he did, Keegan wasn't bothered by it. Izzy was his now, and everyone else would learn that soon enough.

"Can we go?" Izzy asked, looking like he might put his head down on the table and take a nap if Keegan said no.

Xavier gave his approval, so Keegan wrapped an arm around Izzy, who had Riley's leash in his other hand, and led them out to his still double-parked car. He waited for Izzy to make a quip about the ticket on his windshield but got nothing.

The drive back to his house was quiet, with Izzy staring out the window and Riley watching them from the back seat. Keegan tried not to worry when Izzy didn't comment on their destination either. He was exhausted from the interview, and he needed time to process. Keegan couldn't imagine what it was like to dredge up all that history for the cameras, knowing that the world was going to see it.

Izzy still wasn't himself. He'd napped for a while when they got home and was now sprawled out on the couch under a pile of blankets with Riley curled against his chest. The herbal tea Keegan had made him was on the coffee table, cold and untouched.

Keegan didn't know what to do, what to say, how to help. He didn't even know if he should be doing or saying anything. The helplessness ate at him. He found himself pacing the house, cleaning things that didn't need to be cleaned, and straightening things that didn't need organizing.

The other two dogs had wandered through several times as well. Chance had even sidled up to Izzy, greeting him with a lick to the back of his hand, before he and Lucky vanished upstairs.

Keegan returned to the living room for the hundredth time, feigning looking for a book. He gave up the charade when Izzy continued to stare into space without acknowledging him. Keegan sighed. Everything about this felt wrong. His brat wasn't built to be this quiet. He crossed the room and perched on the edge of the couch. "Hey," he said, carding his fingers through Izzy's curls.

"Hi," Izzy said back, his tone listless.

Keegan resisted the urge to force him up, to poke him until he reacted. “You’re worrying me, brat.”

“Sorry,” Izzy said, turning his head and squinting up at Keegan. “I don’t mean to. I’m just really tired. I don’t think I’ve slept right since I left the cabin.”

“You could go back to sleep?” Keegan suggested, but Izzy shook his head.

“Not unless I want to be up all night.”

Fair enough. Keegan pulled out his phone. “Do you want something to eat? I can order in.”

Izzy shook his head again, taking Keegan’s phone and setting it aside, then tugging on his now-empty hand. “Come and hold me?”

Anything , Keegan thought, but then he paused. “I don’t know if there’s room for all three of us under there.” He reached beneath the blanket and rubbed Riley’s ears.

Izzy smiled slightly and ducked down to nuzzle her. “She’s a good cuddle buddy,” he said, his eyes averted. “Not quite the same as you, though.”

Keegan kissed Izzy’s forehead, then moved out of the way while he nudged Riley to get up.

That got him a doggie sigh, but she wiggled out from under the blankets and hopped down. Then she gave Keegan a look that seemed to say “Your turn” before trotting off to the kitchen in search of her water bowl.

Once there was space, Keegan peeled back the blankets, climbed over Izzy, and stretched out along his back, dragging him into the little spoon position. Izzy was

warm from his blanket cocoon, and Keegan couldn't help nuzzling his hair and breathing him in.

Izzy hugged Keegan's arms to him and heaved a sigh that sounded a lot like Riley's.

Keegan rubbed soothing circles on Izzy's chest, wishing he were better at this. Wishing he had the right words to help Izzy with whatever was going on in his head. In the end, he gave him the only words he had. "I love you, Isaac."

For a minute, he wondered if he had waited too long and Izzy had fallen asleep after all, but then Izzy squirmed onto his back, his blue-gray eyes on the ceiling but his gaze far away.

Keegan traced his profile with a finger, along the straight plane of his nose and over his enticing lips.

"It's been a long time since I trusted myself," Izzy said finally. "Josh took that from me." He swallowed, his throat bobbing. "He didn't hurt me like the others, but he made me question myself—my judgment. If I could fall for someone like that, someone like him, how could I trust myself not to do it again?"

"Izzy," Keegan said, his heart breaking for the boy Izzy had been, as well as the man he was now. "It wasn't your fault."

