



The Guy in the Alley

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Get comfortable for a love story that promises Chicago grit, sizzling heat, a playful rivalry between a White Sox diehard and a Cubs fan, and an autistic boy's dream to see the ocean.

There was nothing like starting the new year with a snowstorm and trying to keep a sinking ship afloat in the middle of Chicago. Trace Kalecki had grown up at the Dearborn Clover, an Irish sports bar that'd been in his family since the late 1800s. He loved the place. He lived and breathed the Clover, from its staff and the sports memorabilia on the walls to the creatively named items on the menu and the soup kitchen they hosted twice a week. But the business was a damn headache too.

One night, when he was wrestling garbage bags out to the dumpsters in the alley, he heard a broken plea for help.

Ben O'Cleary was mostly hoping the snowstorm was going to finish him off once and for all. He was cold, hungry, drowning in defeat, and now wounded, too. Wasn't it just great? Almost fifty years old, and he couldn't take care of himself, much less his son and his old ma. Ashamed and shattered, he asked a young man for help, and...maybe that was the start of something new?

That guy, Trace...? He had an offer for Ben.

The Guy in the Alley is a stand-alone spinoff following The Guy in the Window. While the main characters from the first book do cross over briefly, it's not necessary to read it to get the full enjoyment of The Guy in the Alley.

Disclaimer: No fans of the White Sox, Cubs, Red Wings, Dallas Stars, Preds, Cleveland, Canucks, Minnesota, St. Louis, or Green Bay were seriously injured in the making of this book. Probably no Yoopers either.

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Trace Kalecki

“Dearborn Clover, Trace speaking,” I said, answering the phone as I logged in to the computer. I wasn’t a fan of our new payment system; it was a whole fucking process just to open the register.

“Yeah, hi, I was wondering if you’re showing the home game tonight,” a man said.

What the fuck was it with people? Did they call a clothing store and ask if they sold shirts? Huh? Christ. This was a sports bar smack-dab in the middle of Chicago—yeah, we were showing the home game. Didn’t matter the sport either; the answer was yes.

“Absolutely,” I replied.

“Great, thanks.” The guy hung up, and I sighed impatiently and finally got into our system. We were good to go for a new day. Two big games. We were bound to be busy tonight. Most of the tables were booked from seven.

Adam showed up a few minutes later, and I waited to see Bella running after...

“Where’s my girl?” I asked. I had another week to make her OD on Chicago before they returned to California.

Adam rolled his eyes and tore off his beanie and gloves. “Ev casually threw out that he was spending the day watching old movies, so she stayed with him. I swear she loves him more than she loves me sometimes.”

I chuckled and did a final wipe-down of the bar. He could complain, but he loved it. He'd been with his architect hubby a few years now, going back and forth between Berkeley and Chicago, and when I heard Bella had begun calling Ev Dad and saying how much she loved California, I knew I'd lost her. She'd started school there last fall.

"How's the new kid workin' out?" Adam asked.

I pointed to the station where we kept cocktail garnishes. "He thought it was a good idea to cut up fruit right here." Hence why I'd needed to wipe down the bar before we'd even opened. I'd come downstairs to find random lime wedges and cherries all over the counter. "He's Petey's problem now." I'd sent him back to the kitchen.

"Look at you, being all boss-like." Adam smirked and sat down on a stool. "Maybe you'll survive without me."

Yeah, maybe. Still felt weird, though. Adam and I were supposed to be the "kids" of the place. I ran all over, doing what was necessary. Adam had been a bartender here for six or seven years. Then, all of a sudden, my folks decided to retire and move to Florida. They'd already been snowbirds for a decade or so, leaving me in charge over the winter. Which I'd been happy with. I was only thirty-two, so I had been in no rush to shoulder more responsibility.

Now the whole fucking place was mine.

"You okay, bud?"

I chewed on the inside of my cheek and nodded once. I was okay—but a lot was riding on this quarter. I'd spent our meager savings on fixing the place up a bit, new padding for the booths, some chairs had been replaced, we'd repainted the walls dark red, new payment system, upgraded security, and a new menu design.

As much as it made me feel like a sellout, I'd made the decision that we should cater more to tourists. My old man had been set in his ways, preferring to focus on old-timers like Jerry and Malcolm, who came in most days to waste their pensions at the bar.

The place was a little less Irish than it'd been before the winter, but not a lot.

"Did I do the right thing with the changes?" I asked.

Adam glanced around the place, nodding slowly. We had a main dining area, where every booth had its own flat-screen. Then three smaller areas. We had the Wrigley on the other side of the tiny arcade, where we hosted bachelor parties, elaborate game nights for big corporations, and family reunions. Then the Junior Circuit, a semi-open space suited for children's parties and families. Lastly, the Green. It was dedicated to sports my old man had never cared for, such as golf, figure skating, swimming, tennis, and soccer.

It was also where we hosted our soup kitchen on Thursdays and Sundays.

"Honestly..." Adam turned back to me. "I don't think you had a choice, Trace. It was adapt or die."

I sighed. Yeah, that was the problem. He knew what the rent was too. He'd seen the stacks of bills. Especially now in the winter—fuck, utilities shot right up.

January had started off with a record-breaking snowstorm, and we hadn't recovered yet.

"Personally, I thought it was hilarious to see my man with a paint roller," Adam said, sliding off the stool again. "I'll go change."

I grinned. “At least he was great at the decorative shit.” More than great, I had to say. The man could draw like a professional—I mean, he was one—and he’d painted our city’s sports logos, street signs, and retired jersey numbers to blend in with all the other memorabilia.

* * *

I needed one more Petey and Adam on my staff. Petey’s experience and history with us allowed me to never worry about the kitchen. He ran a tight ship and treated his staff fairly but with no bullshit. Similar to Adam, though he was more of a big-brother type to the waitstaff. He was a couple years younger than me, cheerful, and encouraging. When he was in town during summers and winters, he was the top dog behind the bar. But it wasn’t enough. I needed someone permanent.

Petey would probably retire within the next five or six years, so I’d prefer to find a new Adam ASAP. That way, when it was time to find a new Petey, Adam 2.0 would already be part of the Clover family.

That was another thing I had to figure out. Dad had hired people who stayed on. They didn’t quit after six months. The exception was waitstaff, which consisted mainly of college students. But the rest, they wanted to stay. They were a little older too.

I should call Ma. She’d been very clear that just because she was retired didn’t mean she was going to stop doing the bookkeeping around here. She’d worked as an accountant for thirty years, and if anyone could help me find a balance between investing in the place and keeping the employees happy, it was her. We’d find the money somehow.

“What’re you grumbling about, man?” Adam strode past me with four beers as I checked the computer next to the register.

“Money. What else?” I closed the browser. This wasn’t the time or the place. I could continue my research on marketing tonight after we’d closed.

“What for?” Adam came back to return one of the card readers.

“Marketing and online bullshit,” I replied. “My sister says we gotta be on social media—but do you know what that costs?”

Dad had never bothered with online marketing whatsoever. He was old-school. Hell, he’d hired kids to hand out flyers up till a couple years ago.

“Lemme think about it,” Adam said. “We code monkeys tend to think we can fix everything.”

I laughed under my breath and grabbed an apron, and I tied it around my hips. I appreciated his offer, but he was swamped as it was. I wasn’t stupid either; he came in to work when he was in town more as a favor to me.

Before meeting his hubby, working here had been his day care, because my folks loved Bella. They’d let Adam bring her with him for a shift whenever, and they’d babysat her while he’d worked his ass off at several jobs.

In sunny California, he was a busy computer programmer. The last thing he needed was to stick his fingers in this fucking mess I was trying to run here.

I lost the next couple of hours behind the bar and out on the floor. Given the shitty weather, I’d only put three on the lunch shift to work the floor, and we managed if I helped out. Most of the lunch guests were middle-class suits, though some tourists had actually found us in the snow.

Why they visited this time of year was beyond me.

As I headed to another table to take an order, I cast a glance toward the doors and saw Bella barging in.

“Sweetheart! Your boots—kick off the snow, please.” Everett was right behind her.

“Oops!”

I grinned to myself and reached the table of two late lunchers. “What can I get’cha, gentlemen?”

“I’ll have the same as always—Double Trouble with fries and a Coke,” the first said, closing his menu.

“No problem.” I turned to the other guy.

He hummed. “Can I get the beef dipped?”

One beef dipped, got it. “Course, hot or sweet? With or without mozzarella?”

“Hot, thanks. Yes on the mozz. And a Coke.”

“You got it. I’ll be right back with those drinks.” I grabbed the menus and returned to the bar, where Bella was busy rambling to Adam about her and Dad’s new plans.

“Really? In this weather?” Adam chuckled and winced.

Bella flipped her hair over her shoulder. “Daddy, the weather is always good for dress shopping. Okay?”

Whoa. Ship a kid to California, and they came back as a princess.

“She get that behavior from you?” I asked Adam.

“What the fuck?” Adam was immediately offended. “Ask that one. He spoils her.”

“I most certainly do not,” Everett argued. “She suggested shopping because apparently you want her to have a new dress for some dinner we’re attending soon.”

I snorted under my breath and went to put in table nineteen’s order.

“Meanwhile, nobody’s taking me shopping,” Bella huffed.

“We were gonna eat first, princess.” Everett called her by the right name.

Damn.

Maybe I’d lost my influence on Bella, but I had one more hope. One more kid in my life. My nephew. Who... I checked my watch. Should be here any moment.

