



Tattoos And Tinsel (Tattoos and Ties)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: A secret, even with good intentions, could jeopardize everything he holds dear.

Keyes Dixon's life has changed in so many ways since meeting his now-husband, Alec Pierce. He shed his unkempt biker exterior, leaving behind the days of intimidating people with his mere presence...mostly.

Empowered by his new confidence in himself and his life, he wants to share his joy with Alec. He seizes the opportunity to craft a special, handmade gift for his love. A custom motorcycle built entirely by Keyes.

Shhh....don't tell Alec! It's a surprise.

Alec, skilled attorney with unyielding determination and a knack for diving deep into any situation, knows something is amiss inside their home. He tries to give Keyes space and time to come to him, but his patience wears thin even as he keeps his worries bottled up.

As time inches closer to the big day, will their secrets destroy what they worked so hard to build?

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Dev

September

With his signature wicked smirk in place, Dev “Devilman” Fox sat on top of the conference room table with his weathered boots planted firmly on a plastic chair. He leaned forward with his elbows propped on his knees. His eagle-eyed stare fixed on the towering drop-down screen taking up most of the back wall of the meeting space. A screen so big, it was hard to think of anything else and it definitely threw off the balance of the room.

At least that was his opinion that no one asked for.

So he kept his mouth shut.

Holding his tongue while keeping all the wild craziness leashed up inside his head was a new development in his life. Cash, the guy who owned his heart, called it maturity. Dev suspected it had more to do with the properly prescribed—from a real medical doctor, ADHD medication he popped on the daily. Like as in every morning. Cash lovingly placed a pill on the counter before leaving for work with a sweet note of encouragement to have a good day.

Damn, he loved that man.

Another bonus, Cash had medical insurance that he shared with Dev. It really made a big difference in the medical care he received.

Dammit, Dev. Focus.

He may have exaggerated the claim of being eagle-eyed. As he gripped the presentation remote tighter than any game show contestant he'd ever seen, anxiety and pressure pumped through his veins. He had one job. To click the button to turn the pages of the PowerPoint presentation Keyes Dixon was giving.

And since he was telling the truth, he'd go a step further. His ass hurt from the uncomfortable seat he'd chosen when he first arrived. Hopping up on the table? What was he thinking? There were ten padded leather chairs in the room.

Lesson learned.

But no lie, his assigned job was challenging. It might be the hardest of his entire life. And with what he had lived through, that said a lot.

The preparation for today's presentation had taken weeks, maybe months, to nail down. Keyes had done all the heavy lifting in organizing the content, taking this as seriously as he had ever taken anything.

Their audience consisted of one person: Alec Pierce. Keyes's new husband.

And their sole potential investor.

Months ago, when he and Keyes began to revive their childhood dream of building custom bikes, Alec had guided them to the Small Business Administration. The SBA had then sent them to SCORE Business Mentoring to help mold their dream into a potential professional moneymaker. After all their help in learning what it takes to start a business properly, they were now ready to secure financing.

The kicker, Dev could single-handedly finance the whole operation without an

investor. But how did he explain where the money had come from without raising more questions than he was prepared to answer.

“Devilman, what the fuck?” Keyes barked, drawing Dev back into the here and now.

“Shit. Sorry,” he murmured and pushed the button.

Dev stared at the new slide, trying to judge their performance to this point.

Maybe Keyes wasn’t the right person to spearhead this presentation.

This time, Dev caught Keyes’s cue and pushed the button, changing the slide at the right moment. He let go of a pent-up breath. The pressure was off him for at least the next few seconds.

As Keyes continued to speak, Dev cast a sly glance at Alec. He lounged in a leather conference room chair, shifting his attention between Keyes and the screen. He was focused and attentive, with a manila folder open on the table in front of him. He leaned on one elbow with his hand partially covering his mouth.

They were in Alec’s swanky offices in the headquarters of Escape Resorts.

Dev had never seen Alec’s professional side. Keyes’s husband had always come off as pretty arm candy, devoted to Keyes’s happiness. Today, Dev understood it was all a veneer. Alec was a force who challenged everything, grilling Keyes with a barrage of questions as the presentation dragged on.

From this angle, Dev caught a glimpse of Alec’s lips pressed into a tight frown. Huh.

What if he decided to pass on the investment?

He suspected Keyes couldn't see the frown from his position, facing Alec directly.

Regardless, Dev caught another one of Keyes's cues and clicked the remote for the win.

The screen changed. With a nod, Keyes silently acknowledged a job well done.

Damn, Dev was crushing it like a boss.

"Why do you insist on doing this?" Alec asked, interrupting Keyes.

Keyes clamped his lips together. His furry, manicured brows dropped into a severe V, giving his most fierce glare, which meant one of two things. Either, Alec risked being tackled into a fistfight. A place Dev had found himself in a time or two when he'd pushed Keyes too far. Or the other, which was more likely, Keyes was contemplating Alec's question.

Either way, the big giant's stare usually frightened anyone in the vicinity but had zero effect on Alec, who responded with his own stern stare.

"You need to see that your investment's a sound decision," Keyes finally answered.

Alec's chair quietly squeaked as he sat forward.

"I know it's a sound decision. I'm the one who asked you to keep the investment opportunity in our home. We'll make a lot of money." Alec's voice rang with certainty. His hands splayed out as if to drive the belief home. There might have been an unspoken dumbass implied in the tone.

Alec's declaration was new information. He hadn't known that Alec actually wanted to be their only investor. To set up a proper machine shop would take hundreds of

thousands of dollars, if not more.

Now, he wondered if he should have figured out a lie and tossed in some of his own cash. Play the investment game that he didn't understand, but with a smart guy like Alec seeming so sure of their success, maybe he should invest too.

But first things first. Dev needed to participate in all this attitude bouncing around the room. He dropped his brows, shifting his expression to irritation. He directed his question to Keyes. "You made me do all this crap, spend time away from my family, and you knew for sure he was ponying up all the dough?"

"It wasn't a bad idea to put your plan to paper," Alec started, circumventing the impending argument between Dev and Keyes. "It's what I asked you to do. The focused planning helps propel the shop forward while anticipating any obstacles that might arise, but I personally don't need this style of presentation. Send me the business plan, and I'll forward it to Larry Sprung, my financial guy at Miltin. You're familiar with him, Keyes. He'll make sure the right team's in place and the plan is properly executed."

Alec seemed to believe that was some form of an answer. It wasn't.

Dev swung his head toward Keyes. "What the fuck, Dixon? We could already be turnin' our blueprints into sleds."

Keyes slanted his head toward Dev and muttered, "We gotta do this right..."

"You have blueprints already?" Alec interrupted, confused, staring between the both of them. "Why haven't I seen them?"

Shit. He'd said too much. Keyes was really going to be pissed off.

After the briefest pause, Keyes continued as if Alec hadn't spoken. "I'm not takin' money from Alec until I know we have it all down and ready to go. He's too important to me."

"What if Alec loses his money?" Dev and Keyes said in unison. He'd heard Keyes's mantra so many times over the last few months that he repeated the question verbatim.

This time, there was no question in Keyes's expression. He was angry.

Of course Dev didn't give a single shit. Most people looked at him that way.

As he opened his mouth to pop something harsh and crude off, Alec took the curve, swerving the argument off course. "How about I look over the business plan before I send it off to Larry tonight? If I have questions, I'll ask."

"Ask me," Keyes said a second faster than Dev. If Alec did ask Keyes, it'd take days for Keyes to comb through every piece of gathered data to ensure his response was consistent with their plans.

Consistency and preplanning weren't Dev's way. He wanted to get this bitch underway already.

"Will do," Alec said, getting to his feet. Alec fastened his suit jacket then reached for the paperwork and folder on the table. "Have you decided on a name for the shop?" Even as proud as Dev had been while printing the PowerPoint materials, he had to admit, they appeared amateur at best.

Neither he nor Keyes had spent much time in front of a computer screen. Typing the business plan and resulting presentation had taken so much longer than necessary with the way one of them pecked at the keyboard while the other watched for

misspellings and errors. The latter had honestly been the most difficult job.

“Yeah,” Dev said, tossing the clicker back on the table. “The one I think we settled on is The Devil and The Key.”

“When we get to the point of mass producin’, we’ll name the different frames after different demon names. At least that’s what we think right now,” Keyes added, shutting the lid to his new laptop. The presentation screen went dark.

Alec started around the table only to stop and question that decision. “You’ll be limiting your customer base with such a name.”

“Thought about that,” Keyes answered confidently. “Then we decided they’re not our target audience, so it shouldn’t impact anything.”

The explanation must have made sense because Alec nodded and started back toward Keyes again. “Okay then, give me a kiss goodbye.” Alec tucked the folder under his arm and lifted his lips, coming to stand within an inch of Keyes’s broad chest. Alec was taller than Dev but still inches shorter than Keyes. “I’ve got a meeting. I’m late.”

Keyes raised a single eyebrow and hesitated on the offering. “We’ve still got another twenty minutes. I don’t need the screen. Dev printed the presentation. Let’s just talk it out.” Dev fully understood that Alec didn’t want to hear another word. Apparently, Keyes hadn’t gotten there yet.

Man, they must have really tanked to have someone as devoted as Alec, preferring to ditch his mister than hear more.

Probably something they should work on.

Or not.

When were they ever going to need this skill again in their lives?

Whatever.

“You convinced me and I’m in. Good job,” Alec said with a smile, lifting a hand for a high five. “Now kiss me goodbye. I have a long rest of my day. I might be late getting home if I don’t get going.”

Keyes didn’t relent and left the high five hanging in the air. “You’re the one who said we’ve gotta find our professional voice. We’re tryin’ to do that. What if we have to find another investor? We gotta know what to do.”

“That was a solid first try, but I’ll handle any future financial presentations. I’ve met a venture capitalist in Dallas who invests in green projects. He’s interested if we need him. We’re not there yet. I want to fund us for as long as I can. You watch my dollars closer than I do so we should be fine.” Alec explained, glancing over at Dev, including him in the conversation.

“Why didn’t you tell me we had someone else interested?” Keyes asked.

“Because we agreed that I handle the finances. We each have a job. Yours is to build, Dev’s is to design, and mine is to manage the finances. We stay in our lanes of responsibility. It’s also the best approach to handling such a partnership to keep the infighting at bay. It’s how business works best,” Alec explained, taking a step back to ensure he saw both his and Keyes’s nods of acceptance. “Now kiss me. I’m feeling insecure. Every time you walk into the building, everyone stares. Kiss me to help my insecure heart.”

Keyes barked out a harsh laugh right in Alec’s face. “They’re not into us. They’re wonderin’ why the poor side of town showed up on their doorstep and what violence we brought with us.”

Dev huffed out a bark of laughter because Keyes was dead on.