Izzy shook his head. "You don't understand. I believed him. I defended him. I was in love with him."

Keegan traced along the arch of Izzy's cheekbone. How could he convince Izzy that he was just as much a victim of that predator as any of the others? Josh had had Izzy under his spell since he was teenager—that boy never stood a chance. There was one thing he could clarify, though. "You weren't in love with him."

Izzy's brows drew together and he met Keegan's eyes, a denial on his lips, but Keegan didn't let him voice it.

"You weren't in love. You were manipulated into caring for someone who never existed. You were gaslit to believe the things he said, and he capitalized on your infatuation. He took advantage of you. You may have loved what he was pretending to be, but Isaac, you didn't fall in love with a monster."

Izzy pressed his trembling lips together, nostrils flaring as his eyes filled with moisture.

"You didn't fall in love with a monster," Keegan repeated, voice firm and final.

Izzy shut his eyes, covered his face with his hands, and wept.

Hours later, after they were both in bed and—Keegan had assumed—both asleep, the mattress shifted. Cold air hit Keegan's bare skin as the sheets slid away. For a minute, Keegan thought one of the dogs was messing around, but he was proven wrong when he opened his eyes, ready to fight for his blankets back.

Izzy was kneeling next to him, his bare skin lit only by the glow from the cracked bathroom door.

Keegan reached out and caressed him from his shoulder down to his wrist. "Baby? What are you doing?" he asked, his voice rough with sleep.

Wordlessly, Izzy crawled on top of him and settled, straddling Keegan's hips.

Keegan's cock slotted into the hot crease of Izzy's ass, waking up more quickly than his brain was. His hands went to Izzy's hips, stroking smooth skin. "What do you need, Izzy?" Keegan tried again, blinking the sleep from his eyes, but Izzy still didn't

answer him. Instead, he bent at the waist and brought their mouths together for a slow, thorough kiss that sent Keegan's head spinning.

Keegan let his hands wander, mapping Izzy's skin, dragging over the firm planes and curves of muscle, and dipping between his cheeks to discover his hole already slippery and loose. "Am I dreaming?" he asked, not sure if he was more confused or turned on, but leaning toward the second.

Izzy sat up and repositioned himself with his opening almost where Keegan wanted it. He braced his hands on Keegan's chest and rocked his hips, Keegan's cockhead bumping against his wet hole over and over.

"Can you do something for me, Henry?" Izzy asked, his body sure but his tone hesitant.

"Without knowing what it is?" Keegan asked. "Against my better judgment, yes."

Izzy caught his lower lip between his teeth and turned his head to hide his smile. "Five years ago, I made you drive me home, and I asked you a question."

He'd asked Keegan to come in, what they would do once they got there heavily implied. Keegan had shot him down.

"Can we pretend it's five years ago, and you said yes?"

Keegan's breath caught at the yearning in Izzy's voice, though he didn't understand its source. "Sure," he replied. "We can do that. Are you gonna tell me why?"

Izzy's hands were wandering across Keegan's chest, mapping his skin like he'd never done it before. He didn't answer, just reached back, angled his hips, and started to work himself down onto Keegan's cock.

Keegan rubbed up and down Izzy's thighs, trying to stay still and focused as perfect heat engulfed him. "Fuck, baby," he groaned. "You feel good."

Izzy let out a shaky breath that ended on a whimper as he seated himself fully, his hole fluttering around Keegan's girth. He stayed there, his eyes closed, head back, mouth open, his chest rising and falling as he sucked in rapid breaths.

Keegan swept his hands up Izzy's chest and plucked at his nipples, drawing a gasp. "You're stunning, baby," Keegan told him, loving the way his cheeks flushed.

"You're really big," Izzy breathed, nearly too soft for Keegan to hear. "Feels so good. I'm so full."