My little sister hadn’t been nearly as screwed over as I had in our parents’ retirement plan. She’d already been itching to move back to Chicago, so when our folks had literally given her their house, just like that, they’d made her day. This was their big bon voyage into retirement. Sarah got their house; I got the Clover. She had a nice home with very few mortgage payments left in a decent school district, and I had a sports bar in the Loop that’d been a sinking ship the past ten years.

One could say I was bitter—but not for the reasons some might guess. I loved the Clover. I’d grown up here. I’d run barefoot all over these sticky floors. I understood Dad’s reasoning when he’d told me he was giving Sarah a home and me a future. I got it. It wasn’t a money issue. The problem was the motherfucking headache that came with this joint. Running it was painful, because we were always one bad move away from shutting down.

This'd been the Kalecki tradition for four generations now, though. I'd inherited it from my father, who had taken over from his mother and her two sisters. Before then, their old man and, originally, his uncle.

I was sure as shit never having kids—who the fuck could afford 'em anyway—so that left Chip. My five-year-old nephew with attitude problems. Or that's what his teachers at kindergarten said. They knew fuck-all. He was just a kid. He was a cocky little runt, but he had a big heart, and he was protective of his momma.

I'd been the same way at that age.

And look at me now.

* * *

“All right, I'm punchin' out. Jamaal's here,” Adam said.

I was busy pouring beers, but I reached over and bumped his fist. “Take it easy out there, man. See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, and get some fucking rest,” he told me.

I would. Later tonight.

I had a break in five minutes, though. Petey was already working on my dinner.

As Adam left, Jamaal emerged from the back, and I told him he could start with refills for our Senior Circuit. As in, Jerry and Malcolm. They'd been sitting at the bar since four o'clock.

“Christ, Pop. Don't you ever go home?” Jamaal didn't love having Malcolm here all

the time, but I thought it was hysterical. When Malcolm got real lit, he'd start telling everyone what a cute baby Jamaal had been, effectively killing any attempt Jamaal might make to get his flirt on.

Innocent flirting was allowed after eight PM.

We liked big tips, and we could not lie.

"You know the answer to that, boy," Malcolm replied. "Someone's gotta keep an eye on Jerry."

I smirked and headed for the other end of the bar, where three tipsy women were waiting for beers.

For the record, nobody needed to keep an eye on Jerry. Jerry just needed to go home to his fucking wife already. Poor Irene didn't have it easy with him. I'd never met a crankier man than Jerry, and I was my father's son.

"Trace?" I heard Julie call.

"Yeah?" I looked over my shoulder, only to see Chip had woken up from his very late, not-gonna-tell-Sarah nap. "Be right there!" I hurried up and put a charming smile on my face for the three ladies, and once they had their beers, I walked off.

"Unca Trace, I'm awake now!" Chip hollered.

He was so fucking cute. It helped that he took after me. We shared the same dark hair and green eyes. I'd been adorable as a kid—and these days, quite a few men had assured me I was hot as fuck.

"I can see that, little man." I swooped him up and blew a raspberry on his cheek. "Did

ya have a nice nap in my office?”

“Yeah.” His grin was as sleepy as it was goofy. “I don’t want a babysitter. I have you!”

Yeah, well. According to Sarah, this situation wasn’t optimal. Their move from Boston was still weighing on her bank account some six months later, including the minor renovations at our folks’ old house. But it was important to her to have everything settled in their new home; Chip needed stability and shit like that. So while she saved up and took extra shifts at the hospital, I had him here a few nights a week.

I didn’t mind one bit. If he was going to take over one day, he needed to develop a love and protectiveness for the Clover.

Back in the kitchen, Petey had my dinner ready, so Chip had woken up at a good time for me to take my break. With Chip on my hip, another chip on my shoulder, I grabbed my plate, a bottle of water, some cheesy bread for the kid, and then aimed for the office.

It was on my list to declutter it someday. The cabinets and shelves were filled with files, receipts, and bank papers dating back to before I was born.

Before Chip, Bella had spent countless naps on that couch in the corner. It had everything he needed. An old iPad for watching cartoons, pillows, blankets, and a baby monitor we used as a walkie-talkie. Not that I could hear him over the din at the bar, but Petey kept the other one in the kitchen.

We’d developed a good system.

Honestly, I didn’t see the need for a babysitter either, but then, I wasn’t a fussing

mother. She claimed she couldn't turn her back on Chip for a second. I begged to differ. He was a bright little dude, and he knew the rules.

Chip settled in on the couch again, happy to devour more cheesy bread, and worked an iPad better than I did.

Sarah loved telling me I was born in the wrong era by calling me a boomer.

“Unca Trace?”

“Yeah, buddy?” I sat down at my desk and cut into my steak.

“Mister Petey is always here,” he said.

I nodded and chewed on a mouthful of steak and salad. “Close to it, just like me.”

Except, I didn't have a wife who traveled for work, or kids who were off to college halfway across the country.

I reckoned it was a loneliness thing. He and I usually took the same double shifts. We were closed on Mondays, and he was off on Tuesdays. Ma's rule. Petey's gotta rest, baby! He needs two days away from here. She'd been everyone's mother. Why she kept telling me was a mystery, though. He decided his own schedule, and he had Sandy too. While Petey was self-taught, Sandy was an actual chef.

I both missed Ma's constant fussing and was relieved not to have her lurking in every corner.

Fucking Florida. What was so great about it? I drove down to visit once a year, and it was all I could handle. But no wonder old people moved there; joints fucking melted in that heat. And goddamn insects the size of your hand all over.

“Will I be here tomorrow too?” Chip asked.

I shook my head and uncapped my water. “Not on Thursdays and Sundays. Your mom’s afraid of homeless people.”

“What?” He scrunched his nose.

I grinned faintly. “I’m kiddin’. She’s just protective of you, and Thursdays and Sundays can get a little rough.” Very rarely, but whatever. It was Sarah’s choice. Her experience with the homeless as an ER nurse looked a lot different from mine. At most, our guys got a little territorial when we were running low on bread. That was about it. Otherwise...fuck, especially in the winter...? People were exhausted and cold.

“Mommy says we gotta go to church on Sunday,” Chip grumbled.

I chuckled. “Have fun with that.”

“Can you come?” he asked, hopeful.

“Nah, ’fraid not. God owes me money.”

He gasped. “How much?”

Before I could answer, I heard a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

It was Julie again. “Sorry to bother you, but we have a situation with the garbage. Tonya and I can’t get the door to the alley to open.”

“No problem. I’ll fix it after I’m done,” I replied. The door was probably frozen shut or blocked by snow.

“Thanks, boss.”

I harrumphed loudly enough for her to hear it, and she laughed and walked away.

She knew I hated being called boss. Everyone knew.

“Chip, you wanna come here and finish my food?” I crammed my mouth full first, not ready to let go. Petey made the best steaks, medium-rare on the side of rare, and even the shit he put in the salad was delicious. Olive oil and some secret seasoning.

Our steaks on the menu were pricey as fuck, because they were the one food item we didn’t mess around with. Top quality, organic, and came straight here from local farmers to our Yelp and Tripadvisor reviewers.

“I can always eat!” Chip pummeled toward me, then came to a screeching stop as he stared at the plate. “Can I leave the veggies?”

“No, they’re good for you. They’ll make you big and strong—and it keeps Mommy off my back.”

“But there’s so much of it, man,” he whispered.

I grinned and switched places with him, and I pushed in his chair. “This is what you do.” I showed him my trick and stabbed the salad with the fork. “Like this.” Got some good bits of lettuce, cucumber, and tomato on there. “Then you add steak.” I put my fork in there and cut around the meat. “Now you have perfection and blah on the same fork, but the blah won’t taste as much because you have the perfection in the same mouthful. You should write this down. It’s what we call a life hack.”

I wasn't completely stupid. I did the cutting for him. Small pieces so he didn't choke.

"I can write my name, Mommy, and some stuff!"

"You want a trophy for that? Please." I dipped down and smooched his cheek. "Eat up. I'll be back in a bit. And you know what to do if you need help."

He smiled goofily and nodded.

"Say the rule, chipster."

"I open the door and yell for Julie or Tonya or Petey cuz they get me goodies and call for you."

I was actually gonna leave the door open, but yeah.

"That's what's up." I held out my fist, and he bumped it with his in the triumphant spirit reserved for a Cubs win. "I'll hurry."

I grabbed my parka on the way out, then gloves by the back door, and I asked Julie to keep an eye on Chip. Four large garbage bags had been left in the narrow space, so I squeezed by and eyed my opponent.

Holding down the handle with a small push did nothing.

Shoulder-checking the fuck out of the door...

We have a winner.

I grunted as the door gave away with a half-frozen crunch, and I was immediately bitch-slapped by a wall of icy cold.

I threw the first two bags off the stoop, partly to measure the depth of the snow in the alley. A solid two feet, I'd say.

Christ, I had to do something about this tomorrow. It wasn't like the owners of the place on the other side gave a shit about clearing snow; they'd filed for bankruptcy before the holidays. Now some swanky fusion restaurant was opening in a couple months.

I wrestled the other two bags outside, and I aimed for the dumpsters in the back.

On the way, I threw a scowl up at the lights that should work. One outside our kitchen exit, another closer to the mouth of the alley, which was our side entrance to the Green—and our soup kitchen—and lastly, the lamp outside the door that led up to my place. The bulbs had needed to be replaced for about two years now.

It was on the list.