Alec shook his head, disagreeing, and puckered again. After a short pause, Keyes finally bent to place his lips on Alec's. They didn't linger. Thank Buddha.

"I can see you still have more to say, and I want to hear it. Let's do it tonight when I'm in the right mental state to listen. I'll click the button for Dev. It seemed his only participation."

Dev barked out a laugh at the truth of Alec's words.

"You're gonna listen to me while you're runnin' on that machine or when you're cookin' our dinner," Keyes said doubtfully.

"It's called a treadmill, and it's good for my heart and the housekeeper's making dinner. I'll dedicate all night to listening to you," Alec replied.

Keyes smirked, Alec smiled, and Dev bounced off the table to his feet. Something was happening between the two that he might be unable to scrub from his memory. Those two did that cuddled-up shit all the time.

Dev cleared his throat to gain their attention. "I'm out. Get your crap, Dixon, and meet me in the car. Five minutes max or you'll have to take Alec's car home. See you, Alec." He tossed the deuces over his shoulder as he went through the conference room door.

He felt the success of their new venture in his bones, but he had a thriving business of his own already. A new tattoo parlor where he was booked solid with appointments from now until he died. He had to head back to the parlor so he could finish and get home to his family early tonight.

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Cash

“Daddy’s home,” Mae squealed. The high-pitched frequency she achieved when excited skated along Cash’s nerves until a full-body shiver followed.

Tonight was Cash’s scheduled evening at home. With their busy calendars, they’d had to devise a plan so someone was always home for the girls. He’d been sitting at the kitchen table with Mae and Abi, an iPad in his hand. He read a case file while the girls did their homework. All was forgotten as the distinct sound of Dev’s motorcycle pipes grew louder as he drove up the driveway.

Cash’s own excitement had him getting to his feet.

Where Mae leaped off her seat in a dead run toward the kitchen door, a sedate Abi stayed in her chair, pretending to continue to study. The indifference was a veneer. Something she did to Dev all the time. She had mastered a way of keeping Dev on his toes, making him work for her attention.

Cash was more in line with Mae’s side of things. But before he left the table, he asked Abi quietly, “Do you need a refill?”

Abi never lifted her head as she gave an almost silent answer. “Yeah. Coconut water with watermelon.”

To Dev’s irritation, Abi had fully adopted Cash’s vegan habits. She’d most likely done it to aggravate Dev. The man was a carnivore to his core. But between Cash and Abi, they were slowly making headway with Mae. If the majority of the house was on

a healthy diet, then Dev would have no choice but to follow. At least it worked that way in his head. Dev's unpredictability left most things in question.

Cash took the steps between the kitchen table to the refrigerator, getting Abi a new drink and pulling out a Bud Light for Dev.

"Hey, Mae," Dev said in the booming way he spoke. Since Mae's last birthday, she was about fifty-fifty on whether Dev was to pick her up or bend down to give his greeting as a peck on the cheek. Tonight, she launched herself at him, jumping up. Dev swept out his arms, easily catching her.

"Hey, Daddy. I started my Christmas list today. You need to teach me how to ride a bike," Mae said, absently pushing the wisps of hair off her face to see better. They'd been talking about Mae learning to ride for a while now, but she'd rejected every single opportunity to go outside and try. Tonight, she changed her tune. "Mama told me I need to ask you for a Frog Bike for Christmas. They're four hundred dollars," she stated proudly, then paused, looking over her shoulder to Abi. "Right?"

"Yes," Abi answered without looking up, intuitively knowing Mae was talking to her. "And it's too much money for a first bike. I told you that."

Mae popped her head back around to Dev, giving a shake. Her long ponytail swished back and forth. "It's not too much money, because it's pink, and I can ride it in the dirt."

"You don't like dirt," Abi countered with her face still down, pen moving as Cash put the new drink in front of her. "And you're growing fast now. That bike won't fit you next year."

"Don't listen to her, Daddy," Mae said, bringing her hands to Dev's ears, covering each one while moving his face to where they stared at each other, only inches apart.

“Can I say hello to the rest of my family?” Dev asked Mae. For about a second, she contemplated the request, then nodded happily. The smile continued as she placed a quick peck on his cheek.

“I’m glad you’re home, Daddy. Do your artwork in my room tonight until I fall asleep.” Her legs went straight, ready to be put back on the floor.

Dev’s gaze searched the large kitchen until he found Cash. His guy eased any lingering tension from the busy day. Dev had an uncanny knack of leaving work at work. When home, he gave his full attention to his family. Crazy still gravitated to Dev. The tattoo parlor had grown too big, too fast. Dev could barely keep up and had hired an additional artist to help Trace with the overflow clients. The girls had Dev chasing after them all the time. He strived to be a good parent. He attended every school meeting. Made promises to the PTA and volunteered to be the parent set designer for a school play Abi was taking part in.

They’d also begun the process to have more children. It was fast, probably too soon in their less-than-a-year-old relationship, but that was how Dev handled life: full throttle.

As if that weren’t enough, Dev had added a joint venture with Keyes to his already full plate.

Cash tried to help Dev’s heavy load, but his efforts usually fell short. Every time he took a task off Dev’s list, another promptly replaced it. But at this moment, with the easing in the fine lines around Dev’s eyes and the sincere smile he gave, Cash better saw how he helped his mister. Their bond was deep and mutual. A sweet devotion to the other. Cash loved his biker beyond reason. From this minute until they left in the morning, Dev belonged to him, and he belonged to Dev.

A reformed outlaw biker made the best forever mate.

“Here,” Cash said, meeting Dev in the middle of the kitchen, handing over the can of beer before tilting for his kiss.

Their lips lingered like they always did.

“Two little lovebirds sittin’ in a tree...” Mae started a tune her mother had taught her to sing anytime he and Dev did anything remotely intimate. Tena, Dev’s ex, and the girls’ mom was back in Dallas full time, on her own. She was doing a good job at managing her responsibilities, only aggravating in these situations.

“Can you believe how annoyin’ Mae is?” Dev whispered loudly, giving the exact reaction his little one wanted. She beamed with pride while climbing back into the seat.

“She loves you,” Cash added.

“But the other one over there hasn’t said a word.” Dev zeroed in on Abi while popping the top of the can, starting toward her. “Is there any chance she doesn’t know I’m home?”

“Probably not,” Cash admitted, chuckling at the smile Abi hid from her father.

When he stood beside her, and she still didn’t respond, he grabbed a bit of her long hair and gave a gentle tug. She turned up her face, unable to hide the grin from her success. Dev smiled down at her.

“Abi has a new boyfriend,” Mae spouted.

An instant frown formed on both daughters’ and fathers’ faces. Abi kicked a foot, jolting Mae’s chair enough to tousle her in her seat.

“Shut up,” Abi said. If laser beams could shoot from her eyes, they’d most certainly singe Mae’s hair. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, I do, Daddy,” Mae shot out, defending her knowledge. “She has a boyfriend.”

The energy in the room stood still from Dev’s fierce stare. “You aren’t old enough to have a boyfriend.”

“I don’t have one,” Abi answered and dismissed Dev, turning back to her homework.

“She does. His name’s Maverick and he’s so cute. They were holding hands when Mrs. Phiri picked her up. I saw it. Mrs. Phiri gave him a ride home, so he didn’t have to walk. His house is bigger than ours.”

Mae read a room about as well as Dev did.

Suddenly, Abi abruptly pushed her chair backward. With all the attitude a Fox could give, she gave an aggravated huff, or at least he chose to believe that was a huff, not the devil inside her trying to free itself on Mae, and grabbed her books.

“You’re too young to have a boyfriend,” Dev said again sternly. His tone and message bit out forcefully. This Maverick had no idea what he was in for with Dev as Abi’s father. Poor guy. “You don’t know what dudes are thinkin’. I do. You’re too young.”

“Thanks,” Abi tossed to Mae before storming out of the room.

Dev started after Abi, no doubt determined to mansplain his ways to her. He did it all the time, but she was too much like him. She’d do the exact opposite of what he wanted just to get under his skin. Cash gripped Dev’s wrist, holding him back. Abi might be the most responsible Fox in the family. She needed time and trust. She’d

earned both over her short life.

“Let her go. Talk to her later,” Cash encouraged, drawing Dev to him. “Tell me about the meeting today. Was Alec impressed?”

It took a few seconds for Dev to shift to the new topic. His grim features eventually softened until he grinned broadly.

“I don’t wanna hear anything about the dumb motorcycle shop,” Mae said and stood on the seat, jumping to the floor before racing in the same direction Abi had gone.

“All the hell Keyes put me through was for nothin’,” Dev grunted. “Alec’s fundin’ the entire project, the sole investor. Keyes already knew he was dishin’ out the dough.” Dev took hold of the back of Mae’s chair, dragging it out before dropping heavily down in the seat. He kicked at the chair beside him in invitation for Cash.

“So, you didn’t have to offer any help?” Cash asked quietly, surprised.

“Not a single dime. Keyes thinks Alec should be a paid partner. He’s handlin’ the money and he’ll take care of all the marketin’. Somethin’ like that. Keyes talked to me when we left the office, but he’s started using so many words to say things that it’s hard to listen to it all,” Dev explained, wrapping his arms over his chest. “Keyes is doin’ most of the work. I can’t see where I should be an equal partner to Keyes. Maybe Alec shouldn’t either. I don’t know. We’re usin’ my name and reputation... Alec’s a smart guy...” Dev shook his head. “However it works is fine.”

“What does time management look like now?” Cash asked. He missed Dev during the nine or so hours of his workday. If the motorcycle shop really took off, he saw lots of lonely nights and weekends in his future.

“Keyes and I can manage a lot over the phone and by video calls. I can’t afford to let

the ink parlor suffer any more than it has. Trace is transitionin' my overflow well enough, but his schedule's stacked. I figure I can shift more of my one-off customers to him, and he can shift what he can't do to the new guy. They can also handle the walk-ins. On my evenings with the girls, we can head to Keyes's place for a couple of hours. They like it over there. The dogs play. They love that shit."

Cash nodded, hopefully pulling off a look of encouragement, but feeling needy inside. "I can head there after work..."

"Gonna miss me?" Dev teased, leaning forward, and getting closer to Cash, who leaned back in his seat. The deep connection he'd developed sometimes made him vulnerable and insecure.

"I..." Cash clamped his mouth shut when nothing else came. Dev read him like a book, barking out a laugh, reaching for Cash's forearm. He was drawn forward until their fingers intertwined, linking them together.

"I was teasin'. In my head, wherever I am, you're there too. Sometimes I forget you don't understand that. If you don't mind, can you come with me on the nights I'm there? I think my work can be done here at home, but I feel like I need to be supportive," Dev explained as he began to fingerplay Cash's hand. "The initial bikes that Keyes is buildin' from scratch... He's crazy talented. What he's doin' hasn't been done before. We're gonna see if it works. How he slung tires for all those years was such a waste of his time."