Keegan half smiled, bemused. Izzy almost sounded like— Ah, fuck . He went back over the few things Izzy had told him about his farce of a relationship with Josh. Fuck . He wrapped his arms around Izzy and flipped them, laying Izzy back against the sheets. He had his face turned away, refusing to meet Keegan's eyes. "Baby," Keegan started, but Izzy held his hands up, warding off the question.

"Don't stop," he begged. "Just fuck me, please."

"Isaac," Keegan said firmly, not willing to let him deflect. "The night I drove you home, you wanted to have sex with me."

Izzy let out a groan and groped for a pillow in an attempt to drag it over his head.

Keegan stopped him. "It would have been your first time."

Izzy hid his face with his hands as his blush spilled all the way down his chest. "It's a stupid social construct," he said, voice muffled by his palms. "It doesn't matter."

Keegan peeled Izzy's hands away from his face and kissed him, long and lingering. "Just relax for me," he murmured when the kiss broke. "Tell me if I'm hurting you, and I'll stop." He shifted his hips in small rocking motions, gradually building speed as Izzy gave in and started to meet him. "No one's ever been inside you but me, huh?"

Izzy gasped, his wide-eyed gaze flying to Keegan's face. Then, after a long hesitation, he bit his lip and shook his head. "Just you," he said.

"I'm honored," Keegan told him. He meant it too. He didn't care where he fell on the list of Izzy's past partners. Being with him now was all that mattered. But if a little bit of role-play gave Izzy some of his power back, Keegan would play the absolute best version of his past self he could.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am

It had been a stupid idea—Izzy felt ridiculous—but for some reason, Keegan was going along with it.

It wasn't that Izzy regretted his choices over the years. He'd had a hell of a lot of fun. But sometimes he wished...

He didn't remember the first time he'd let someone fuck him. He'd been so drunk—so had the other guy. He knew it had happened because his ass had hurt like hell the next morning, but he didn't even have flashes of the actual event. Pretending with Keegan wouldn't change that, but fuck if it wasn't filling some warm, forgotten corner of his brain.

He couldn't seem to get his body to work. His hands were clinging to Keegan's forearms, his legs hooked over Keegan's elbows as Keegan rocked in and out of him in slow glides. He hadn't used enough lube because he wanted the burn, wanted it to linger, but for some reason, the sensation was overwhelming him. Getting fucked had never felt like this before—almost like he'd fooled his body into believing it really was new. Like Keegan really was the first man to open him up and carve a place for himself inside Izzy.

“Kiss me?” Izzy begged, meeting Keegan's eyes and getting caught in the intensity there.

Keegan dipped down and brushed his mouth to Izzy's once, twice, then he deepened the kiss. His tongue slid into Izzy's mouth the same way his cock was claiming Izzy's ass. It set off fireworks across Izzy's skin that swept through him and concentrated in the spot where Keegan was filling him. Oh god. How did that feel so good?

“Harder?” Izzy asked when he could speak again.

Keegan murmured his assent and adjusted the angle. The next snap of his hips went deeper.

Izzy gasped, his vision clouding. “Yes. Please.” His chest heaved and his head spun as it lolled on the pillow, too heavy to lift.

“Touch your cock for me, baby,” Keegan said, the order gentle but still impossible to ignore. “Stroke yourself nice and slow.”

It took Izzy a minute to remember where his hands were and another for how they worked, but he managed to pry one from Keegan’s forearm and wrap it around his aching, weeping cock. He groaned at the first touch. He was so close, he didn’t think he even needed the additional stimulation, but he couldn’t disobey Keegan.

“Look how beautiful you are,” Keegan said, making Izzy’s startled gaze fly back to his. “My gorgeous, sweet, perfect brat.”

Izzy’s breath hiccuped on a laugh. “Yeah,” he said, his voice wavering. “I’m yours.”

“Just mine,” Keegan replied. He kissed Izzy again, his movements picking up speed and strength until Izzy lost the rest of his words and became nothing more than a live wire of sensation. Of pleasure.

He didn’t even know he was coming until heat started pulsing over his knuckles. He shook through it, whimpering and clinging to Keegan as the aftershocks dragged on and on. Even when it was over, Keegan’s movements inside him felt so good that Izzy begged him not to stop.