And I might need to bump that up on the priority scale, 'cause I couldn't see shit out here aside from snow and contrasts.

I did always carry a flashlight in my back pocket, but that was more for tactical reasons. It had enough lumens to disorient an attacker for a few seconds in complete darkness, and I didn't need more than that to either get the upper hand or make my escape.

I was the same with hookups. Gimme five seconds after we were done, and I was gone.

Through curses, kicks, and labored breaths, I dragged the garbage bags through the snow and over to the first of the three dumpsters—and I came up with an answer for the few times people asked how I stayed in good shape when I worked with deep-

fried sports-bar food all day. This was fucking why. Taking out the trash was a frigid workout that had the same results as me going to the gym. Only, there I got pissed off because I wasn't a fan of people. Here, I got pissed off because now my shoes were wet.

"Sorry, boss. Here's two more!" I heard Tonya holler.

"Motherfucker," I cursed under my breath.

The workout continued. At least I didn't have to worry about recycling and sorting shit with these bags. I returned to the stoop and grabbed?—

"Please..."

I released the bags and instantly turned to the opening of the alley, where I spotted a dark form hunched against the wall.

"Please help me," he rasped.

A dozen scenarios ran through me at the speed of light—a thought that prompted my next move. In a hot second, I'd retrieved my flashlight, and I directed the beam at his head.

"Show me your hands," I said, approaching slowly. "I can help you, but you gotta show me you're cooperative."

He flinched and ducked his head, and I noticed he was clutching his side. Gun? Wound? Was he injured or just a good actor?

My training and experience had kicked in the moment I'd heard the man's voice, so I registered every movement and trait. His jeans were wet but not dirty, he was

significantly older than me, taller too, white, plenty of silver in his short hair, he was breathing heavily, down jacket—good condition but not new.

“Are you hurt?” I asked.

He sucked in a breath and nodded, and he lifted one of his hands. “Please help me. They took my car.”

Was the car a bigger issue than whatever injury he’d sustained?

When I was only some six feet away, I lowered the light to the side of his stomach he wouldn’t let go of, and I saw the tear in the fabric. His fingertips were bloody too.

“I’ll call 9-1-1,” I said.

“No!” he choked out.

I stopped reaching for my phone and hitched my brows. Suspicion rose, though surprise did not.

“If you could just—” he coughed. “Fuck. I’d like to inspect the damage myself.” He heaved a breath, and I lifted the flashlight a little. Enough to get the outer circle of the glow to catch his face. His expression was pinched with pain. “Could I please use the b-bathroom?”

Yes, he could. “Sure.”

I went with my gut feeling and quickly pocketed my flashlight. Then I closed the distance between us and took charge. He winced and recoiled as I gripped his arm to guide him to the kitchen entrance, which reminded me. He must’ve seen me sweating the garbage route in order to assume I worked here.

“Do you need me to call someone?” I asked. “A spouse? Shelter? 3-1-1?”

He breathed through clenched teeth and shook his head.

Fair enough.

I helped him up the stoop and let out a short whistle when Tonya walked down the hallway.

She turned to me, her surprise following.

“Can you get me a first aid kit, hon?”

“Yeah, of course.” She scurried off.

The staff bathroom was right here in the hallway, so it wasn’t a long walk. I flicked on the lights, then ushered him to sit down on the toilet.

He sucked in a sharp breath and scrunched his face.

He had a small scar on his stubbly chin.

His jacket seemed dry enough, but he needed to get out of those jeans. They were wet all the way up to his thighs.

“Do you live far away, sir?” I pushed down his jacket, revealing an old hoodie underneath. That, too, had been torn by what I could assume was a stab wound. “Are you homeless? Doubled up somewhere?”

A small pocketknife fell from his jacket. No surprise there.

“They took my car.” He let out a whimper, and it took me aback to see tears rolling down from the crow’s-feet in the corners of his eyes.

The man was in serious pain, though I suspected that car was, in fact, a bigger loss to him.

“Did you live in that?” I asked quietly.

He drew an unsteady breath and mustered a small nod.

Fuck.

I dropped the jacket on the floor and side-eyed the shower. Which was more a storage for cleaning supplies and buckets. But we’d let people wash up here before, especially in the winter when it was vital to keep their heat up.

“Trace, here’s the kit.” Tonya returned with our kit from the kitchen.

“Thanks. Marisol isn’t working tonight, is she?” I went for the man’s hoodie next.

“No, afraid not. You need a nurse?”

I nodded. “Can you get me Jamaal?”

At least he’d almost been a corpsman when he’d decided to quit the Navy dream. His older brothers were all military, but he’d discovered it wasn’t a life for him. Together, we should be able to help this guy get patched up.

Tonya stalked out again, and I made quick work of shedding my own coat and gloves before I got the man to lose his hoodie. And...that revealed two more shirts underneath. Sounded about right for someone living in their car.

Oh, this could be a long night for me.

I scratched my forehead and cursed my folks. They'd made me this way. They'd made me give a fuck. Fucking assholes.

"Protect the business first, son. Without it, we can't help others or ourselves. Then we open the doors to those in need."

I had a long list of shelters, organizations, and emergency housing that came in handy every week, but at this hour... Fuck, they'd all be full—or there'd be an opening down in fucking Dolton, and they'd close before this guy could get there.

By the time Jamaal arrived on the scene, I'd gotten the man to shed the last shirt, and in another time and place, I would've appreciated the view a lot more. Now, not so much. He was fucking shaking.

I gave Jamaal the little information I had while I grabbed a stack of towels. The largest would have to function as a blanket for now, and I draped it around the man's shoulders.

In the meantime, Jamaal went down on one knee to inspect the damage and open the aid kit.

"What's your name?" Jamaal asked.

"Ben—ah, fuck." He groaned in pain and dug his fingers into his thighs.

I stuck to the background, ready to assist, but it looked as if dressing like a Russian doll had protected him. The wound wasn't deep, and it appeared to be a clean cut. Jamaal borrowed my flashlight to make sure, and then he poured a generous amount of wound cleanser.

Ben wasn't talkative. When we asked him what'd happened, he just repeated that "they took my car" and added, "I don't know, four of them—they fought me off and took it."

"You sure you don't want me to call someone, man?" I asked. "You should at least report the crime and?—"

"No," he gritted out as Jamaal applied antiseptic cream. "What's the point? I don't have insurance."

Of course he didn't. Insurance wasn't exactly a priority in his case.

I was just rambling bullshit. I was asking all the questions that the authorities believed mattered or should be asked for whatever reason. The reality looked a lot different, and the 311 system was nothing but a glorified audiobook that read shit off the government website. High on promises, low on action. More often than not, they dispatched you to 911 if something needed to be done. AKA, sending the cops.

I handed Jamaal the lidocaine next.

At least the bleeding had slowed down.

"If you pop a fever, you need to go to a hospital," he told Ben. "Or if the wound changes color and gets infected. We're not fuckin' around with sepsis, okay?"

Judging by the sight of Ben's torso, this wasn't his first run-in with sharp objects. His form was equal parts cut and stocky; he had muscle definition and some padding. And a handful of scars where his chest hair didn't grow.

All right, time for me to be useful again.

“If you’re willing to stick around a couple hours, I have a dryer upstairs for those jeans,” I said. “We’ll get some food in you too.”

Ben sniffled and scrubbed a hand over his face. “I—I-I don’t—” He clenched his jaw and wouldn’t make eye contact, a sight I’d encountered way too many times.

Pride.

“Listen,” I said, clearing my throat. “If you don’t want me to at least call someone, you’re staying. It’s fuckin’ freezin’ outside, and you’ve been hurt. Get those pants off. I’ll be back in a bit.” I squeezed Jamaal’s shoulder. “I’ll prepare the Green.” We kept two of the three smaller dining areas closed on slow days anyway.

He nodded with a dip of his chin, and then I walked out.

* * *

They took my car, they took my car, they took my fucking car. Where was I gonna sleep now? How would I get to Alvin? What would Ma say?

Would Angie notice I was gone? How would I make it to my interview tomorrow?

I felt so goddamn pathetic, and I wasn’t sure I could handle another hit. I was a fucking embarrassment. A useless piece of shit.

The kid—Jamaal, if I wasn’t mistaken—finished dressing my wound and said he’d be back with painkillers and dry clothes.

I’d heard of this place. The Dearborn Clover. It was on a list of soup kitchens I’d been given once at a shelter. The lady who’d checked me in to a room had said they were good people.

How lucky I was, then. To get robbed a block away from a sports bar that served the homeless.

Maybe later, the night outside could finish me off once and for all since I was too much of a coward to do the job myself.

I sniffled and carefully stood up. The pain made me wince every time I shifted, but it felt better than before. My fingers almost hurt more from the cold.

I had to stop trembling.

As I unbuttoned my jeans, I carefully removed my boots until I saw my phone was still intact. That was something. I always kept it in my left boot, along with my debit card. My phone flashed to life when I pushed my toe on the buttons.

They hadn't taken that from me, at least. Just my clothes, the dummy wallet I kept in the glovebox, and...twenty bucks worth of gas.

God-fucking-dammit.

That other kid came back, the one who'd fucking blinded me—before saving my ass. I was still seeing white spots in my vision, though they'd gotten fainter.

“Oh—my bad. You want privacy?” He averted his gaze.

I shook my head. I didn't care. I barely knew the meaning of privacy. “It's okay.”