"And Alec still doesn't know that Keyes is building him a motorcycle?" Cash asked.

When Cash initially heard the plan that the first bike made would be a Christmas present to Alec, he didn't know how Keyes could keep such a secret being married to a curious attorney. They had months to go before the holidays. It still seemed iffy to Cash that Keyes could pull it off.

“Nope,” Dev said proudly for his friend. “I brought up the blueprints by accident, but Keyes swerved and redirected like a pro. Since the bike’s bein’ stored in his uncle’s barn, I don’t think Alec has a clue.”

“How’s the new shop coming?”

Keyes and Alec had purchased acres of land many months ago and were in the process of building a massive workshop there.

“It’s almost done,” Dev said, leaning back in his seat, drawing Cash forward to keep their hands intertwined. It wasn’t a hardship.

“What else happened today?”

“Remember Ollie’s son Peck? The guy who took over the ink parlor for me when you came barrelin’ into my life. He’s got experience paintin’ bikes. He’s talented, so we hired him this afternoon. I gotta finish Alec’s art so he can start to work,” Dev explained.

It seemed like everything was coming together. Good for Keyes. He deserved all the positive things coming his way.

“Keyes got super detailed in his presentation.”

“How did Alec take it?”

“Honestly?” Dev asked, waggling his brows like it was a choice. His voice dropped an octave to keep anyone else from listening. “We were a wreck. Alec stopped Keyes about halfway through and reaffirmed his commitment. That’s how I figured out he was payin’ for it all.”

Cash chuckled. He could only imagine what the two bikers sounded like in such a professional setting. “What about the name of the shop? Has it changed again?”

“Oh yeah.” Dev laughed and placed his elbows on his knees, bending in to kiss Cash’s knuckles. “In Keyes’s text, he suggested the name Devil’s Key.”

“It’s shorter, but I like The Devil and The Key. The acronym’s TDTK. Easy to say.”

“Hmm... good point.” Dev got to his feet, letting out a long yawn, bringing Cash up with him. “I gotta draw tonight. I’m behind on my tattoos. After I get Mae to sleep, then I’ll put you to bed, and keep workin’.”

“Have you eaten?” Cash asked, liking the plan.

“I’m not hungry. I’ll grab a sandwich later.” Dev wasn’t a foodie. If he didn’t have to eat to survive, he wouldn’t. “Have the girls eaten?”

“Yeah, I saved some of Mae’s mac and cheese for you. It’s in the refrigerator.”

A grin spread across Dev’s face, and his chest bumped into Cash’s. “My favorite. I’m lucky to have you.”

“Remember you said that,” Cash teased, locking an arm around Dev’s waist, keeping him close for a kiss.

“Always.” Dev opened his mouth, meeting him halfway for a toe-curling kiss with promises of more to come.

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Keyes

“We have a delicious ground turkey and vegetable scramble,” Alec said, his head stuck inside the refrigerator. “It looks good. It has baby bok choy, Broccolini, edamame, mushrooms, the spicy red peppers you like so much, onions, pomegranate seeds, and sunflower seeds. You like Broccolini...” Alec paused, poking his head past the door, waiting for Keyes’s response as if he didn’t already know the answer.

Keyes sat in his usual spot on top of a tall barstool on the other side of the kitchen island.

“Pass,” he said, knowing Alec had a wealth of dinners inside the refrigerator, which allowed him to pick a dish he liked better.

This was their way every night. Keyes watched Alec prepare their dinner or on nights like this, the housekeeper made the recipes Alec instructed then played surprised at what he found inside the fridge. Though, all that was usually done to encourage Keyes to eat a healthier meal.

Honestly, he was getting there, but he still enjoyed his beef. Ground turkey didn’t classify as real meat. No poultry is categorized as hearty. He didn’t make the rules about real meat but absolutely lived by them with his whole heart.

“But she made the coconut rice you like to go with it,” Alec said to sweeten the pot. The nightly negotiations had begun. His lawyer was a dog with a bone when he tried to get what he wanted.

“Pass,” Keyes said again and started a rolling hand motion for Alec to move on.

“Keyes...” Alec said with a lecture sure to follow.

“Alec...” Keyes said back.

Alec wrinkled his brow, giving him a stern look as if he didn’t see that same expression many times a day from his mister. Keyes wasn’t sure what effect Alec would hope that had in the present moment.

Luckily, Alec relented without more of a fight. His head disappeared back around the refrigerator door. “Looks like we have spaghetti sauce with tortellini. Olivia makes those fresh, usually with ground beef, I believe.”

“With ground beef in the sauce?” Keyes asked. Alec had tricked him by using ground veggie crumbles a time or two, passing them off as ground beef. They never fooled Keyes, not one single time.

“Mmm hmm...”

“Sounds good. I like you in those skintight workout clothes,” Keyes added to shift the topic before Alec attempted to go back to the Broccolini idea. Alec squared his shoulders and wiggled his ass in appreciation. The move was designed to be alluring and playful and made Keyes smile. When Alec brought both plates from the refrigerator, a large helping of Broccolini took up a third of Keyes’s spaghetti plate.

One comment about the vegetable and that was only said in an attempt at foreplay, and now he ate Broccolini a couple of times a week.

Keyes blamed Cash’s influence for Alec’s redirection of their food intake.

“You’re trying to distract me. But it won’t work. I want you to live a long life with me.” Alec’s words were becoming akin to a broken record as he set each plate in the fancy new warming drawer. He claimed it would better heat their food.

“You’re gettin’ more muscular,” Keyes added casually. He rested his forearms on the granite countertop as he pushed up from the bottom rung to better check out Alec’s hot body.

“Now you’re just being silly,” Alec drawled, reaching for the oven mitts.

“No, I’m not. I’m bein’ honest.”

Alec smiled the smile Keyes liked so much and tossed the mitts on the counter in easy reach of the warmer. He went for the glass of wine he’d poured earlier.

“Tell me the progress you’ve made on the prototype.”

Keyes smirked and lifted his gaze to look Alec directly in the eyes. They exchanged something in the stare. Probably Alec’s growing frustration with being left out of this phase of the bike-building process. He repeated Alec’s words from earlier. “You handle your end, and I’ll handle my end. Isn’t that what you always say?”

Alec narrowed his eyes as he tilted back the wineglass, draining the contents in one long swallow. A single dropped brow gave away his irritation.

His guy spoke of their love being soulmate-worthy. Something special and unique. They understood one another on a different plane. Secrets didn’t exist between them. That was until Alec found out Keyes wasn’t working from the shop on their property every day. Questions flew with no answer appeasing his guy.

Alec was a hard one to keep secrets from, and the holidays were still months away.

Maybe if he stayed on his toes, having a ready arsenal of answers... Yeah, it'd still be damned hard.

The completion of Alec's bike hinged on Dev finishing the art. Keyes had requested some sort of play on the kneeling angel back tattoo Dev had inked on him almost a year ago. Dev had outdone himself and was sure to hit the mark this time too.

Alec would shit when he saw the finished product.

Pride overwhelmed him. He had a knack for building badass bikes. He'd never been real smart about anything. Good to see he had a skill at something.

"How did I do today? Be honest. I've never made a PowerPoint presentation before. Hell, I never presented anything before. I had to google everything. Even how to open the program to build the pages," Keyes said and reached for the bottle of beer he'd grabbed before sitting down, tilting it back for a long swig. The bitter taste of building the presentation didn't wash away. Hell, the trauma caused by working so hard on the thirty-seven-page PowerPoint might need counseling to overcome.

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Alec

Once Alec understood the direction of Keyes's question, he turned away, which never happened when Keyes was around. His guy was the most handsome man in the world. He deserved every bit of Alec's focused attention. But Keyes was trying hard to be a knowledgeable business owner even though he'd failed spectacularly this afternoon. Alec searched for anything to occupy his hands.

He paused. Letting the quiet linger between them like a wrecking ball.

He was waiting too long to be believable.

Jeez. He was an attorney, for God's sake. He laid out bold truths for a living. Why couldn't he do that now?

Because he knew the care Keyes put into making his presentation unique and thorough.

A presentation Keyes insisted on giving once he learned how start-up businesses had to lay out their plans for bankers and investors to offer up money. A poor business plan scared investors away. Keyes was determined to be mindful of every stage of the shop's development, including Alec's investment.

What Keyes had presented was a business plan that was too thorough and scattered in a mishmash of data and ideas. Poor Dev. His contribution was to digitally turn the pages. Keyes had been all over the place, impossible to follow. Keyes had often barked at Dev for turning the pages too quickly or not fast enough.

Alec's gaze landed on the warmer. Finally, a real reason to look away. The warming drawer just became the best purchase of his life. Alec grabbed a fork and moved the spaghetti around to check its temperature.

"You reaffirmed my investment before you were finished." Alec's voice sounded off, so he cleared his throat, then added, "Real solid."

"Why did you say it like that?" Keyes asked, skepticism ringing in his tone. "Your voice sounds different."

Alec reached for the oven mitt and scooted the plate from underneath the coils. "Sinuses," he said, placing the plate on a table mat in front of Keyes. He ventured a quick glance up. Their gazes collided. The small smile that formed happened

regularly. Keyes took his breath like he took his heart. Thankfully, Keyes nodded.

Whew. Bullet dodged. Good.

Alec turned away and removed his plate next. There was no conceivable way that the food was completely warmed.

“If the prototype isn’t complete, can I look at the blueprints? I’m excited to see what you’ve come up with,” Alec said, setting his plate on the table mat beside Keyes.

It took several long moments while he gathered two glasses of water and silverware before he realized Keyes hadn’t answered.

This time, when he glanced at Keyes, he got a sassy smirk that was all his guy. He didn’t like that look one bit, because it meant Keyes thought something was obvious when it wasn’t at all.

“What?” Alec’s mind raced. “The blueprints aren’t ready. That can’t be right.”

“You’re fishin’,” Keyes said knowingly and lifted the fork. His attention went to the plate, dismissing Alec. “You sure this is ground beef?”

“Key,” Alec said forcefully, drawing Keyes’s knowing grin back his way. “What am I fishing for?”

Keyes’s face morphed again. This time, he gave a dramatic eye roll with a broader smile. “I know you wanna be a full partner. It’s cool. I mentioned it to Dev this afternoon, but there have to be rules. You’ve gotta be honest with me all the time. And stop buyin’ me all the presents. You gotta watch the budget the same as me. And for sure, we want you to handle all the advertisin’ and marketin’. I’ve only ever bought advertisin’ on grocery carts. That’s not our target audience for these bikes.

Teach me how to do it as we go. I figure we'll cut you in as a third and still pay you back for the investment with interest."

"I didn't ask for interest," Alec said, stunned.