“Shh,” Keegan said, voice rough, his sweat dripping onto Izzy’s burning skin in cool

drops. “I’m not gonna stop. I’m gonna fill you up. Mark you as mine, inside and out.” He pushed his hand down on Izzy’s belly, and Izzy gasped at how deep he was. Fuck, that was hot.

“Do it,” he begged. “Mark me. I want to feel you dripping out of my ass all day tomorrow.”

Keegan let out a groan that was almost a snarl, pounding into Izzy until he shoved deep and lost his rhythm, hips stuttering like he was trying to get deeper anyway.

Izzy shuddered, his cock releasing another weak pulse of pleasure. Oh god. Fuck. He went limp, his hands falling away, his legs slipping from Keegan’s shoulders.

Keegan dropped down on top of him and Izzy convinced his arms to listen for long enough to wrap around Keegan’s back and hold on. Keegan’s face was buried in Izzy’s throat, and his teeth scraped across Izzy’s skin. Izzy shivered and clung tighter.

“Stay?” he asked when Keegan went to pull back. Izzy wasn’t ready to be empty just yet.

“Okay, baby,” Keegan answered. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

That was when Izzy realized he was crying again. He released a shaky laugh. “I’m a mess,” he told Keegan.

Keegan lifted his head enough to press their foreheads together, his eyes closed. “Maybe,” he said. “But you’re my mess.”

Izzy tilted his head up for a kiss. Good. That was good. As long as someone was responsible for this shitshow.

Izzy eased his foot forward blindly, feeling around for any obstacles before shifting his weight onto it. Then he repeated the process.

Next to him, his hands on Izzy's shoulders to direct his progress, Keegan sighed. "I'm not going to lead you off a cliff, if that's what you're worried about, brat."

"I'm supposed to believe that?" Izzy replied from behind the darkness of the blindfold. "What if you've just been biding your time the last few weeks."

On his other side, Riley brushed against his legs, her panting doggie breaths unconcerned. She would let him know if this was an elaborate trap, right?

The sun was warm on his face, despite the early-March chill. "If this is a proposal, I'm gonna... Well, I'll probably say yes, but I'll also question your sanity. We've only been dating for a month."

"Noted," Keegan said, laughter beneath the dryness in his tone. "But it's not a proposal. Just a surprise."

Izzy clutched his arm tighter. "A surprise like a sheer cliff face?" he quipped, trying to hide his nerves.

"In the barnyard?" Keegan shot back.

Okay, his boyfriend might have a point. Izzy grinned. He loved their banter. Especially now that it didn't have the sharpness of hurt feelings and misunderstanding behind it. "So not a cliff, but an open grave? Maybe you're finally sick of my charming personality."

Keegan tugged him to a stop, then cupped the back of his neck, dragging him in for a kiss. "Never," he said against Izzy's lips, then he removed the blindfold.

Izzy blinked against the bright winter sun until the spots cleared from his vision and he could see Keegan. Keegan, who looked nervous. Crap. Was this a good surprise? Or was it one of those things Izzy would have to pretend to like while secretly dumping half of it down the drain like that weird monkey-shit coffee Archer had given him.

Keegan nodded to the massive silver horse trailer parked in the driveway. It was the professional kind, with living quarters and a tack room attached. Why would Keegan get a trailer? He didn't even have a horse.

Then Izzy heard the thump of hooves on thick rubber flooring, and a familiar dark head appeared at the top of the ramp, glossy ears pricked, nostrils scenting the air.

Izzy's hands flew to his mouth to muffle his gasp and the broken sound that followed it.

Blackbird.

She clomped down the ramp in high-kneed, hesitating steps as she tested the footing until she was on flat ground. Then she snorted and tossed her head like she was complaining about the en-route service.

"How?" Izzy choked, blinking back the tears that threatened to cloud his vision. How was she here? Why was she here? Was any of this real, or was Izzy having one of those weird blackout dreams that came from too much whiskey?