I fished out my actual wallet, not that it contained anything of value. I didn't know when I'd find use for my driver's license again. Out of the other cards, I supposed my library card was the most important.

“Lemme get that for you.” The kid bent down to grab my phone.

I didn’t want him to be too nice to me.

Once in a blue moon, I ran across someone who evoked stronger emotions in me. They were usually passionate about helping out. Most recently, it was a nurse. I didn’t remember her name, but she’d had this kind smile I’d been unable to look away from. In one big swoop, I’d felt envious, bitter, angry, sad, hopeful, grateful, and overwhelmed. I couldn’t explain it. It wasn’t attraction or anything like it. But I had a hunch this guy would be similar. Only, it was his eyes, and it wasn’t necessarily kindness. His pale-green eyes were framed by dark lashes, almost too long to belong to a man, and they carried charm and an edge.

I could tell people liked this young man.

So I didn’t.

Besides, what the hell did he know? Anyone who offered to call 3-1-1 was about as useful to me as a wet paper towel. Maybe he was new here.

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Trace Kalecki

Jamaal soon came back with a box of clothes for Ben, and he told the man, “See if you can find anything here. If not, we have more.” He also handed over two pills, presumably painkillers. “Water’s in the sink.”

Ben was visibly overwhelmed, so I gave him some space and took his jeans and socks upstairs to my place. After putting the clothes in the dryer, I went back down and stopped at a supply closet for a couple Ziploc kits, and then I made sure Chip was doing all right in my office.

He was busy with the iPad. “Yeah, I’m killing zombies!”

Got it, got it. No more pop for him today.

By then, I saw Ben poking his head out of the bathroom, so I told him to follow me. He’d found a pair of jeans and a hoodie that fit well enough, and he was back in his boots. Hopefully with new socks on, ’cause we had a lot of those.

The Clover was in the thick of it. We had contacts all over, and we partnered up with three churches and two charity organizations regularly to swap supplies, assistance, and information. They could hand out info about our soup kitchen, and we got clothes and hygiene products that people donated. There was always someone in line whose coat was too thin or who needed better socks. Occasionally, we could also hand out vouchers, gift cards, and CTA passes.

In the kitchen, I snatched up the to-go bag Petey had put together.

I let Julie and Tonya head out first, their hands loaded with food orders, and then I followed. We bypassed the bar, and I veered right toward the Green.

Tonight hadn't been as slow as I'd feared. The majority of the tables in the main dining area were filled.

"In here." I pushed open the doors to reveal the most Irish area in the joint. Large flat-screens behind plexiglass shared the dark-green walls with Irish sayings and my family's timeline from County Clare during the famine to Chicago today.

I'd lost count of people saying, "Kalecki? That ain't Irish."

No fucking shit, but my grandmother had married a Polish guy. You're welcome for the sausage.

Twelve booths in total lined the eastern and western walls, and I picked one of them for Ben.

"Have a seat." I emptied the bag of three containers and two beverages. "I don't know how you like your coffee, so I brought creamer, milk, and sugar too." We didn't shy away from high-energy and high-fat in the winter when an unsheltered person came in. I left the packets next to his food. One big grilled cheese, our famous pizza soup?—

"What is that?" He pointed at the soup. "Is that pepperoni?"

I nodded. "Try it and fall in love. I'm tellin' you." It was spicy tomato soup with pepperoni and melted mozzarella, and it came with cheesy bread fresh out of the oven.

Ben sat down and carefully put a hand over his wound. "You didn't have to go to all

this trouble.”

In the winter, I did. Otherwise, I’d toss and turn all night.

During warmer months, it was easier to offer a menu of simple soup, bread, and the occasional hot dog. But right now? It wasn’t just a matter of freezing. The cold burned calories too fucking fast.

“Do you mind if I sit?” I asked, unpacking the last of his meal. A Coke, fries, and bread.

The bread had been the last change I’d made when we’d ordered new menus. Now it was called Chip’s Cheesy Bread, much to the excitement of my nephew.

Ben shook his head and picked up the sandwich, and I could tell he was uncomfortable. I’d do my best to fix that. I just...wanted to know how or if we could help him.

As he bit into his food, he eyed the Ziploc kits next to his container of fries, and I figured it was a good start.

“So we run a soup kitchen here every Thursday and Sunday,” I said. I made a gesture to the pool table at the center of the room. “That’s when we cover the table and serve hot food from eleven to five for anyone who stops by.” I cleared my throat and nodded at the two kits. “When we’re able, we also hand out kits with hygiene products and energy bars.”

He watched me in silence as he chewed.

I couldn’t lie; he was fucking handsome, this man. His rugged silver years were taking over, but he was still cut.

“Since you lost your car, do you have any place to stay tonight?” I asked.

He swallowed hard and shook his head, and he averted his gaze to the food.

“Would you mind helping me prepare for tomorrow’s service if it gave you a safe spot to sleep?” I asked next.

That one elicited suspicion in his eyes. “What’s the catch?”

I showed my palms. “No catch. You just help out for a few hours tomorrow.”

He took another bite and chewed slowly.

“We pack more of those kits,” I said, nodding at the Ziplocs. “We make a fuck-ton of soup, coffee, and tea, and we divvy up bread. There are six of us, but we can always use extra help.”

He reached for his pop, and I noticed his fingertips were scratched up in places. “You usually don’t pay someone before they do the work. What if I’m gone in the morning?”

I shrugged. “It happens. But it doesn’t change anything—and I don’t consider a warm place to sleep payment. It’s a basic human need. The spot’s yours whether you help out or not. That said...it can be more than a one-time offer if you stick around and pitch in.”

Yeah, that didn’t help with the suspicion. The man was on edge. I couldn’t blame him for that.

“Where is this spot?” he asked.

I exhaled a chuckle and rubbed the back of my neck. I kinda hated this part, because though my option was better than his, I felt like a jagoff for not being willing to open up my home. “Well, it ain’t pretty, but I hope you’ll see my side—I gotta be careful.” I shifted in my seat. “I’m the only tenant upstairs, so it’s just me coming and going. In other words, you’re welcome to use the hallway. There’s an alcove right next to my front door, where I keep one of those foldable camping beds.”

He grew pensive and put down the sandwich, and he side-eyed the soup. “You’ve done this before?”

“More times than I can remember.”

It was absolutely nothing fancy, but it beat staying outside.

“And people don’t take advantage?”

I smirked. “More times than I can remember.”

The upstairs used to be an attic with storage space. Then some six or seven years ago, Murray Estate, which owned the building, turned the western half of it into a loft apartment and offered it to us since we rented the only other establishment in the building. The other half remained an attic with storage units accessed from their own entrance on the eastern side. The apartment was out of my price range, but I saved a lot on never needing a car or having to commute to work.

As long as I paid my rent on time, I was left alone, and that was how I’d managed to shelter dozens of homeless people over the years. Yeah, some took advantage—or tried. I had the scars to prove it. A few had attempted to break in, another few had tried to rob me when I’d walked by, and not a single one had succeeded.

More often than not, “taking advantage” was more about them being shit guests.

Many were users, and I'd become a pro at cleaning up needles.

"Why do you keep doing it?"

I shrugged. "We all need a redeeming quality, don't we?"

That was the best answer I was going to give.

Ben fell silent again and focused on the soup.

It appeared to be a winner.

He wasn't shivering as much anymore either.

I killed a few minutes by keeping an eye on the rerun games running on the various flat-screens, but I had zero interest in curling, figure skating, and golf.

"I don't like handouts," Ben said quietly. "I'll help you tomorrow."

Perfect. It was settled.

* * *

I was dead on my feet when I finally killed the lights in the restaurant and bar. Ben shuffled after me, holding his to-go bag with leftovers, as we walked through the kitchen.

I'd found him dozing off in the booth when I'd returned to let him know we were closing, and no wonder. Who knew the last time he'd gotten a proper night's sleep.

I'd checked in on him a couple times once Sarah had picked up Chip, and I had to

admit I wasn't particularly worried about him crashing outside my place. He showed no signs whatsoever of being a user—and I knew all the fucking signs—and he wasn't one of those who'd lived on the streets for years and years either.

My semi-educated guess...? At some point in his life, not too long ago, he'd fallen on hard times, and he was struggling to get back on his feet. It was the story of many here in the city. Rents and mortgages had gone up, same with food and gas—wages, not so much. The property taxes alone could send entire families out on the street, especially in the suburbs, and then they were forced to double up with family or friends somewhere or jump through hoops to get into an emergency housing program. We hadn't increased Section 8 vouchers at the rate that was necessary either.

Once we reached the back, I flicked off the last of the lights and activated the alarm. Then I let him head out first so I could lock up.

“Since you're stayin' the night, we may as well wash your clothes,” I said.

I turned around and found him glancing up the stairs.

“That's not necessary,” he replied absently. “Can, uh, others get in?”

I shook my head and pointed at the front door behind him. “That one's always locked. At this point, it's probably frozen shut too. I can't remember the last time I used it.”

I always went through the kitchen back door, and my mail was delivered to the bar's PO box.

He seemed somewhat satisfied at that.

I gestured for him to go on up first, and that was less comforting for him. I was sure

he didn't like turning his back on potential threats. And neither did I.

"About the laundry," I said. "Fuck what's necessary. It's about comfort. I'mma get something to eat—you're free to use the bathroom. Take a shower, wash your clothes."

He reached the landing and peered down at me. "You really do this for others too?"

I chuckled. He got me there. "Rarely," I admitted. "But you don't strike me as someone who would knock me out to steal my TV. Which is the only thing I value in there."