"No, but it's the right thing to do. If you're givin' us your money, then it's not earnin' interest somewhere else." At that moment, Alec's heart jumped from his chest, snuggling against Keyes.

"You always watch out for me. I'm lucky to have you," Alec said as he went around the island to stand beside Keyes. "You're the best part of my life."

Keyes gave a humph, perhaps liking the words but also letting Alec know that he thought the words were ridiculous. Alec's hand went to Keyes's shoulder, gently caressing his big bicep.

"I love you," Alec whispered as Keyes turned, drawing Alec between his parted thighs.

"Love you more," Keyes murmured and slid his palms up Alec's back, then massaged down until his hands gripped each ass cheek and held on. "I'm not that hungry..."

"Is this what you were waiting to say to me before I get access to the blueprints?" Alec asked, interrupting Keyes.

Keyes's hands fell away. "You never let it go. I just made you an official partner, and you're still unhappy."

He turned toward his plate, dismissing Alec as he picked up his fork again.

Alec remembered a time in the not-so-distant past when he'd have insecurity about Keyes giving him the cold shoulder. Not anymore. He reached for Keyes's forearm, twisting it until Keyes looked at him. "What's the reason you won't show me what you've been working on?"

Keyes's brows dropped, not in anger but in concentration. "I'm not ready to show you. It's not done, and I want it to be just right. It's the first bike I've made..."

"It's not the first..." Alec started and stopped speaking when Keyes launched himself from the chair, causing Alec to back away several steps. Keyes kept coming until Alec found himself hoisted over Keyes's broad shoulder, easily tossed there. Keyes's strong arm wrapped tightly around his lower legs while his free hand swatted Alec's ass as he started toward their bedroom.

"When it's time, I'll show you," Keyes growled and swatted a hand over one of Alec's ass cheeks playfully.

"Let me down," Alec said and tried to kick his legs. Keyes had a tight hold and swatted his ass again as he moved through the living room.

"Say you'll stop askin'," Keyes said, taking long strides through the house. "I'll show you when I'm ready for you to see."

"Key, you know I can't do that." A heavier slap landed on his ass. A breath he hadn't known he held rushed free as a sensual warmth spread over his body. Alec was thoroughly aroused, his cock swelling at record speed.

"Yes, you can. Say you'll stop askin'."

Alec pushed his fingers into the waistband of Keyes's jeans. The damn belt kept him from sliding his hands all the way in. Keyes swatted him again. The sensation had his

eyes closing, his body tingling as Keyes tossed Alec from his shoulder like a rag doll to land on their bed with a bounce.

He barely had time to get to his elbows before Keyes reached for his runners, flicking each one off before tossing them over his shoulder.

“I’ll suck you before I fuck you if you say you’ll wait until I’m ready to show you,” Keyes growled, the dominant tone sending vibrations of lust straight to Alec’s core.

Jeez. His favorite way to make love.

The tingles sprinted over his nerve endings. Alec dropped back down on the mattress as his cock did its best to burst free of the confines of his compression shorts.

“Deal,” he finally murmured, unsure if he could keep the vow for any length of time. Reasonably, he understood he didn’t want to rush Keyes. He wanted his muscular mister happy and proud of the end product. Sounded doable. Alec grinned and lifted his ass as Keyes brought his shorts down his waist while massaging his hard-on with the big, calloused palm.

Tonight was shaping up to be a perfect night.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:11 am*

Keyes

November

All the over-the-top feelings and sensations were there, driving Keyes's hips to move faster, back and forth, in and out of Alec's gorgeous body. He loved his guy with all his heart. Nothing had ever felt this right or as good as it did when he made love to his husband.

Love, devotion, and a forever commitment swirled in the air surrounding them. His thighs gave a decadent ache, the muscles straining under the tempo. He did his best to plow into his lover's welcoming channel, just the way Alec wanted.

Alec lay on his back on the edge of the mattress, bottom lip tucked between his teeth. Keyes was on his feet, holding Alec's thighs. Alec's hard cock bounced enticingly with every snap of his hips.

Fuck, it felt good. He bent Alec's knees to his chest to better cradle his palm around Alec's five o'clock shadow. He swept his thumb the length of Alec's plump bottom lip, grinning at the unexpected nip Alec gave to the tip of his finger.

"Kiss me," Alec panted, then sucked Keyes's thumb into his mouth.

Damn, he liked that move.

Keyes followed the directive, bending between Alec's legs to reach his mouth. His love circled his neck, drawing him down for a proper and thorough kiss.

The sweet, velvety tongue slipped along his, guiding him deeper into Alec's delicious mouth. The sweet moment felt so good. His heart leaped from his chest, tangling with Alec's. The man captivated him body and soul.

With his eyes closed, he let go of any control he had, giving himself freely to the release building inside him. Alec owned him, and he knew it. His guy wrapped his legs around Keyes's waist, holding him in place as Alec's fingers tangled into Keyes's long mass of hair. The gentle tugs Alec gave and the scraping of fingernails against his scalp were his undoing.

Alec moved his hips, pistoning against Keyes, matching him thrust for thrust. His captor opened his mouth wider, taking over the kiss as he fully explored Keyes's mouth.

As fast as he'd claimed him, Alec let go of the kiss, drawing in a deep, stuttering breath. His eyes rolled into the back of his head.

"You're fucking me so good," Alec rasped, tightening his fingers into Keyes's hair.

Goddamn, he loved a good hair pull, but that wasn't what Alec was doing right now. Instead, his guy wanted him to stay right there.

Good thing Alec was so damn bendy.

Keyes slid his hands low, gripping Alec's ass cheeks, pulling them roughly apart. The fraction of an inch he gained was everything right in the world. Darkness seeped in at the edges of his vision, causing him to lose control fast. "Fuck me."

"I'm trying," Alec murmured. His tease came out as a carnal, throaty sound. Alec tilted his head back, pressing it to the bed. Keyes's lips touched the warm, sweaty skin of Alec's neck. "You hit it every single time."

More than anything, he wanted to respond with something cute and hot meant to tease his lover, but words and reason took flight, leaving him nothing more than an urgent mass of tingly nerve endings. His hips began the rough crescendo of release, slapping against Alec's ass. His knees went weak at the stunning pressure.

The visual of the man lying underneath him, Alec's gorgeous body moving back and forth in the rhythm Keyes created, was just the tip he needed, right over the edge. The war raging inside him to make this moment last forever was lost to each powerful thrust.

Alec lifted his head. The heavy, heady weight of Alec's darkening gaze brought Keyes's forehead against his husband's. He inhaled Alec's intoxicating scent, a rich, spicy cologne along with musky, delicious need. The smell drove him crazy. There was nothing that could stop him now. He dropped down to the crook of Alec's neck, his lips pressed there, relishing the wildly thumping vein.

Breath became uneven and ragged. He reached between them to stroke the bobbing cock. How time and the right man had changed him. He wanted Alec's orgasm before his own. The feel of Alec's shaft sliding through his calloused palm felt more right than any other moment of his life. The soft velvet wrapped around solid steel was pure perfection.

Keyes rose a fraction to better see Alec's beautiful cock driving into his fist. He flitted his gaze lower to where their bodies came together.

"I... Coming." Alec rode his palm like a bucking bronco.

Fire licked along Keyes's spine, setting him ablaze from the inside out.

"Yes!" Alec hissed. His ass clenched and spasmed around Keyes. Alec's come shot between them, painting his chest and warming Keyes's fist. Alec arched his back as a

throaty moan slipped free.

His body shook and shattered, his release pumping freely into his love. Every muscle in his body tensed and seized, frozen in the moment as reality melted away. Keyes collapsed. Alec's hard body welcomed him there.

"Jesus, Key. How's it still so good?" Alec panted.

"Mmmph," Keyes groaned, gasping for breath as sleep lured him into her peaceful warmth. Alec's ass twitched, milking the last few drops free. "Sleep."

"Mmm-hmm..." Alec agreed. His palms massaged down the length of Keyes's back, then up again. A rubdown he liked a whole damn lot, almost purring at the sensation.

Making love to his mister was everything, regardless of the reason that got them in bed that night.

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Dev

One week later

"Hmm. The designs are impressive," the senior Mr. Layne said, moving around printed pages of the digital files Dev had sent last night.

Keyes and Dev sat in Dev's workspace inside his ink parlor on one end of a video call. Mr. Layne, their latest client, was on the other. They were using a video chat program that Dev had arranged. The only problem was that Dev hadn't properly anticipated the length of time of the call. And his cheap ass hadn't bought full access to the app. Their allotted sixty minutes were running out. If they didn't wind it up

soon, the video call would cut off, making them look unprofessional. Buddha knew they needed no help in that category.

Dev's tight schedule gave him five extra minutes between the video call and his next scheduled tattoo. Per his parlor manager, Millie, the client was already waiting in the reception area. Millie was hovering close by, disinfectant in hand. She wanted to clean before the client sat for the tattoo.

Besides all those obstacles, he couldn't run late today. This was his evening to be with the girls. Mrs. Phiri ran a tight ship, with no leeway in the schedule. The disapproving stare she'd give him always had lingering effects. He'd feel bad all night. Better to just be on time and avoid disappointment.

Focus on the video, jackass, and close this bitch down.

Mr. Layne was Alec's boss's old man. He wasn't old, per se. Probably Dev's old man's age. Oh man, his heart smiled at the reminder of what his father had gone through. The thought sent excited goose bumps springing up along his forearms.

At least the smile stayed on the inside this time. Not the giant grin he usually gave when he thought about his old man's newest forever home.

Goddammit, Dev, focus.

Layne.

Age.

Right. Maybe the guy was closer to seventy than he looked. The bike he had commissioned was as extraordinary as it was pricey. Out of all the sales they had made, Layne's new sled was by far the most custom and costly. Layne was easily

spending a hundred large. And if he stopped with the simple tweaks, they might get a deposit for half the total cost. Layne wasn't in it for speed. He wanted a flashy cruiser, decked out in silver and gray. It was quite a bit for a man who had never owned a bike before.

They had rules in place from a business perspective. The biggest one was the hardest for Dev's continued understanding. The secrecy behind each project was to hide all their designs from Alec. Keyes wanted Alec to have a total concept surprise. It was getting old and more difficult to accomplish. Alec was like a trained bird dog, determined to sniff out the truth. The whole thing was ridiculous. And complicated. Lies stacking on top of lies. They were damn hard for him to remember, and he sucked at lying.

Keyes had insisted that all three of their new customers sign NDAs—a non-disclosure agreement on the details of each bike built until the beginning of next year. Keyes had an extreme talent. The designs would sell themselves if anyone had the chance to see them. Mr. Layne was chomping at the bit to show his friends and his brother the new ride to make them green with envy.