"I made a few phone calls. Your parents helped. So did your friends." He gestured to the very pregnant figure holding Blackbird's lead rope. Emma. "She insisted on bringing Blackbird herself. Her husband wasn't thrilled since she's due in about a month and isn't supposed to travel."

Izzy turned his back on the whole scene and folded his arm over his eyes, his chest heaving as he fought a breakdown. Oh god. Fuck no. He couldn't be here. He couldn't do this.

"Isaac," Keegan said, rubbing Izzy's back. "Just hear her out."

Riley touched her nose to the back of his hand, then leaned against his legs and whined. Izzy dropped to one knee to hug her, letting her steady presence soothe his racing thoughts. "Why?" he managed to croak out, hoping Keegan had a good reason for this. Because if he didn't, Izzy was never speaking to him again—for at least a few days.

Keegan sighed and carded his hand through Izzy's hair. "Because you need this, baby. You've been beating yourself up for too long, and you need some closure." He dropped a kiss to the top of Izzy's head, then stepped away. "I'm going to let you two talk."

What? Izzy flailed out for him but missed. When he lifted his head to see where the asshole was, he was confronted by worn, winter muck boots, leggings, and a thick coat stretched around a very pregnant belly. He pushed himself up on shaky legs, unable to meet Emma's eyes. "Hey," he said finally, then swallowed hard against the bile that was pressing up against the back of his throat.

"Hi, Izzy," Emma said, her voice just as soft and sweet as he remembered, but somehow stronger and more mature.

Izzy didn't know what to do with his hands. He tucked them into his coat pockets, then pulled them back out, scrubbed his palms on his jeans, and folded them across his chest. "You, uh...you're really pregnant."

That got him a surprised laugh, cut off when Emma clamped a hand over her mouth.

Izzy cringed. Shit. You weren't supposed to say things like that, were you? It was rude or something. "Sorry. You, um... I just meant, you look good. Great, even."

He could hear the laughter in Emma's voice. "Thanks, Izzy. I feel very pregnant. Stewart is having a nervous breakdown back at the farm, but I couldn't just send our girl with a driver. I needed to see you. You look good too."

Izzy clenched his jaw, but that didn't stop his lip from trembling. "I don't understand," he admitted. "Why the hell would you want to see me after everything? I have to bring back terrible memories."

"Oh, Izzy," Emma said, her voice cracking. A moment later, her arms were around him, her cheek pressed to his sternum as she somehow, despite her huge belly, hugged him within an inch of his life.

He froze, his hands hovering. What was he supposed to—

"Hug me back, you big jerk."

Izzy let out a wet sound that probably didn't count as a laugh and carefully wrapped his arms around her, having to bend because she was so short.

"Is that why you stayed away?" she asked. "Why you didn't return my calls or come to my fucking wedding? You thought I wouldn't want to see you?" She stepped back and smacked his arm. "What the fuck, Izzy?" Emma was crying, tears streaking her cheeks. Izzy blanched, memories threatening to overwhelm him, but she just rolled her eyes. "Pregnancy hormones," she said, with a gesture to her face. "I cry at nothing these days."

Izzy rubbed his stinging arm. He'd forgotten what a firecracker she could be. "I didn't want to make things worse," he admitted. "I couldn't even stand to be around

me—how could you?”

Emma took his hand in hers. “Izzy, listen to me.” She squeezed his fingers to the point of pain. “Are you listening?”

He nodded, trying not to wince.

“It wasn’t your fault. Yeah, you didn’t believe what I was saying at first, but who would? He was respected. Revered, even.”

“Stew believed you.”

Emma huffed a laugh. “Stewart was in love with me. He would have believed me if I said aliens were invading.”

“You married him.”

Emma smiled and pressed a hand to her pregnant belly. “I did. He’s a good man.” She squeezed Izzy’s hand again. “So are you. But Izzy, the big difference between you and Stewart was that you were also one of Josh’s victims. And he was an expert at manipulation. Of course it took you longer to see the truth.”