I went ahead next, and we rounded the corner to my door. And the alcove where he'd sleep.

"So this is it." I unfolded the bed and straightened the mattress. There was just enough space for an old milk crate too, and I pointed to it. "Inside that crate, you'll find an alarm clock in case you need it. Sometimes, I have guys who gotta get up early for a job interview."

He nodded with a dip of his chin and left his stuff on the mattress. "I was supposed to be at an interview in Skokie tomorrow, but I'm gonna skip it."

Because of the car?

"Why?" I stuck my key in the first lock and squinted as I did CTA math. Skokie... So that was the red line up to Howard, and then?—

"I wasn't gonna get it anyway," he muttered. "I'm not a fuckin' plumber. And those guys today—they gotta see degrees and certifications for everything. Back in my day? You showed up and proved yourself."

Christ, he spoke like my old man, yet he couldn't be a day over fifty.

Third lock's the charm. I opened the door and glanced back at him. "What are you?"

"Contractor," he said. He scratched his chin with a bit of a faraway expression. "I spent twenty years building houses, just to end up homeless."

Damn. That fucking sucked. No wonder he was struggling to find work this time of year too.

I opened the door wider and let him in.

My place was kinda sad, which Adam liked to remind me. Given the previous use of the space as an attic, I had two bedrooms, a front room, and a kitchen forming a neat row, then a long fucking hallway followed alongside, with a fire escape down at the end. One big bathroom, one half-bath. Both bedrooms stood empty, aside from some moving boxes. I slept in the front room, where I had a big pullout couch I never prepared for company. I kept it as a bed. Coffee table, entertainment center, big flat-screen, huge windows you could sit in. Nothing on the walls, much to my sister's disappointment. She'd given me a photo of Chip, and I'd stuck it on the fridge.

Ma had tried to get me to decorate it more. At the very least, use one of the bedrooms, but I didn't care. I liked falling asleep to the TV running.

I gave Ben a quick tour—as in, I pointed out the front room and kitchen on our way to the bathroom. There was a second fire escape in the kitchen too.

"Bachelor pad if I ever saw one," he mused.

I smiled faintly to myself. Yeah, maybe. Not that it saw any action on that front. I really didn't fucking like people. Far as I knew, only my family and Adam had been

up here. Bella too, maybe. I wasn't sure. Then possibly a dozen men and women who'd gotten a similar treatment to Ben.

I'd always felt bad I had so much space and didn't do anything about it, but what else did I need? And fuck having roommates. This was my one luxury, and I shelled out 75% of my pay to afford the rent.

In the bathroom, I showed Ben the ropes and how he could do his laundry. It was a spacious bathroom, all gray and white tile, modern, and the only things on the long counter, aside from a sink surrounded by my basic toiletries, were a box of detergent and a bottle of fabric softener. Big shower, one bottle of two-in-one body wash and shampoo, extra toothbrushes under the sink, razors too, towels on the rack between the toilet and shower. He was good to go.

He flicked a glance at my two overpacked laundry baskets and raised a brow. "You don't wanna throw some of your shit in there? Seems like a waste."

Yeah, all right. I should work on that. Usually, I threw in precisely what I was gonna wear the next day.

This was ten years of Ma buying me socks and boxer briefs and tees. She didn't dare buy jeans, 'cause they had to fit just right. So my dislike for shopping was why I only had two pairs.

I made quick work of filling the washer and turning it on, and then I excused myself to make us some food. Hopefully, he'd enjoy his shower.

* * *

Should I check on him?

The shower had stopped running probably twenty minutes ago.

No, as long as I heard the occasional noise, I'd let him be. For a while longer.

I'd made his bed out in the hall. Everything was clean, and I hoped three blankets would suffice. Otherwise, I'd go downstairs and search through the donation boxes. That was where I'd once found the sheets and two pillows.

Shit. I shot right up from the foot of my bed, and I absently brushed nacho crumbs off my tee. I'd forgotten he might need to redress his wound after the shower.

I left the front room and knocked quietly on the bathroom door. "Ben? Just so you know, there's a first aid kit under the sink too. Lemme know if you need help."

I heard him cough and clear his throat.

"Thank you," he replied thickly.

Goddammit. What else could I do for him? To be honest, I wasn't used to seeing homeless people get emotional. It happened, obviously, but they were usually closed off and understandably guarded. On edge, even. Or in withdrawal.

"I'll hurry," he added.

"No—just...no, take your time. No rush." I stepped back and debated calling my mother, only to realize it was past two AM in Florida, and she was definitely asleep.

Instead, I wandered over to the front door and opened it. Could I do something else to the alcove? Before I'd left the bathroom earlier, I'd told him we'd find clothes for him to sleep in. I was sure I had some sweatpants that sat loose on me.

I took another step and peered into the to-go bag from earlier, and I chewed on the inside of my cheek. His wallet—it was there.

He'd most likely not intended to leave that behind. Perhaps he was feeling too shitty. I didn't know how much that car meant to him, but I knew how much having a roof over my head mattered to me.

Yeah, I was that douchebag who checked the wallet. It was a balancing act for me, figuring out how much to offer someone before I screwed myself over. I didn't trust easily, but I wanted to. I wanted to give more.

He had... I sighed. About twelve bucks.

His driver's license was expiring soon.

Benjamin Andrew O'Cleary.

Born on May third, and he was... Fuck, more math. He was turning forty-nine in a few months.

This was interesting. He was listed at an address out in Elmwood Park.

Brown hair, blue eyes—yeah, no fucking kidding. I'd seen them. Six foot four, sounded about right. He had a few inches on me. Huh, he was an organ donor.

Then I heard a faint noise coming from inside, so I hurriedly returned the license and the wallet before I made my way back in. I literally sprinted into the front room, and a second later, the bathroom door opened.

Christ.

The moment I was seated on the foot of the bed again, I tossed a couple nachos into my mouth.

Keep it cool.

Benjamin Andrew O’Cleary appeared in the doorway, wearing only a towel around his hips, and I had zero complaints. I was glad he’d redressed the wound. I didn’t want that cut infected.

Now was an excellent time to stop staring.

I cleared my throat and stood up. “I’ll find you some clothes. Everything go okay in there?”

He nodded with a dip of his chin. “Thank you. I, uh...” He exhaled a chuckle, looking mildly uncomfortable. “It felt real good to brush my teeth. I’ve tried to be careful, but I think I need to see a dentist at some point.” He rubbed his fingers over his cheek. “My last wisdom tooth isn’t in good shape.”

I grinned faintly. “I’m surprised you have any left. I’d yanked all mine before I turned twenty-five.”

He followed me down the hall where I had a row of closets I’d bought for cheap at IKEA.

“My mother was a dental nurse before she retired,” he murmured.

That explained it.

I opened the first closet, the only one I used, and dug through my pile of sweats. There should be one pair... There. Farthest in. Gray pair.

“These should fit.” I handed them to him and took the same journey with my tees. Only, I had more options. Ma didn’t always get it right. “And this.” A baggy tee from Florida. Thankfully without dolphins and neon colors, just a tiny palm tree against the black fabric. He’d survive that. “You hungry? I made nachos.”

“Thank you, but I fear the food downstairs already did a number on me.” He smiled politely and...then just dropped the fucking towel. All right. Okay. Yeah. Fuck modesty, right?

Jesus fucking Christ.

The man was hung.

I averted my gaze as he stepped into the pants.

“Okay, uh...” Think, man. Think. “If, uh—if you need to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, don’t hesitate to knock. Seriously. Those stomach cramps can be hell.”

I also preferred to be woken up rather than finding a pile of shit on the stoop in the morning.

It’d happened before.

“I think I’ll be okay,” he said, putting on the tee. “You’ve done enough...uh.” He cocked his head. “I think I heard a couple of the staff call you Trace?”

Jesus. Hadn’t I introduced myself?

My bad.

“That’s right,” I replied, and I automatically extended my hand. “Trace Kalecki.”

His mouth twisted into the faintest smile, and he shook my hand. “Thank you for saving me tonight, Trace. I owe you.”

I shook my head. No, he didn’t.

* * *

The bed was weirdly comfortable, but it squeaked loudly every time I turned over.

Still nothing from Angie.

I scrolled through my messages, partly relieved. I didn’t want her to worry. It wasn’t like I could get a message to her now anyway. I’d have to wait till I found a hot spot. Maybe they had Wi-Fi downstairs. I hadn’t thought to ask earlier.

I was so goddamn tired.

Just in case, I checked for Wi-Fi. Network after network popped up, all of them locked. And there we go. The Dearborn Clover GUEST Wi-Fi. Also password protected.

I returned my phone to my boot, then rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling.

It was painted in the same muted green color as the walls.

A breath gusted out of me, and I carefully brushed my hand over my wound. The pain had faded into a dull, constant ache.

Could I actually sleep here?

The silence was deafening. I couldn't handle silence. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd experienced it.

Maybe Trace didn't count it as silence. I mean, there were some faint sounds—plumbing, the occasional squeak, the wind whipping up against the building... But it was silence to me, compared to what I was used to.

Ah, there. The distant call of sirens.

I breathed deeply and closed my eyes.

Trace Kalecki.

Under no circumstances could I stay here for long. A night or two, tops. I'd help out with the soup kitchen, of course. It was the least I could do. He'd done way too much for me. And then I'd be on my way. I had to see Alvin on Friday anyway. Even if I had to walk all the way out to Elmwood Park.