“I think I want the solo spring seat in matte black. How will that impact the overall look?” Mr. Layne asked. “I only need a single seat. My wife won't ever get on the back.”

Dev quickly ducked his head and began changing the design on the digital pad.

“I like that change,” Keyes said, watching Dev work.

“It'll be badass and more comfortable,” Dev answered. “I prefer a solo spring seat myself. I'm redrawin' it now in black. I'll toss in another drawin' with the gray/silver seat color. I think both will complement the look you're goin' for. Think about it. We have time.” Dev worked the screen and sent the changes.

“Mr. Layne, our video’s runnin’ out of time. If we lose you, we’ll call you back,” Keyes said. Dev tilted his head toward his business partner. Why did they need to extend the time?

“What’s going on in here?” They both turned their heads toward the screen to see a man coming inside the room behind Mr. Layne.

“Shh. I’m in a secret meeting with TDTK,” Mr. Layne said, barely glancing over his shoulder. “Shut the door behind you. I signed an NDA.” The confusion on the younger man’s face was comical. “It’s only my son, Arik. He’s the one who pointed me toward your shop.”

“If you’re looking for privacy, you’ve failed spectacularly,” Arik added with severe sarcasm. Dev instantly liked him. The door shut with a slam. “You own this entire building. You have an office. A large one. Bigger than mine. And about fifteen conference rooms of varying sizes. Why’re you in my office?”

“I don’t want to alert anyone to my purchase. Your uncle’s gonna shit when he sees what they’ve done,” Mr. Layne said, an inner joy and prideful smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

“There’s a flaw in your plan,” Arik said, coming to stand behind his father. “I’m seeing your project.”

“You don’t—”

Luckily, the screen went dark, and Dev shot out a hand to keep Keyes from reinitiating the video call.

“What’re you doin’?” Dev asked. “I got a client waitin’, and Millie’s gonna have a fuckin’ cow if she can’t disinfect where your big ass has contaminated my space.”

As if he hadn't heard a word Dev said, Keyes sat back dejectedly, scrubbing a hand down his face. A disgruntled huff came next, making Dev take a closer look.

"In no more than sixty seconds, tell me what's wrong." Dev swiveled in his chair, tucked his arms over his chest, and gave Keyes a concerned stare. For the first time today, he saw the tiredness in his buddy's eyes and the grim lines at the corner of his mouth. "Why're you tired?"

Keyes dropped his brawny arms by his side in defeat.

"Times tickin'," Dev said, his leg beginning to bounce. "What's up?"

"Alec's gettin' harder to steer away from the surprise. I'm fuckin' exhausted. The only way to take his mind off shit is to either ignore him, which I'm doin' durin' the day, but at night, Goddamn..." Keyes said, shaking his head.

"Just tell him. He'll be happy no matter when you give it to him," Dev said. It seemed dumb to have to deal with all the bullshit.

"Do you know how much he does for me?" Keyes asked incredulously. "I have a life for the first time in my life and as pissed off as he's gettin'..."

Dev blinked, trying hard to follow the logic. "I'm confused. Is he givin' you a hard time?"

"I'm fuckin' givin' him the hard time every single night. He never gets tired of being owned. My thighs fuckin' hurt all the time. My dick's gonna fall off. He takes a poundin' and only rolls over and goes to sleep until we do it again," Keyes complained.

Once Dev got the gist of the problem, he reached over and patted his friend's leg.

“You’re complainin’ about too much se—”

A loud, cleared throat came from the laptop. Both their gazes shifted to the darkened screen. “What’s happenin’?” Keyes asked nervously, lifting in the seat. His voice and movements were panicked.

“I don’t know what’s happening to keep us connected this way, but I’m Alec’s employer and I believe we’ve crossed a line. Since he’s my lead attorney, I can’t ask him for the law in this situation...” The dark screen made it difficult to know for sure, but Arik sounded like he had humor in his voice.

“Is your father still there?” Dev asked. Man, he hoped he wasn’t.

“I am.”

Dev dropped his head between his shoulder blades. There was no denying the amusement in the older Mr. Layne’s voice, even in the two words spoken. He rolled his head to look at Keyes, who had gone completely red-faced.

“Mr. Layne, I’m sorry. Please don’t share what you heard with Alec. Just until I give him the bike. It’s a Christmas present...” Keyes started.

Arik interrupted him. “I feel like I should tell Alec that he’s asking for too much in the bedroom...” Laughter had the rest of the sentence going unsaid.

“No. I’m embarrassed for Alec. I didn’t mean it like it might’ve sounded...” Keyes shook his head when Arik laughed uproariously.

“No need for embarrassment, son,” Mr. Layne said. “Arik and I will happily hold your secret until the first of next year, but I feel certain Arik’ll have to tease you both about the other someday. It’s a quirk in his personality. He never lets anything go.”

As if he deflated, Keyes's elbows went to his knees, his hands splayed out as he mouthed, what the fuck .

"It's okay. Alec's gotta be used to the embarrassin' things you do by now," Dev said quietly, truly meaning to help. Keyes's eyes widened as he reached out a foot and knocked Dev's chair, rolling it a good distance away. Dev barely stayed upright and got to his feet.

"I believe we're good to go," Mr. Layne said good-naturedly. "Send me an invoice for the deposit so we can get this started."

"Thank you," Dev said, watching Keyes almost silently bang his forehead on the small tabletop. "When Keyes recovers, he'll shoot the invoice over. Let me know about the seat design. We have time."

Dev grabbed the back of Keyes's T-shirt, pulling him to his feet. "Say goodbye."

"Goodbye," Keyes said as instructed. Dev pushed him from behind to get Keyes moving out of his space.

"Goodbye," he heard both men say. Dev reached over and shut the lid of the laptop.

"Stay the course," Dev said, trying for encouragement. "Forget all about that. And get to work. You have a lot to get done before January. And send Millie in. I got shit to do." Dev shoved Keyes out the door, feeling his supportive friendship quota was met for the day.

Keyes dramatically rolled his eyes, his head following the exaggerated motion until his body rolled with it, turning to leave. His shoulders slumped as he walked down the hall to the reception area.

“Good sale,” Dev called out. “This one’s big.”

“Alec’s gonna fuckin’ die.”

Dev chuckled and began straightening his desk. There was no lie in Keyes’s words.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:11 am

Alec

December

The workshop behind Keyes and Alec's home had become the regular Fox-James/Dixon-Pierce hangout. Both families spent an enormous amount of time in this large rectangular metal building together among the new machinery and work bays, ready to churn out new bikes.

This evening, Dev's Harley had all the attention. Keyes was lost in finding whatever problem Dev experienced. Dev was bent down on one side, Keyes on the other. Dev's only job was to provide moral support to Keyes. Dev's strength was in the arts. Mechanics, not so much.

"Is there anyone else we need to invite?" Alec asked from his perch on top of his regular barstool. He had a pad of paper in one hand and a pen poised to print the names suggested for their first annual Christmas Eve bash.

"Who you got so far?" Keyes asked distractedly, never lifting his head.

"We can't come to your party," Mae piped up, running in circles as the dogs chased after her. "We're spending Christmas Eve and Christmas morning with Mama. Daddy's letting her have Christmas at our house, so we don't have to move around so much."

Abi sat against the outside shop's wall next to the door. She was on the ground, sitting crisscross with her cell phone stuck to her hand.

As much time as the girls spent there, it was apparent Abi was becoming increasingly detached from everyone. The phone was her life source, much to Dev's repeatedly stated aggravation.

"Mae, take the dogs outside. You're gettin' 'em too riled up. They're botherin' everyone," Dev said, his head bobbing up over the top of the seat as the dogs began to bark.

"Who's on your list?" Cash asked as Mae ran outside. Cash generally followed along with Dev but rarely participated in anything more than dinner, where he shined, and gave Alec hope. He'd never tasted a healthy dinner so good.

Cash's recent new employment as a hearing officer for Judge Sawyer's court, a position Alec had provided a reference for, kept Cash occupied. The guy was rarely seen without his iPad and briefcase, studying, or working all the time.

"Well, we've become quite the party since we originally only had you and Dev and Keyes's uncle on the list," Alec said and flipped the first page over to read from the top of the list. "Besides you and Dev, Arik and Kellus are now coming." He didn't know if Cash knew Arik, and quickly explained. "Arik owns the company I work for."

Keyes gave a humph. "Arik's somethin' else. Everything's a negotiation with him. If he doesn't get what he wants, then he wages a secret battle of manipulation until they cave. And some people seem okay with it. Like it's perfectly normal to stage a war against the company you hired to handle your legal shit." Keyes's head popped over the bike. "Alec and his team now work for Arik instead of the outside company. Alec handles every legal issue the guy has, whether it's personal or business. And since he steamrolls over everyone, there are plenty of legal problems."

Alec nodded and grinned. Everything Keyes said was true, and it regularly amazed

him that Arik retained any friendships. His previous employer, tired of the fight, had thrown his hands in the air and given Arik an obscene price to release Alec from any non-compete clauses and to cover the firm's lost revenue. Arik paid it and gave Alec a significant monetary raise to switch companies. All parties were happy in the end. He'd never met anyone like Arik before.

"Arik does have a way of retaining friendships that might otherwise be destroyed with his bulldozing ways," Alec agreed and nodded then continued to read from the list. "We have Shanna, Trace, and Joe confirmed. Connor, who's part of my staff, plans to come for an hour or two. So that's ten people? Maybe not as much as it seems. I changed the number with the caterer to cover fifteen people. Should I invite more?"

"How many beds you got? I don't think anyone plans on bein' sober enough to leave," Dev said.

"Right now, we have enough beds," Alec said. "Arik and Kellus are leaving early. If I invite more, we'll need people to bunk together. I thought about inviting Blaine..."

Keyes gave an audible cough that said, no fucking way . Alec immediately laughed. Keyes had never gotten past his and Blaine's first meeting.

For all the hell Keyes gave Alec, he should invite Blaine to watch his husband be forced to get along with his nemesis. Alec's laughter grew, maybe sounding borderline psychotic. As far as he was concerned, it wasn't an awful idea.

"I have a cinnamon roll bar planned and a mimosa and Bloody Mary station for the next morning..."

Cash kept his gaze on the pad in his hand and added, "With all the alcohol we picked up today for you, I'm not sure anyone will be able to eat a cinnamon roll the next

morning.”

There was no lie there. He’d been surprised when they unloaded the boxes. “I had asked the IV Therapy Company to come by Christmas morning to pump hydration and vitamins into our systems, but then I canceled. I wasn’t sure if we were taking someone from their family on the holiday morning.”

“Maybe they don’t celebrate Christmas. You’d be givin’ ’em somethin’ to do,” Keyes added, which was technically the way his husband used to celebrate the holidays before they got together.

“That’s a good point,” Alec said and wrote a note to call the company on Monday morning. Ask their opinion on the matter.