Keegan had told him that before, but Izzy hadn’t really believed it. Josh didn’t do to him what he’d done to the others, so how could Izzy call himself a victim? It felt like absolution he didn’t deserve.

“Hey,” Emma said, pulling him back out of his head. “I never said it because it never occurred to me that you needed it. And it should have. I’m sorry for that.”

“Said what?”

“I forgive you, Izzy. It wasn’t your fault, but I still forgive you.”

Izzy shut his eyes and tried to keep breathing. Riley licked his hand, then jumped up and put her feet on his chest, her tongue licking the air since she couldn’t reach his face. It never failed to make him laugh, and he used his free hand to stroke her head.

“She’s beautiful,” Emma told him. “And it looks like she’s good at her job.”

Izzy’s cheeks warmed. “She is.” He turned his head to look for Keegan and found him standing over by the trailer, running a professional hand over Blackbird’s flank while the driver held her head.

“There’s another beautiful girl over there who’s going to be happy to see you,” Emma said, her voice kind.

Izzy took a breath that shook. “How did you find her?”

Emma gave him a curious look. “I didn’t.” She tilted her head. “Izzy, I’m the one who bought her. She’s your soul-horse. I couldn’t let her go to a stranger.”

Izzy stared at her. Blackbird had been sold at auction. He’d never asked who the purchaser was. He’d assumed he wouldn’t know them. “I... I don’t know what to say,” he admitted. This was all too much.

“Say thank you, and then go hug your horse.”

Izzy froze again. “My horse?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Oh my god, yes. Your horse. She was always yours. Your man over there wanted to pay me, but I wouldn’t let him. I don’t need the money, and besides, Blackbird gave me two beautiful foals. That’s more than enough to make us

even.” She gave Izzy a little shove. “Go.”

Izzy felt like his feet were made of lead as he crossed the barnyard. It had been so long. Would she even remember him?

He was still a few yards away when she lifted her head from where she’d been searching for grass in the frozen gravel and looked at him. Her nostrils flared and her ears flicked, and then she let out a soft wicker.

“Hey, baby girl,” Izzy breathed, his eyes welling with tears yet again.

Birdie was one big blur when he reached her and held out a hand for her to sniff. A moment later, she pressed her big head flat against his chest and leaned into him. Izzy wrapped his arms around her and shut his eyes, the deep ache that had been with him since the day he’d let her go melting away.

They stayed like that for a long time. Finally, Birdie tossed her head, knocking him back a step and making him laugh, before starting to search his pockets for treats.

Izzy wiped at his eyes, clutching the long strands of her mane with his free hand. It was going to be a while before he could let go. “Sorry, baby girl. I’m all out. No one warned me you were coming.” He looked past her to where Keegan was leaning against the trailer, watching and waiting. “You’re lucky I love you,” he said.

Keegan grinned. “I know I am.” He pushed away from the side of the trailer and walked to Izzy. “I thought the waiting might be worse than just springing it on you.”

Izzy huffed. He wasn’t wrong. Izzy didn’t do well with anticipation. “Yeah,” he agreed. “Maybe it’s time for me to get some therapy.”

The relief was plain on Keegan’s face, but he didn’t make a big deal about it. “I may

have a list of names on my computer.”

Izzy kissed him, melting when Keegan stepped closer, kissing him back. “Thank you,” Izzy said when the kiss ended. “Thank you for bringing her back to me. Thank you for not giving up on me. Thank you for loving me.”

Keegan cupped his face with warm hands and stroked his thumbs under Izzy’s eyes. “You don’t need to thank me, Isaac. Knowing you love me. Knowing you trust me. That’s all I need.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am

“Oh my god, I hate you so much,” Izzy grumbled as he walked backward up the stairs, trying not to trip over his own feet and end up crushed under Alice’s solid, wooden monster of a dresser. He didn’t know why she insisted on bringing it when there was already one in the loft. Hers was clearly old—the top was covered in faded stickers and the paint was worn off the drawer fronts. But who was he to judge? He’d brought some weird stuff along when he’d moved in with Keegan last week. And no, he wasn’t talking about the stuff in his toy box, although he got a lot of joy from pulling out items that made Keegan’s eye twitch. He just happened to have a fork and a coffee mug he liked.