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Trace Kalecki

“Ben, can you look outside and give me an estimate on how long the line is?” I asked.

Four giant stockpots, each one holding approximately seven gallons of chicken and vegetable soup, usually cut it. But we always circled back to the same sentence.

This fucking weather.

Everyone was cold. Everyone was seeking out heat, whether they came right off the streets or they’d traveled far for food they couldn’t afford at home. Most visitors weren’t actually unsheltered; they just didn’t have enough money for food.

The alley had been filled with people of all ages coming and going since we’d opened, some of them sticking to the heating vents for extra warmth when the booths in here were full. We tried to ensure that those who arrived with kids could sit down at a table.

Marisol and Julie stepped up the pace to empty bags of bread, and we were running low on that too. Four slices per head, and I didn’t wanna make cuts on carbs in this fucking weather. Coffee and tea were easier; we had tons of packets of insta-coffee and way too many tea bags. Ben had spent an hour bagging insta-cocoa and marshmallows for the kids as well.

He leaned out the door. “The line still goes around the corner. I’ll go out and check.”

“Thanks, man.” I wiped my forehead and asked Sandy to take over for me. I had to

go check with Petey in the kitchen if we could make more food magically appear. “Oh, and when Ben comes back, tell him to find me in the kitchen.”

“Will do,” he replied.

I hurried out of the Green and into the...rest of the establishment. And talk about a different world. At this hour on a Thursday—the place was almost dead. The lunch rush was long gone, and it’d be another hour before early birds and tourists braved this fucking weather.

Adam perked up from the bar. “Do you need help, bud? I just got the Senior Circuit here.”

“I resent that!” Jerry grouched.

“Senior, my ass,” Malcolm huffed.

I grinned, out of breath, and shook my head. “We’re good, but thanks.” Then I jogged out into the kitchen and headed straight for Petey’s station. “We need more food.” I bent down and dug out our last two stockpots that size and put them on the counter.

“I’ll go see what I can find.” Petey stalked off.

In the meantime, I filled the pot with water and started eyeing our spice selection on the wall. We should be able to pull together a poor man’s goulash.

“We should have plenty of ground pork and tomatoes!” I yelled.

’Cause we were out of the chicken that’d been reserved for this service.

When Petey returned, he and I worked like a well-oiled machine. It wasn’t our first

rodeo, and we knew what we could pull together quickly. We skipped carrots 'cause they took forever to soften. No potatoes either. He took care of the pork, and I chopped onions and bell peppers. Ben came in around that time and stood sort of frozen, just watching.

Overwhelmed, maybe?

I crushed six cloves of garlic into each pot, then added the beef stock and crushed tomatoes before reaching for the paprika.

“You okay, Ben? You can take a breather, you know,” I said.

That seemed to snap him out of whatever. “Uh, sorry—no. Um, I counted about eighty people.”

Fuckinghell.

“Can someone do the math for me? Will fourteen gallons of extra soup be enough?”

Petey squinted at nothing.

“What’s the serving size?” Ben asked.

“‘Bout two cups,” I said, tossing five sticks of butter into each pot.

“Then, yes,” he answered. “Fourteen gallons, two cups—should be roughly one hundred and ten servings.”

“Exactly what I was gonna say,” Petey bullshitted.

I side-eyed Ben. “You some kinda math whiz?”

He cleared his throat. “If that makes you feel better, sure.”

Ha!

I grinned, unable to help it. I liked this guy. I liked a guy who could sling sharp comebacks.

I didn’t know what made Ben smile, but he nodded and said, “I’ll go help the others,” and he walked out.

I chuckled and shook my head. He was funny.

He had a sexy smile too.

* * *

At ten minutes to five, I was in relief mode. We were gonna make it. Despite having run out of bread, we had a delicious goulash that contained both meat and pasta.

“Trace! We made it!” The sound of that kid’s voice echoing my thought stole my attention, and it felt damn good to see Tommy again. He entered with his mother in tow, and I left my station to go greet them.

“Hey, little man! It’s been a minute. Where ya been?” I bumped his fist.

“We’re staying with Grampa now!” he replied with a toothless grin.

“That’s awesome.” I shifted my attention to Monica and gave her shoulder a brief squeeze. “It’s good to see you, hon. Did you get that job?”

She smiled tiredly, relief visible in her eyes. “I did, thank fuck. I start next week.”

Damn, that was good to hear. “We gotta celebrate, then,” I said firmly.

Tommy lit up. “Do kids under thirteen still get ice cream?”

I chuckled and winced. “In this cold? You gotta wait till spring. But I got somethin’ I think you’ll like. I’ll see you up at the table.”

I returned to my station between Ben and Marisol, and I reached under the table to grab a plastic bag. Then I filled three containers with goulash for Monica and Tommy to take home. I added a couple kits with energy bars and, last but not least, extra servings of cocoa and marshmallows.

Next week, I had to order more takeout containers for liquids. We had thousands of lids, but the cups ran out fast.

When it was Monica’s turn, I handed over the bag to her while Marisol served them the food they could eat here, and I gestured at an empty booth.

“Thank you. Really. Thanks.” Monica smiled and lowered the bag for an impatient Tommy, who beamed at the sight of marshmallows.

“Fuck yeah! It’s the minis!”

“Let’s go have a seat, baby.” Monica ushered her boy over to the booths, and we shifted our focus to the next man in line.

A few minutes later, we closed for the day, and it felt mad good we didn’t have to turn anyone away. It happened here and there, and it always sucked.

Those who were still eating could stick around while we started cleaning up, and Marisol changed to cartoons on a couple of the flat-screens. The kids liked that.

I liked that I was about to have a two-hour nap before I went back to work.

As if on cue, I heard Ma in my head, but I didn't need the reminder. Petey would get his rest in the office.

Marisol and Sandy offered to stay behind until the last people had left, so Ben and I began lugging the stockpots out of the Green.

"You know what comes now?" I nudged the kitchen door open with my hip. "Food and a well-deserved nap."

He chuckled under his breath. "I admit, it got more hectic than I anticipated."

Warmer months were a lot easier, that was for damn sure.

When all was said and done, the kitchen staff, Ben, and I had our own containers of goulash—plus I grabbed a serving of cheesy bread—and he and I headed upstairs.

"I think on Sunday, we're gonna serve ramen and grilled cheese," I said. "Costco's running a promotion on block cheese and bread that even our wholesale suppliers can't beat, and our ramen cup storage is getting full."

He'd noticed our donation initiative in the restaurant earlier. We kept tip jars scattered about, our most popular being the one at the host's desk and then the ones at the bar. We called it the Clover Cup, and basically, we asked people to consider donating fifty cents for a ramen cup and other food that went to the soup kitchen. So every time I saw a good promotion or we got coupons, we took the money and stocked up.

"Doesn't it require much more work to make grilled cheese?" he asked.

I shrugged and dug out my keys. “Not really. We just have more people in the kitchen, ’cause the ramen is essentially self-serve. We hand over a cup, and they pour the hot water themselves.”

With limited resources and time, we couldn’t offer a wide range of foods like some soup kitchens could. We did our best to provide both carbs and protein, but they usually came in soup, the occasional casserole, or stews. Then bread. Grilled cheese, plain bread for dipping, PBJs, toast and beans in tomato sauce... A lot depended on sales and donations.

Last week had been really good. A local grocery store had donated fruit and eggs that were about to expire, a women’s group at a church had stopped by with baked goods, and I’d come across an insane sale on canned ravioli at Jewel. I’d had to call Adam and Everett down there to help me clear out their entire display.

Kids always loved ravioli in tomato and meat sauce.

And so did I.

I came to a stop in my hall once I’d thrown the keys on the side table, and I noticed Ben was staying outside.

“You comin’?” I tilted my head.

He hesitated, then nodded and stepped in. “I didn’t want to assume.”

Oh. Well, fuck that.

“You worked up a sweat today for us,” I said. “Shit like that makes me trust easier. Please get comfortable, okay? I’ll get us something to drink.”

I hoped he stuck around for a while, to be honest. He could ride out the winter in the hall, knowing he at least had food and a warm bed, and we'd get extra help on Thursdays and Sundays.

In the kitchen, I grabbed us a couple orange Crush from the fridge and two spoons.

Ben had entered the front room, but he just stood there, looking at the bed. The one occasion I should've turned it back into a couch, maybe. Whatever. I always sat at the foot of the bed when I ate. I had the coffee table there for a reason.

"You don't use your bedroom?"

"Nah, there's no use in cleaning two rooms." Or three, for that matter. I sat down and nodded for him to take a seat next to me. "Plus, I have the TV right here." I set down my food on the table and reached for the remote. Another luxury of mine, I guessed. I had all the sports channels, courtesy of the bar footing the bill. Which reminded me... I turned to Ben as he removed the lid from his container. "I understand sports aren't a priority when you're concerned about finding a place to stay, but I hope I'm not sheltering an enemy here. You root for all the right teams, yeah?"

"Of course," he assured. "You don't, however."

I lifted my brows. The fuck?

He smirked wryly and scooped up some food onto his spoon. "Considering the obscene amount of Cubs memorabilia downstairs, I can only assume you're a Cubs fan."

"Ah man, don't say it?—"

"The Sox runs in my blood, kid."

“Fuck, you said it.” I shook my head and dug into my food. “Knew you were too good to be true.”

He let out a laugh. An actual laugh—and it was fucking beautiful. He had a rich, warm, slightly scratchy voice that just did it for me.