“What do we bring?” Cash asked.

“Nothing. I have a catering company bringing appetizers and doing the setup. Olivia’s setting up the bar. I have an ice machine behind the bar and a freezer full of ice in the garage. The bedrooms are ready. Decorations are up...” Alec was going down his checklist, feeling the whole party coming together nicely, when Keyes interrupted.

“Yeah. DFW Airport called and asked if we’d be willing to be an overflow landing strip...”

“Hush your mouth,” Alec said, raising a critical eye. This was a conversation they’d had over and over, but since word had gotten out in the community of how decorated the house and property were, they’d had a steady stream of vehicles driving past each evening. Keyes was certainly going to have something to say when he learned they were adding a hayride around the property into the mix. “I enjoy decorating. I like the lights.”

“You aren’t gonna like that electric bill when it comes in,” Keyes stated matter-of-factly. Alec couldn’t argue that point, so he’d give the win to Keyes for this round.

Alec dropped his attention back to the pad and continued reading. “We’re doing a white elephant gift exchange with a fifty-dollar limit.” Alec paused and watched all the heads nod their understanding. He made a note to reinforce the gift exchange to those not there. “We’ll handle the upkeep and cleaning ourselves...”

“That says a lot for the pampered guy,” Keyes drawled.

Reasonably, he understood Keyes was teasing him, but as far as he was concerned, Keyes had met his quota of making fun of him. The rawness in his heart blistered, causing Alec not to like the comment at all.

“I clean up after us all the time,” Alec shot back, his tone as forceful as it was crisp.

“I clean up after us,” Keyes said distractedly, not looking up. “You do the takin’ care of us.”

Alec mashed his lips together, staring laser beams at the top of Keyes’s head. His guy wasn’t wrong, but the argument they were having shifted to motorcycles in Alec’s head. A source of severe contention between them, at least where Alec was concerned.

Keyes seemed to have no problem keeping all the secrets in the world from him.

“Okay,” Alec said and placed the pad of paper on his lap. “So, you’re saying you’ll handle all the cleanup for the party? That’s your contribution because I haven’t seen you participate in the planning.” What a ridiculous thing for Alec to say. Keyes actively listened and encouraged wherever Alec needed. Alec’s tone brought Keyes’s glance from over the bike as if he were trying to catch up with how things had gone

south so quickly.

He blinked several times as he stopped himself from calling Keyes a liar and a fat mouth about the bikes he was secretly building.

“Sure. I’ll handle the cleanup. That’s fine. Not a problem,” Keyes answered, his brow wrinkling as he seemingly understood that wasn’t the correct answer but had no idea why.

“You know that’s not what I want,” Alec bit out, his back stiffening as he crossed his arms over his chest.

The tool in Keyes’s hand clanked to the ground. His guy’s hard tone cranked up an octave. Alec suspected this had become their new way. He put Keyes on the defensive all the time. “Then I missed somethin’.”

Since Alec refused to give in ever again, he and Keyes began an angry stare-off at one another.

After the last time Keyes had told Alec to stay out of his business—at least, that was the way Alec interpreted the remark—Alec had sworn he was never asking about the bikes again. Then he’d tried not to care. Neither option had been easy, especially since four large deposits had hit their business account, and Alec knew nothing about the projects.

Alec shot out a dismissive hand wave as he said, “You know what you missed.”

“No, I don’t. But you’ve been a borderline jerk to me for the last week. Now you’re doin’ it in front of my friends. What’s up with you?” Keyes used the seat of Dev’s bike to help lift him off his knees to his full height. His face turned as fierce as his voice.

Being intimidated wasn't in Alec's wheelhouse. Besides, Keyes would never use force with him. He rolled his eyes at the aggressive display. The hurt inside him didn't give a shit who was there to watch the scene.

"They're my friends too, and I know you've been working on new bikes," Alec accused as he got to his feet. The pad of paper and pen dropped to the polished concrete floor. He splayed his hands around the fancy garage he'd built for his mister. "Where are they? They aren't here, in the shop that cost me hundreds of thousands of dollars to build." Alec shouted the price point, saying each word with more emphasis.

"We should leave," Cash said, getting to his feet.

"No. Stay," Alec and Keyes said in unison. If it wasn't such a touchy subject, he might have laughed as Dev looked at Cash and shrugged. Uncertain what to do, Cash lifted his leg back over the stool, but hovered there, not fully sitting. He was ready to bounce on a second's notice.

"You're the one who insisted on all this equipment. I didn't ask you for it," Keyes argued with the truth. He hadn't asked for anything. Nothing. A man unto himself. Alec didn't need to exist in Keyes's life, he'd do just fine on his own. "Don't throw the money in my face. I hate that shit."

"How do you know you hate it? I've never done it before." A silly argument but still valid. "Have you seen the bikes?" Alec demanded of Cash, piercing him with a look that wouldn't allow him to lie. Since Alec was an expert at reading expressions, Cash's stare begged him not to ask that question. "He's seen what you've done but I can't? What the hell?"

Alec threw his hands in the air and stormed out of the shop. Each of his footsteps sounded louder than the last. Hurt washed over him, fueling the fast pace past the girls who both quietly stared at him. They heard the exchange. Even the dogs settled

down and stared, unsure what was happening.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:11 am

Keyes

“You should go after him,” Dev whispered to Keyes. “Tell him the truth. It’s gone on long enough.”

Keyes dug his fingers through his hair, tightening his fist. The blunt tips of his nails scraped the scalp.

“Your intentions weren’t wrong, but is it worth all these hard feelings?” Cash added to Dev’s push. “How do you two come back from this?”

Keyes’s head raced, and his heart hurt. Alec pushed at everything all the time. He needed to learn to back the fuck off sometimes. Hell, Alec was smart as a fucking whip. How hadn’t he figured it all out on his own by now?

The tension was too tight in the house. They had a couple of weeks to go. Maybe less if there was no other choice. Was he causing irrevocable damage to their relationship?

Fuck. Keyes grabbed the tool on the bike’s seat and sent it flying across the room. More to blow off the pent-up energy than actual anger. He was aware of where everyone was and made sure not to throw it in a direction where anyone got hurt, but the violent clang of metal against concrete helped.

On a string of terrible curse words, Keyes stormed out of the shop, heading for the house.

“He went to the garage,” Abi called out.

He’d have to thank her later as he pivoted around, taking long strides to the garage where Alec kept his precious vintage rides. Alec had been hanging out in there more often lately. He wasn’t sure why. Maybe sulking. Keyes yanked open the door and was hit with the perfect sixty-five degrees of climate-controlled air. The overhead light was engaged. He easily saw Alec sitting behind the Maybach. One of his favorite cars.

Alec didn’t look his way. All the bluster Keyes had while storming across the yard fell away. Alec was his entire world. He had a family, a home, and unconditional love. Things he’d never known existed before meeting Alec.

A renewed sense of purpose pushed past the aggravation, giving Keyes courage. Alec deserved to have the best Christmas Keyes could give him.

Weirdly, all of Alec’s upset had Keyes’s spine stiffening as he walked toward his husband. The way Alec’s head turned away caused a smile from Keyes. He reaffirmed his decision. He’d go the distance with his present.

A tune played quietly inside the car.

When he tried the Maybach’s door handle, he was denied entry. Alec had locked him out. Keyes stared down in the front seat, but Alec never looked at him.

Keyes bent his forefinger and knocked his knuckle against the window.

Alec still refused to look at him. This time, Keyes didn’t try to hide the grin.

“Roll down the window,” Keyes called out.

The decibels of the stereo skyrocketed. In slow motion, Alec turned his head toward Keyes. His expression was filled with piss and vinegar.

“Got it. You’re mad. Now open the door,” Keyes yelled. His hands went to his hips.

Alec motioned his index finger toward his ear and shook his head while mouthing, I can’t hear you .

Keyes only stared at Alec, waiting for him to get his fill of the games he played. It took a minute. Maybe as long as an entire song before the door unlocked and the radio turned off. Keyes opened the door and extended a hand.

Alec stared at it as if he didn’t understand the gesture.

“Come on,” Keyes said and wiggled his fingers. Alec didn’t move. The pain in his eyes remained stark. “Look. I need you to give me time. Of course, I wanna show you what I’ve done, but your opinion’s especially important to me. I’ve messed up a lot in my life, especially in this business planning. It’s embarrassin’ how little I can do right. It’s gotta be as perfect as I can get it before you see.”

Whether it was his tone or the words, he wasn’t sure, but Alec finally extended his hand, urging Keyes to pull him from the car. With a gentle tug, Alec got to his feet. “You don’t ever give yourself the credit you deserve. I’ve been impressed with everything you’ve done. And I want to be included in every single step you take.” Alec leaned against Keyes’s body, his palm landing on Keyes’s heart. “You know I’m needy where you’re concerned. I don’t like secrets. Not with you.”

Keyes smiled and drew Alec into the circle of his arms. “I know and I agree. Just let me get this right. I’m insecure about what I’m doin’.” He crossed his fingers behind Alec’s back, hoping that made the lie not count. “You have to trust me and give me a little more time.”

“But you’re working on four bikes. Something has to be completed to your satisfaction. Cash has seen at least one. Clyde has to have seen what you’re working on. The four people who paid deposits have to agree to the designs. Why can’t I see? I believe in you.” Alec’s handsome face wrinkled as he looked up at Keyes. The continued argument was right on his guy’s lips, but his face morphed into genuine concern. “I don’t know that you love me like you once did.”

Keyes burst out with a laugh, tightening his hold around Alec, drawing him snugly in. Alec’s face smashed into his chest. “Whatever’s beyond love is how I feel about you. It’s you and me together until the end. And whatever happens after the end, we’re together then too. That’s what I want.”

He brought his hand to the back of Alec’s hair, caressing down. Alec wrapped his arms around him.

“That’s how I feel too. Forever and eternity, Keyes. I don’t understand a life without you.” Alec held on to Keyes as if his life depended on the intimacy. “Get our friends gone, then come inside. I need some serious you time.”

Keyes nodded and kissed the top of Alec’s head. Somehow, he was able to keep the sigh inside. He knew precisely what Alec wanted. His thighs already felt the burn.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:11 am

Keyes

The Christmas presents Alec had purchased for Keyes were piled up under the enormous tree in the corner of the living room. Not to be confused with the much larger tree in their foyer or the smaller, more modest, slim tree in the corner of their dining room. All three were sparklers for sure, but nothing compared to the décor and spectacular light display outside their home.

Keyes ran the vacuum over the foyer's rug, worrying again about the gifts he'd put under the tree. Two of the boxes were decoy presents. Empty of anything more than a smiley face he'd drawn on a piece of paper. Only one had a key fob inside.

That was most likely a bad call on his end.