“No, you don’t,” Keegan shot back, his voice strained as he fought to balance the other end of the dresser. They were doing this backward. Izzy should not be the one on the higher step. “You just don’t want to admit that I have a point.”

Izzy gritted his teeth. Fucker. “It has nothing to do with right or wrong, Henry. It’s the principle.”

Keegan chuckled breathlessly as they hoisted the dresser up the last few steps, then put it down with a thud. “I’m sure that’s all it is.” He grabbed the hem of his tee to wipe the sweat off his face, revealing his toned abs and fuzzy happy trail. Izzy—who often struggled to differentiate between angry and horny when it came to Keegan—wanted to lick him.

“Are you two still fighting with each other?” Alice asked without looking up from sorting through her boxes. “I thought that would stop once you fell in love.”

Keegan coughed around a laugh, and Izzy scowled, reeling in the inappropriate

thoughts. “It would have, if this asshole weren’t so goddamn stubborn all the time.”

Keegan’s eyebrows went up. “I’m the stubborn one?”

“What are you even arguing about?” Alice asked, eyeing them dubiously.

Izzy’s skin, already warm from the summer sun, heated further. He kept his eyes on the dresser as he shoved it into place next to the old one. He didn’t want to go there.

“His parents invited us out to dinner,” Keegan explained.

“And you accepted without asking me first,” Izzy snapped back. “They aren’t even your parents. Who does that?”

Keegan shut his eyes and rubbed his temples like Izzy was giving him a headache. “Isaac, it’s your mother’s birthday, and we were already discussing having them over soon. Also, to be clear, I didn’t agree. I told them I thought we were free, but I needed to check with you.”

“It’s the same thing,” Izzy said, throwing up his hands. “Now they know we don’t have plans. They’re not going to take no for an answer. It isn’t in their vocabulary.”

In all fairness, he and Keegan had been talking about visiting with Izzy’s parents. Izzy had discussed it with his therapist as well, and she agreed that if he felt ready, it could be a good baby step toward rebuilding their relationship. Izzy was on the fence. Feeling judged by the people he cared about was still a trigger, and Izzy’s parents, though he loved them, were the judgmental type. His therapist wanted to set aside a whole session to dig into that childhood trauma.

Joy.

Keegan slid his arms around his waist from behind, tugging Izzy into his embrace and

squeezing. “Want me to get Riley?” he asked, keeping his voice too low for Alice to hear.

That was when Izzy noticed how jittery he’d become. Ugh. Yes. He did want Riley, but she was up at the house with Milo for company while everyone with thumbs helped Alice move in to Izzy’s old hayloft apartment. Micah, Ryan, and Archer were on their way back with the truck. Nick was at work but promised to bring dinner from the good Chinese place later.

Archer, with a push from Xavier, had exploded onto the New York art scene after visiting the city over the winter. He was in high demand, with offers for gallery shows and visiting artist positions coming in faster than he could turn them down. It had taken some convincing, a lot of encouragement, and, finally, Alice putting her foot down and telling him to stop fucking around and do something for himself for once in his life, but at long last, Archer was moving to New York City to pursue the art career he’d put on hold at nineteen when his sister had needed him.

The timing had been perfect. Izzy had moved in with Keegan, Alice was taking over the loft, and Archer was suddenly free to make decisions for himself for the first time in a long time. He was a complete wreck, but no one was letting him back out when he’d finally taken the leap.

“Here,” Alice said, holding something out to Izzy.

He took it automatically, then stared at the sparkly, neon-pink glob that was oozing wetly between his fingers. “Um...”

“It’s slime,” Alice said, walking back to an open box. “It helps when I need a distraction.”

Well. She wasn’t wrong. He was definitely distracted. What the fuck? He might be a little grossed out, too. The slime started to stretch toward the floor, and Izzy quickly

cupped his other hand beneath it.