“First time I was ever in the running for being too good,” he chuckled.

I wouldn’t know. I didn’t know jack about him, except what I’d scoped out in his wallet, and I didn’t wanna reach a new level of douchebag and dig deeper. I’d prefer to ask questions and get answers from the source.

I turned on the TV and proceeded as casually as I could. “I wouldn’t turn down the CliffsNotes of your life story.”

I’d expected his silence. Either he’d mull things over and then offer a short sentence, or he’d say nothing at all.

I hoped he would give me something. I’d caught glimpses today. He had a sense of humor, definitely. He was a hard worker. He didn’t complain. He didn’t just follow orders either; he pitched in where he saw the need. He was a math whiz...

He cleared his throat, and I pretended to scroll through game results.

“Grew up Back of the Yards, married at twenty, started a company with my brother-in-law, things were going all right, we moved to Hinsdale, had a son...” He let out a breath, and I side-eyed him. He was staring down at his food. He had a kid. And a wife? “Shit went sideways eventually. My brother-in-law, he—” He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. I lost everything. Then my ex-wife died about seven years ago, and bad turned to worse.”

Seven years ago. I... Fuck. I only had more questions now. But it sounded like my initial profiling wasn't far off.

“Congrats on making me even more curious,” I said. “Why did you divorce?”

He paused, spoon midair, and furrowed his brow at me. “Why are you curious?”

I don't fucking know.

Was it against the law to be curious? Huh?

Fuck it.

I dismissed the topic with a bitchy exit. “You sound like my ex. If I asked a simple question, he accused me of interrogating him. I was just makin' conversation.” I looked away from him and shoveled food into my mouth.

Petey and I made damn good goulash. Our version of it anyway.

“He...? Are you gay?”

Oh, for the love of?—

I couldn't help it. That put me on edge. “Is that gonna be a problem?”

“What the fuck? No.” He scowled at me. “Why would it be a problem?”

Maybe because it was a problem for too many people.

“I don't know.” I faced forward again and started eating faster. I was tired, evidently cranky as shit, and I wanted to get some sleep before I had to return downstairs.

I didn't know why I was curious about Ben. I never was. Not to this degree anyway. I mean, sure, I wanted to know if they could be trusted to roam inside my home, but I didn't need someone's life story for that. I was more interested in if they had drug problems or if they came off as hostile.

Ben sighed. "That's why I got divorced. I was sick of hidin' in the closet."

He was sick of fucking what?

I whipped my head around so fast it could've fallen off.

This six-foot-four Grabowski was gay?

Okay, that...that... I hadn't seen that coming.

And maybe he hadn't seen it coming with me either, so...we were square, I guessed.

"Huh," was my clever response.

Goddammit.

I went back to pretending to watch the TV—some old game running—and my mind started spinning. Nothing had changed, and yet everything had. I cursed the situation and how we'd met, 'cause if this had been Grindr, I would've been fucked six ways to Sunday by him already, and we would've moved on with our lives. Except for the fact that I never brought guys back to my place. It was his place or a bar.

Hookup apps were easy. I needed a five-minute conversation, and then I'd get my shit greased one way or another.

Great, now my ears were ringing too. The air felt awkward and stiff, and I didn't

know how to act. I kinda wanted him to be straight, for the simple reason that he was ridiculously sexy, but we'd gotten off on the wrong foot for a fuck. I'd had two boyfriends in my life, and that was enough. I wasn't interested in another, and I already knew too much about Ben.

All while not knowing nearly enough.

And that right there was the point. If I wanted to know more about a person, shit had gone too far already. I never wanted to know more about someone.

I blamed my dry spell. I'd been so focused on the bar and work and...whatever else, that I hadn't gotten laid since...shit, since my sister had moved back to the city last fall. How fucking sad. Who needed HIV prevention when you didn't bend over for someone? Not me.

Tomorrow, I'd either go to one of my apps, or I'd stop taking that damn pill for a while.

Furthermore, I couldn't make a move on a guy who had bigger worries, like finding a place to live or whatever situation he had going on with his son and the rest of his family. Hooking up was probably the last thing on his mind.

No. New plan. We'd get some rest, and if he was asleep later, I wasn't gonna wake him up. He needed downtime. I'd go back to work. Maybe I'd even have a couple drinks and enjoy the Hawks game from behind the bar. I could shoot the shit with a few regulars; Jamaal was on too. Perhaps we'd crank up the music a bit later on, and...and on the off chance that Ben came down, I'd subtly point out our White Sox roasts around the bar. For instance, we had the donation box with socks in it...? It was obviously called the Sox Box. We had the Life Sox burger too, for those who wanted lettuce and only four hundred calories in a meal.

* * *

All right, this was better.

I pushed open the door to the bar with epic timing, just when Jamaal started blasting our game-day playlist. It was our biggest motivator for guests to order more beers with their dinner. The place was packed, energy surged, and people were ready for the game.

“Oh! Sleepin’ beauty!” Jerry was still here...

“Go home to your wife, man,” I told him.

He waved me off. “She don’t want me at home when there’s a game.”

Uh-huh.

I grabbed a short apron from under the counter and tied it around my hips. Then I snatched up a Hawks ball cap too, and I put it on backward, ready to get back to work.

“Trace!” I heard Tonya holler. She was on her way out onto the floor with food.

“Two beer samplers, one gin and tonic, and four number twos!”

I gave her a two-finger salute and got cracking. Bobbing my head to the music, I pushed all images of Ben out of my head and let the bar din sweep over me instead. Jerry and Malcolm were bitching about our best seasons, the three hockey fans right in front of me were talking trades, and Jamaal laughed at whatever a patron was saying.

Chicago’s Dallas fans had found their way to the Clover too, all seven of them.

“Kalecki!” a familiar voice boomed out.

I dropped a scoop of ice and a lemon wedge into a glass, then glanced up and tried to locate—ah. I grinned. Of course Scottie and Tina would be here. Right on time, too; they could claim the last seats at the bar. It was filling up, and more people were pouring in.

“Two shots as usual?” I asked.

“You know it!” Tina leaned forward, and I did the same and kissed her cheek. “One for you too!”

“You know what—I think I will. Thanks, hon. I’ll start up a tab for ya.” I finished the first order just in time for Tonya to return, and then I poured three shots of Scottie and Tina’s favorite vodka. “To the Hawks!”

“To the fucking Hawks!” Scottie yelled.

A dozen people nearby cheered and raised their drinks, proving time and time again we had the best fucking fans on the planet.

I threw back the shot, and it burned its way down my throat the way it should.

Only thing that felt better was a big, hard cock.

Ben’s big, hard cock?

Fuck. I slammed the shot glass down on the bar and immediately poured myself another. And considering they’d bought me a glass, it was only fair I treated them to an extra too.

“I need one more, and I don’t drink alone,” I said. “On me.”

“Kalecki came to party!” Scottie rubbed his hands together and grabbed his glass.

Alcohol always helped, didn’t it?

“Whew!” Tina made a face as she swallowed, and so did I. Goddamn. “What do we want, babe? Wings?”

“Fuck yeah. One basket of Dead Wings, extra hot.” Scottie nodded, handing me his card.

“Comin’ right up.” I started their tab first before I put in an order for the wings.

Shit snowballed from there. Most of the dinner guests had received their game food, so the majority of the orders came straight to the bar. Jamaal and I worked as fast as we could, and we cranked up the volume on the song blaring. We were almost there. Countless screens flashed with a flyover of the empty rink, and we had approximately fifteen minutes before we killed the warm-up music.

“Trace?”

“Yeah, in a sec—” Fuck, I knew that voice. He was supposed to be asleep. I kept my back to him as I dipped the sixth margarita glass in syrup, then pink sugar. Jamaal was ready to take it from there, and I wiped my hands on my apron and turned around.

Ben stood close to the door to the kitchen, and he hesitated a beat before he walked over.

“I asked you to wake me up when you headed down,” he told me.

“Yeah, but I crossed my fingers behind my back,” I replied.

He blinked.

I smiled up at him.

He was even hotter when he’d just woken up from a nap. Despite how short his hair was, he pulled off a stellar bed-head look.

“Are you a child?” he pressed.

I shrugged and scratched my nose. “You keep calling me kid, so...”

He rolled his eyes, then looked out over the crowd. “Put me to work, please. At the very least, I can pour beer and take out dishes.”

By all means. We could use the help.

“You’re not busboy material, so I’ll keep you at the bar.” I reached under the counter and sifted through our work tees with the Blackhawks logo. XL should be a good fit. I found one and handed it to him. “Go change into this.”

He nodded once and walked off.

What, no changing right fucking in front of me this time? What made him modest? A bar audience of fifty people?

If he proved too much of a distraction, I was seriously going to ward him off with crosstown trash talk.

For now, I returned to work and helped Jamaal with a big order of various cocktails.

At the same time, Jerry was trying to increase his beer fund by proposing bets. Malcolm was down, and so were Scottie and a handful of other regulars. Jamaal and I never engaged, but we did enjoy getting the crowd going. So he suggested a vote and picked Hawks enemies as our topic.

We'd done that many times before, and my stubbornness reared its head. I didn't fucking care what some of the old-timers said; our biggest rival was the fucking Blues.

As I prepared three Jack and Cokes, Jamaal jumped up on the bar and cupped his hands around his mouth. "You know the rules! We need five contenders, and the buy-in is ten bucks!"