So far, the number of presents wasn't an issue, but how he'd wrapped them had caused another round of hurt feelings. Last year, he'd gotten so frustrated with wrapping Alec's gifts that he'd pulled out the duct tape and secured those bitches to where they had to be cut out to open. While Keyes had wanted to improve on the visual aspect of his gift-giving, apparently, his duct tape wrapping style was a loving gesture that had meant the world to his mister.

He hadn't known that until he'd placed the professionally wrapped presents under the tree, all in coordinating gift wrap to match each other and the decorations in their home. Alec had a mini meltdown when he saw them. Keyes had honestly believed he'd done good by making them pretty. He thought Alec would be impressed with his effort. Yeah, right. Alec only picked one up and confronted him like it was a muddy boot tracked through the house. He'd explained that those kinds of wrapped gifts held

no love or warmth. The fact that Alec wrapped his gifts in the same way hadn't been a valid response at all.

Thankfully, the front door opened, taking his mind off that argument. His and Alec's gazes collided. Alec glared at him in the dramatic way he had of being put out. Outside, cars lined the street, driving slowly past the house as the lights flashed in sync with a happy holiday tune.

Alec shut the front door with force, drowning out the noise.

Since Keyes had upset Alec on many different levels over the last few months, he wasn't sure what this round of anger or hurt was related to. As Alec walked past, Keyes turned off the vacuum and reached out a hand for Alec's arm. His guy dodged the touch and kept going, staying off the perfectly vacuumed lines.

"I was just gonna say you look nice. I see how you chose clothes to match mine."

Alec kept going, not offering any response.

Keyes let go of an unsteady exhale and reached a hand over his heart, absently rubbing the ache there. The pain shuddered his breath. He'd already decided never to do anything like this again, but after that last look, the pledge imprinted on to my mind.

Not.

Ever.

Again.

No more fun secrets that turn their relationship into a cesspool of doubt and

deterioration. He might wind up in divorce court.

A soft instrumental tune began to play inside the house. Keyes made quick work of putting the vacuum away, then went in search of Alec. He found him bent over the fireplace, trying to start the fresh logs Keyes had put there earlier.

“Let me,” Keyes said. “I got it ready to go.”

Alec let go of a sigh and angled his head. “I can start a fire, Keyes.”

Keyes. Alec’s nickname for him was Key.

“Look, I don’t like what’s happenin’ between us—” Keyes was willing to throw in the towel. His confession was interrupted by a knock at their back door followed immediately by the door opening. He hadn’t heard Cash’s sports car pull up the driveway, but Dev had obviously gotten to the door a step behind Cash. As far as Dev was concerned, they were family who didn’t stand on ceremony like knocking and waiting for the person inside to open a door. Shut doors or manners were irrelevant.

“Hey, that line of cars out there’s a trip. The house looks great,” Dev said, not reading the room. Alec got to his feet and smiled, dusting off his hands while heading for the couple.

“Welcome,” Alec said. “I put an ad in the local magazine about the decorations and added a hot chocolate machine. One of our teenage neighbors agreed to pour the cocoa for me tonight. I’ve been manning the station myself the last few nights,” Alec said, happy and proud. “We’ve had quite a crowd. It’s been a lot of fun.”

“People are pulling off the road to take pictures,” Cash said with three bags gripped in his hands, he stopped off at the tree and set two gifts underneath. “I sent pictures of the house to my parents. They send their resounding approval.”

“You want me to get that fire started for you?” Dev asked. Without waiting for an answer, he dropped to a knee by the fireplace and got to work.

“I was just getting it started,” Alec said.

“Leave the fire startin’ to the professional,” Dev quipped and took over where Keyes had left off, igniting the small patch of kindling he collected.

“I brought a Bordeaux blush,” Cash said, lifting the third bag still in his hand. “Thank you for having us. Otherwise, we’d be in a hotel tonight.”

“Ah, a Bordeaux. Perfect. Thank you,” Alec said and went to Cash to take the gift. Another knock sounded at the back door, and Keyes went in that direction. Shanna, Dev’s sister was there, grinning and waving through the glass.

He took a deep breath and let it go slowly. The night was underway now. He wasn’t going to let this animosity go on, but now he’d have to play it by ear and hope for the best.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:11 am

Alec

Hours into the party, Alec stood on the periphery with one hand in the pocket of his slacks, the other holding a cocktail glass that had seen better times. The ice had melted long ago. The watered-down cocktail held no interest. Honestly, neither did the party.

This was unlike him. Why did he feel disconnected?

Shame replaced all other emotions. Why was he wallowing in self-pity as the picture of a life he'd always wanted played out before him? For months, he'd worked hard to make this a joyous evening. To give his adopted family all the love, peace, and joy of the season. Based on the laughter and conversation, he'd achieved his goals. So why were his thoughts spiraling lower and lower?

He glanced directly at Keyes, the only other person in the room to be faking a good time. The worry lines around his eyes and the corners of his lips grew more pronounced with each passing hour. Alec had given him those wrinkles. It wasn't fair. Keyes showed Alec love daily, at least as much as Keyes had learned to share. Alec had taken on a partner who had been badly abused by the world. Keyes's mental health was a shaky, turbulent battle every day.

Alec noticed Arik, his employer, scan the room as if searching for something. Then their gazes locked. He lifted the watery drink in a toasting gesture before taking the tiniest sip. He fought to keep his face neutral at the awful taste. He seriously needed to rethink his drinking choices.

Arik went to where Keyes sat and bent to whisper in his ear. They both glanced at Alec. Keyes's shielded expression made his thoughts unreadable. That bothered Alec too. Why was Keyes hiding? Arik left Keyes to take determined steps toward Alec. Whatever pushed Arik was sure to be annoying.

Luckily, the front doorbell rang. Never had "saved by the bell" been a truer statement. Since Alec was the closest, he swiveled around, looking above the door at the large wall clock. Ten thirty. Quitting time for the teen working the cocoa machine for holiday revelers, offering the perfect diversion to get out of Arik's path.

Alec discarded the glass on a nearby table and reached inside his pocket for cash. He opened the door to see the young man, surprised to see him holding the heavy drink machine. Keyes had carried the heavy piece of equipment in and out for the last few nights. The money he'd doled out from his clip was forgotten. There was no way Alec could reasonably hold the machine.

"Why don't you guide him to the garage?" Arik suggested as he snagged the money from Alec's hand and tucked it in the young man's pocket. Arik clamped a hand on Alec's shoulder as if it were perfectly natural for him to give directions, even outside the workplace and not in his own house.

Alec glanced back at Arik to say that very thing when he noticed all eyes from the living room were on him. Hmm . Maybe his adopted family needed to be unadopted for sticking their noses in a place they shouldn't. Alec mashed his lips together, holding the thought inside, and looked at the neighbor.

"Can you carry it to the back garage for me?"

The kid smirked as if the machine weighed nothing and nodded. Smartass .

"Maybe we should show him the way?" Arik suggested, reaffirming Alec's decision

to never invite him to a party again.

Except he hadn't invited Arik. Arik had invited himself. And with more force than necessary, Arik pushed him through the door and started down the walkway toward the driveway.

"The garage is in the other direction," Alec said, poking a thumb over his other shoulder toward the main garage.

"Hear that, guy?" Arik called over his shoulder. The kid did a one-eighty and headed in the opposite direction, but Arik didn't change course.

"I'll place it by the door."

"Perfect," Arik answered as they continued toward the driveway. Maybe he had overdone the lights with the way they twinkled off a silver bumper parked on the side of the house.

"You're close to the airport," Arik said. "Had any problems with them over the sheer volume of lights on the house?"

"Ha. Ha. Not an original joke," Alec said dryly. "Where're you walking me to?"

"Like normal, I'm taking matters into my own hands," Arik said. "It's painful to learn how dense my head of legal is. I might've paid too much to get you on my team."

"What?" Alec paused, confused. "What're you talking about?"

"You tell me," Arik said, using a hand on Alec's shoulder to shove him toward the driveway. From this angle, he saw a shiny open motorcycle trailer with a partial gleam from a bike strapped on top.

Alec's mind glitched. The bike was stunning.

It had to be a Keyes and Dev creation, but it was different than any other motorcycle he'd ever seen before. The image before him was magical. Something unseen pulled him closer to the trailer, lost to the beauty of design and color.

The outside floodlights popped on, giving him a better view of the beautiful build. He only turned away from the vision in front of him when he sensed Keyes nearby. His guy took a couple of steps toward him, stopping at the passenger side door of the truck towing the trailer. The TDTK logo ran from where Keyes stood down the length of the bed, then onto the trailer. Their friends stood behind Keyes, close enough to take part but also giving them space. All eyes were on Alec.

"It's beautiful," Alec said. "Is this the carbon fiber you used to talk about?"

Keyes huffed a nod, sticking his fingers into his front jeans pocket. "I knew you'd know that. Merry Christmas."

Alec jerked his head from the bike back to Keyes. His confused gaze searched Keyes's face for the lie as his brain tripped in understanding. He glanced back at the motorcycle, taking in the subtle nuances that he hadn't immediately noticed. The bike was blue. Not any blue either. The color of Keyes's eyes. Alec's favorite color. The rest was gray/silver. Both colors wove through every part of the sleek build.

Only then did he recognize the art. The same design as the tattoo on Keyes's back. The winged angel that represented Alec.

"Key, what've you done?" Alec's heart slammed against his rib cage. Keyes stayed rooted to his spot, making it clear he had no idea of Alec's thoughts. Hell, he had no idea of his thoughts as something akin to fireworks shot through his vision. His heart pounded in his chest.

Alec covered his hands over his face, then dropped down into a squat on the balls of his feet. If he passed out, he'd be closer to the ground.

"Alec," Keyes said unsteadily.

Screw passing out. He shot up, sprinting the seven or eight steps separating them. He didn't stop as he leaped forward, wrapping his arms and legs around his beautiful mister. Keyes absorbed Alec's body weight with a small step backward, remarkably staying on his feet. Keyes gripped Alec's thighs, holding him in place.

It wasn't often Alec's face was above Keyes's. He relished the way he looked down at his guy. "It's the color of your eyes."

"Seems silly now," Keyes murmured, searching Alec's face. The uncertainty still worrying Keyes was all Alec's doing. He'd make it right though. Nothing could stop the joy running through him.

"No, not silly at all. It's for me, right?" Alec asked, inches above Keyes. "Not just here to show me your work, you built the bike for me."

"Course. It's the first one I built, but I've been tinkerin' with—"

Alec mashed his lips against Keyes, giving him a hard, solid kiss.

When his tear-filled gaze met Keyes's again, he stared down at his love and said, "Thank you." Alec kissed Keyes again. "Thank you." And again. "Take me to the motorcycle," Alec whispered against Keyes's mouth and kissed him again.