Keegan chuckled against his neck, then kissed his shoulder. “For what it’s worth, I am sorry. I didn’t want to upset you. I never want that.”

Izzy fiddled with the cold goo, squishing it so it oozed between his knuckles. “I know you don’t. I’m sorry I took my stress out on you. I know how pushy my parents can be, and you have to be careful about what you say since you sort of work for my dad.”

Keegan took him by the chin and turned his face for a kiss. “My working relationship with your father is something I definitely don’t want you to worry about.” He kissed Izzy again, harder. “Understood?”

Izzy melted. “Yes, sir.”

“If you two are going to be weird, I’m kicking you out. I’m already trying not to think about all the sex that’s gone down in this apartment, thanks to you two, and Micah and Ryan. I need to buy some sage or something.”

Izzy did his best not to laugh. “Sorry, Alice. We’ll be good.”

Izzy took a deep breath, gathered Blackbird’s reins beneath her chin and led her out of the cool barn, into the warm summer sun.

She kept pace next to him, her head low and relaxed, her stride long and loose. She hadn’t so much as flicked an ear when he’d finished grooming her and, instead of taking her out to graze in the big field as usual, grabbed the saddle from outside her stall and tacked her up.

She wasn’t as out of practice with this as Izzy. Emma said that once she’d healed from her injury, she had been ridden regularly. She was sound and healthy. She

would never compete at the international level again, but then, neither would Izzy.

He was also fully recovered from the accident. The doctor Keegan had dragged him to after finding out that Izzy had never been officially cleared said he saw no reason why Izzy couldn't ride again.

Even with that news, it had taken Izzy a solid month to get up the guts to try. He'd spent a lot of time talking with Maggie, who had also recently returned to riding after hip surgery. Micah had helped too, offering to ride Birdie a few times to make sure she would behave for him. Izzy had turned him down. It wasn't Birdie he was worried about—it was himself and his own hangups. What would happen if he had a panic attack the moment he was in the saddle?

The path to the ring took him past the large field where Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were grazing. Sunny pinned her ears at Izzy when they got close but otherwise didn't lift her head from the lush green grass. Izzy was taking that as a win. The devil pony still wasn't a fan of men, but Alice said she was making progress.

All three rescues were fully healed from their traumatic past and had clean bills of health from both Keegan and Mason, the farrier. Keegan had taken to teasing Ryan about his "foster fails" because it had been decided that the three rescue horses weren't going anywhere, not even Sunny. She was still a little demon, but she was their demon. Meanwhile, Micah had been working with Violet and said she'd be ready for a saddle soon. And Ryan had ridden Klaus, who had more experience than the others, a few times and thought he could be added to their trail ride rotation. A rotation that Izzy was going to be included in as well, just as soon as he got his ass back in the saddle.

Keegan was waiting for Izzy and Birdie just outside the ring. He gave Izzy a lingering once-over that both warmed him and relieved some of his tension. "Like what you see?" he asked, striking a pose in his tight breeches and tall leather boots.

Keegan smiled and leaned in to kiss him. “Always.”

Izzy leered. “If you want, I can put the boots back on when we get home tonight.”

Keegan swallowed, then blew out a breath. “Get in there, brat,” he said, giving Izzy’s ass a smack, followed by a grope. “You better bring the crop too.”

Izzy laughed and pressed a kiss to his mouth, then led Birdie into the ring and over to the mounting block. His muscle memory did the rest, and before he knew it, he was swinging into the saddle. He caught the stirrup on the far side and adjusted the reins.

Oh.

He slid his palm along Birdie’s neck, stroking her silky coat, the last of his tension and all of his worries melting away.

“I was going to ask how you’re feeling,” Keegan said, leaning on the fence, his messy hair blowing in the light breeze off the mountain, Riley lounging at his feet where she could keep an eye on her favorite people. “But I don’t need to. I can see it on your face. You’re home.”

Izzy blinked away his blurry vision and smiled. Yeah. He was.