Keyes started toward the trailer.

Alec looked over Keyes's shoulder to their friends. "I'm sorry I've been so down. It

never occurred to me that the best husband in the world was building me a motorcycle. The best Christmas present ever.” Alec wrapped his arms tighter around Keyes’s neck, pulling his head closer, whispering into Keyes’s hair. “I love you.”

“Alec was getting to be a lot to handle,” Arik said irritably. “Something had to be done. Keyes wanted to give you the present tomorrow morning, but you were such a brat.”

“Right on,” Dev seconded, his tone not even close to teasing. “I thought he was gonna divorce Keyes.”

“Don’t listen to them. Take me to the bike,” Alec said and kissed Keyes’s lips again.

Alec kept hold of Keyes’s neck and glanced over his shoulder. The bike was perfect. Keyes took a giant step onto the trailer. “You’re heavier than you look.”

“You’re stronger than you look. Tell me about the motorcycle,” Alec repeated as Keyes put him on the seat. It was the only way he was willing to let go of his mister. He hiked a leg over and reached for the handlebars.

“It’s built for speed but handles well on the road. You nailed it when you said I used carbon fiber. I like workin’ with it. I use it on all the bikes,” Keyes said. His voice lost the concern from earlier, building in confidence with each syllable spoken. “Every part of the bike’s designed to be lighter.”

“Remember the helmet,” Uncle Clyde said, coming up on the other side of the trailer with a helmet and leathers for riding. Alec took the offering, smiling bigger than before. The helmet matched the exact shade of blue of the bike. Alec eagerly placed it on his head and lifted the face shield to better see the leathers. The same color combination and design were woven through the pants and jacket. The TDTK logo was on the back of the jacket. His tears were back.

“This bike fits me. I feel like it’s an extension of my body. I love it so much.”

Keyes grinned, looking over at Dev, giving a thumbs-up. “That’s exactly the point of a custom sled. Now you’re gonna have to learn to ride...”

“He doesn’t know how to ride a motorcycle?” Dev hollered and tossed his hands in the air. “Goddamn, Keyes. Don’t you think you should’ve been teachin’ him this whole time?”

“No,” Keyes argued as if Dev were the dumbest person on the planet. “I didn’t want to give it away.”

“I don’t want to ride it,” Alec said, tossing in his own attitude. “It’ll go in the garage with my other cars. I can go in and enjoy it while keeping the miles low.”

“Oh my God, he’s not gonna fuckin’ drive it?” Dev asked Keyes. “I bet you fuckin’ knew that too.” He threw his hands in the air again and started for the back door. Alec was too absorbed in the moment to care about anything else.

“We’re leaving. We have a family obligation,” Arik said.

“It’s beautiful,” Kellus offered with a critical eye. “Keyes and Dev have true talent. The three-dimensional effect with the wings popping off is absolutely stunning.”

He was proud of Keyes, who smiled brightly. Kellus was a successful artist by trade with international notoriety. The admiration in his voice meant a lot.

“It’s a play on a tattoo Dev gave Keyes. I feel like this is only the beginning. Keyes and Dev will be an unstoppable team.” Alec beamed his praise at his guy.

Love made the moment perfect even though his manners continued to fail as he

ignored whether Arik and Kellus actually left. He kept his focus on his present and his husband.

“I botched your presents. Nothing’s as perfect as this bike. You’re so talented,” Alec said, sitting back on the seat, the helmet still on his head.

“Your presence is enough for me.” Keyes bent and adjusted to place a chaste kiss on his lips through the helmet’s opening. “Should I have shown you earlier? I wanted to. We share so much that it was hard not to get your opinion. Did I mess anything up between us?”

“Oh no. This is perfect. I’m sorry for my behavior.”

Keyes reached a finger into the helmet to stop his words. Alec grinned and removed the helmet from his head.

“Don’t ever apologize to me. I feel lucky every day that you’re in my life. I don’t make it easy, but I try.” Keyes leaned in again and kissed Alec before saying, “Merry Christmas.”

This time, the tears built enough to fall down his cheeks. He reached his arm around Keyes’s neck, keeping him close.

“Don’t cry,” Keyes whispered. “I can’t take it.”

Alec couldn’t physically make himself let go of Keyes. It was more than just the present. Their marriage was solid. They were still on the same page, even if Alec had been pushy and impatient. He shoved the helmet toward Keyes then quickly swiped the tears away.

Reality finally settled in, making Alec hike a leg off the bike. “We should go inside.

Can we bring the bike in for the night, so I don't have to be separated from it? Can we place it near the tree? We can move it out tomorrow or never. Having it in the living room would make every day perfect."

Keyes gave a huffed approval. "I hoped you'd want to take it in tonight. It's ready to go inside. Let me get it off the trailer, and I'll bring it in," Keyes said, going to the back to let the ramp down.

Alec watched his love work, giving an oath from this day forward that he'd never doubt Keyes's again. "You know you're gonna have to do me on this bike, right?"

Keyes didn't look up from his task but gave a groan. "You gave my fuckin' thunder thighs a workout with all the questions you had."

Alec grinned. Their sex might have been the only reason he had survived the last few months. Now, he better understood and owed his mister some payback. "Okay, I'll fuck you on the back of the bike."

"I don't know if it would survive one of our sessions." Keyes chuckled. He wasn't wrong.

"We need to get some quality pictures and videos of the bike next to the tree for marketing next year." Alec pivoted, watching Keyes work the straps. Maybe use those straps in their bedroom. His mind raced over the possibilities.

"Whatever you think." Keyes nodded, not looking at him. "Drop the kickstand before I release any more straps."

Alec did as requested and stayed close to the bike. It was going into their bedroom. He never wanted to be separated from it or Keyes ever again.

Alec's breath shuddered as he said a prayer to never lose this man. He was so in love.

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Trace

Trace stood inside Keyes's kitchen, drinking a glass of water. It was always his rule. One beer to one glass of water. He drained the water in three long gulps and placed the glass aside to be reused.

This might be the best holiday party of his life. He swayed on his feet, realizing his thought came from an intoxicated place. His mind shifted to the incoming text messages his sister continued to send even in the late hour.

She sent pictures of his family together. He came from a lively, energetic bunch. As far as Trace was concerned, his grunge style didn't really fit with his clean-cut family. Sweater sets abounded in the photos she sent. Not a single tattoo in the bunch. The differences didn't matter. They missed him. Christmas was the one designated holiday they agreed to be together.

Trace swayed again on his feet.

Joe came from the bathroom right off the living room, and Trace's gaze locked there. Joe had the same vibe as his family. He was tall. At least six feet. A naturally pretty guy. Nerdy. Didn't spend a lot of time outside, which was Trace's preferred place to be. Joe had become Trace's friend. Like friend, friend. Like best friend. Really fast and solid. They got along great. Joe was the only reason Trace hadn't gone home for the holidays.

Huh . It was weird to think about it. He was hilarious even in such a potentially life-changing moment.

The government was actively breathing down his neck to move from the South Oak Cliff apartment. No doubt, he'd have to go. It'd be better if he slept somewhere in the stockyards of Fort Worth, much closer to work. But he liked living close to Joe. He couldn't find a way to make himself leave.

Joe took a swipe at his hair, drawing Trace's closer attention. That was one of two regular moves Joe made. The other was to push his glasses back in place by poking a finger into the nose bridge. Tonight, Joe had gone without his glasses. When the hair moved, he could see Joe's face. Man, the guy was nice-looking with his perfectly symmetrical face. Strong jaw, pretty pouty lips, engaging eyes. Joe had a way of making a person feel heard. Trace generally liked that person to be him.

If Trace hadn't already determined his bisexuality, he'd insist he was gay due to his overwhelming attraction to Joe. His cock zeroed in on the guy like a heat-seeking missile. His body tightened, his hard-on a very real thing, even under all the alcohol he'd drunk tonight.

The only reason he kept Joe in the friend zone was his complete inability to read Joe's preferences. Joe talked about the women he'd dated, but that had been years ago. The only thing that mattered to Joe was his work. He took his job seriously, putting in an untold number of hours to help Diesel and Shanna navigate the rocky terrain of their undercover work.

He was smart. An intelligence badass.

"I'm goin' to bed," Joe announced to the partygoers. Alec sat in Keyes's lap on the sofa closest to the motorcycle. Cash was passed out on the other end. His head lying on the back edge. His mouth wide opened due to the angle. Shanna and Dev were in a card game, neither willing to accept a loss, so it went on forever. Those two were so much alike.

"Don't get up. I 'member the room you assigned me," Joe slurred.

Neither Alec nor Keyes had budged a muscle. As far as Trace was concerned, after the bike's reveal, he wasn't sure either man realized they had a house full of guests at all.

Joe pivoted around and stumbled during the turn. He caught himself well enough. Trace grinned as he zeroed in on Joe's backside, his ass in particular. He wore jeans that accented his bubble butt, probably having no idea how good they looked. The standard long-sleeved T-shirt was in place. The weather wasn't chilly enough for the hoodie underneath a jacket Joe donned and wore well. Both had been removed by the time they got inside Shanna's car.

Joe's gaze unexpectedly landed on Trace. He grinned a sloppy smile and kept going up the stairs. The look wasn't the invitation that Trace wished it were. Not even a little bit, but he found himself following, helpless to do anything else. As much as he hated to admit it, a nerd on his walk was a powerful thing. He trailed more slowly in anticipation, then heard the guest bedroom door shut. His confidence took a hit as he considered this a friendship-destroying move.

Whatever . He'd been into Joe for a year now. His feelings had only grown. Maybe this was how he made the decision to leave the apartment building.

At Joe's door, he lifted a hand and inhaled deeply. He rapped out a quick couple of knocks on the exhale. The door opened with Joe in mid-motion of removing his T-shirt. He stood in his boxer briefs, feet bare.

"Hey," Joe said with the same hint of a slur he'd had downstairs. "What's up?" Joe let the T-shirt fall down his chest.

"I... uh..." Trace's gaze slid down Joe's body to the outline of the limp cock in the boxer briefs. Oh yeah, it looked good. Bet it'd even be better hard.

Arousal burned away any lingering buzz as his gaze lifted to Joe's face. On instinct,

he reached for the T-shirt as he took a single step in. He took Joe's sigh into his mouth, sliding his tongue across Joe's partially opened mouth.

Whether this was a one-and-done or the beginning of many, his instincts told him there was more to this alluring man than he let on. And most certainly a temptation he wouldn't be able to overcome.

Trace brushed his lips over Joe's, his tongue pushing inside, sweeping over Joe's who hadn't pushed him away yet. Yep . One taste was all it took.

Fireworks flared behind Trace's closed lids. He circled his arm around Joe's waist, drawing him close as he dove deep into that delicious mouth.

Happy, happy holidays.

Xoxo,

Kindle