I dug a ten out of my back pocket and held it up. "This is my night!"

Jerry and Malcolm laughed at me, undoubtedly knowing I was gonna write St. Louis as usual.

By the time we had our five contenders, Ben was back, and I explained what was happening, then moved on to give him a quick rundown of the beers we offered.

I pointed to our three stations with taps. "Each one is numbered, so we'll just tell you how many and the item number." Then I jerked a thumb over my shoulders. "Bottles in the fridges."

"Got it." He nodded firmly and seemed to react the moment Tonya and Julie came up to the bar. Luckily for him, it was only cocktails this time.

He'd get his moment soon.

"You have thirty seconds to write down your answers!" Jamaal handed out paper and

pens we'd never see again. "We're lookin' for the Hawks' biggest enemy!"

Someone yelled. "Don't be the jagoff who writes we're our own enemy!"

I laughed, then bent over and wrote the Blues?—

"Are you joking?" Ben leaned closer. "And you wonder why I call you kid."

I straightened and scowled up at him. "Look, you old fucks can go back to the days when everything was about the Wings, but?—"

"No, it ain't that," he replied. "But he said enemy, not rival. You don't have to pick a team."

Huh?

He took one step closer and pointed to the paper. "You wanna win that money? Write the 2013 realignment."

Holy shit.

He...

He was a genius.

Fucking everything had gone south since then. We'd lost our biggest rivals because they were no longer in our division.

Damn near giddy all of a sudden, I did as told and added my name before I handed Jamaal my note and ten bucks. We had some time as he collected the others, so I hurried my way through an order of gin and tonics.

“And two Heineken!” Julia added.

“I got it.” Ben jumped into action.

I crossed the path to lower the volume down to zero, because we were in the last five-minute stretch.

“We have our answers!” Jamaal declared. “As always, the loudest cheer wins! Starting with—” He unfolded one note. “Detroit!”

Yeah, that one always got loud cheers. Whatever. We saw them twice a year. Big whoop.

“Next up!” Jamaal went on. “The Predators!”

“Fuck the Preds!” I boomed out.

Automatic reaction. I couldn’t help that. Try mention the Kings too...

Jamaal laughed as he read the third note. “Chelios!”

Oh, get over it. Only people over forty gave a shit. I looked over my shoulder and saw Ben smirking wryly.

He caught my curiosity. “Yeah, I was bitter when he was traded.”

I chuckled. Of course he was. My dad had been fucking furious.

“Fourth note!” Jamaal hollered. “The 2013 realignment!”

I whipped around again, and for one heart-stopping second, almost the entire

establishment was silent. Then...came the laughter. And the cheers. And more cheers. There was no fucking doubt. Unless the fifth note contained magic, Ben and I had this in the bag.

As it turned out, the last note contained zero magic, because someone had jotted down fucking Minnesota? Seriously? If it hadn't been for the fact that we were currently sucking ass, I would've gotten as high and mighty as we used to deserve to be. Minnesota saw us as rivals; we didn't see them at all.

Two minutes before the game started, I was the lucky recipient of fifty bucks. I pocketed my original ten plus another, and then I handed Ben thirty.

"What're you doing?" He frowned. "You won."

"Because you gave me the answer!" I laughed. "Don't be an idiot. This is more your win than mine, man."

He couldn't possibly see this as a handout.

He was reluctant about it, but he pocketed the money eventually.

Great. Now we could focus on winning the game.

* * *

I had to get out of here. I'd allow myself one last night, and then I was gone. Because none of this was real. It was a painful flashback to simpler times. More than that, it was a glimpse into a reality that didn't belong to me. This was Trace's life.

I didn't work here. I didn't live upstairs. I didn't have the energy to scream at a TV.

But man, I fucking wished I did.

Trace and Jamaal shouted at our shitty play along with the rest of the patrons, while the knot in my stomach just grew. As did my envy. With Trace, I didn't know what was worse. The fact that I wanted to start my life over and be him, or that I wanted to be with him. Because fucking hell, it was attraction this time around. He wasn't a sweet woman with a kind smile who'd helped me in the ER. He was...crass, all male, hardworking, disgustingly generous, funny, and so goddamn beautiful that I constantly caught myself staring.

He had a hunger for life that balanced perfectly with a dose of working-class reality. I didn't know what his dreams were in life, and I had no plans to stick around to find out, but I bet they were right up my alley. I just had a gut feeling that he was exactly the man I'd once wanted to be. Just...fuck, a place to call home, a job I enjoyed, money to catch a game every now and then, maybe a road trip with...

Alvin had wanted to see the ocean since he was little, and by the time I'd been able to afford it, Lindsey and I had started realizing we were reaching our expiration date. I'd been downright depressed, and she'd been understandably fed up with my inability to talk about my problems.

By the third period, I needed some air. We were down by four, and nobody was ordering anything, so I slipped out the kitchen door and into the hallway. After a quick bathroom break and drinking some water, I opened—or not. I frowned and gave the door a shove instead, and that worked.

The icy cold from the alley was a relief. A feeling that wouldn't last long, but now I welcomed it.

I created a pile of snow with my boot to prevent the door from closing properly, and then I trailed down the stoop steps and filled my lungs with frigid air.

Fuck. Just yesterday, I had hated the cold with every fiber of my being. And here I was now... But that proved how fast an illusion could reel one in. Even though tomorrow's worries were on my mind, I'd been able to push them out of sight to some degree today. I'd known this morning that I'd have a couple nice meals. I'd known I wasn't going to freeze my ass off. My clothes were clean. When I asked Trace later if I could take a shower before I went to bed, I had no doubt he'd say yes.

I scrubbed my hands over my face. I should shave, but I wasn't going to. I needed everything that kept me warmer. Without a car, I'd have no choice but to seek out options I'd managed to avoid for so long. It happened, of course. I'd spent the night at O'Hare. I'd spent more than a few nights riding the blue line. I'd been robbed when I'd foolishly fallen asleep at Union Station once. I'd accidentally stumbled upon a turf war between two bums fighting over a heat exhaust in Lincoln Park, and it'd resulted in me limping to the nearest urgent care with a stab wound in my calf.

I'd thought those days were over. I'd bought that car two years ago, cheap as fuck, constantly something wrong with it, but it'd been a place to sleep, and I'd found it easier to get jobs if I could expand my search field geographically.

I'd look into what kind of transit card I needed to buy tomorrow. The thirty bucks Trace had given me offered a bit of relief. I'd be able to see Alvin. Which settled it; he liked trains, so fuck the bus. Maybe I could convince him to leave the house.

This was better. I should focus on my problems, not the life Trace had. Not him, period. What the fuck was I thinking about him for anyway? It'd do me no good. It wasn't like I had shit to offer him anyway. I was a fucking loser. I couldn't take care of my own boy. I couldn't take care of myself.

I was definitely leaving tomorrow. First thing in the morning, before Trace woke up.

This was his goddamn fault anyway. It wasn't like me to fantasize about human touch

or even an ounce of happiness. I'd gotten a couple years of sporadic exploring after the divorce, and that was evidently it for me. The sooner I got that through my skull, the better.

The kitchen door opened with a creaky protest, flooding this part of the alley with light, and I recognized the dark silhouette of Trace.

"There you are." He looked down, and I noticed he had a smoke between his lips. He chuckled. "You made a doorstep outta snow. Who the fuck are you, man?"

Someone was lit.

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Trace Kalecki

Thank fuck. He hadn't taken off.

"There you are." Relief filled me, and I checked—oh damn. He'd already made sure the door couldn't shut us out. But seriously, that icy pile of snow looked like he'd worked hard on it! "You made a doorstep outta snow. Who the fuck are you, man?" I grinned and dug into my pocket for a lighter. "I wonder what else you could do around here. There's a big crack in the bartop—probably three feet long. It's a bitch to get clean. Got any solution?"

I lit the smoke and coughed on the first drag. Shit. It'd been a minute.

"I don't know if you're serious or just rambling because you've had a few, so I'll refrain from responding," he answered. "Is this the best time to pick up a new habit?"

I waved him off and stopped at the first step. "I only smoke when the stars align." I ticked three things off my fingers. "When I'm doing shots and the Hawks are losing and someone lets me bum one."

Ben's mouth twitched with mirth, and he looked down and scuffed snow off his boot against the stoop. "You and I are alike in some ways. I used to do that too. For me, it was only during football season, only if all the bills were paid, and only when I was drinking."

I grinned and blew out some smoke.

That made perfect sense to me.

“Are we still down by four?” He jerked his chin at the door.

I puffed out a breath, and it misted in the cold. So far, it just felt good. Shit got sweaty in there. “It was when I left, but it could be five—hell, why not six or seven? Only fuckin’ thing we’re rakin’ in is minutes in the box.”

“Mm.” He dipped his chin and held out two fingers for my smoke.

I smirked and handed it to him. “Football season is over.”

He grinned faintly and took a drag. “Not for the Chiefs and...whoever the fuck they’re facing this year.”

I sucked my teeth. I didn’t wanna talk about it. Bad enough we were fully booked and had to show the nonsense on all screens in a few weeks.

“Speaking of not that, the realignment notwithstanding—who do you see as our biggest rivals?” I asked. “For the Hawks, I mean.”

He returned the smoke to me and grew pensive.

It was as if every little fucking thing he did was sexy. Even how he blew out smoke.

I was a head case.

“The short answer is Detroit,” he said. “That’s not an opinion—it’s a fact.”

I chuckled and rolled my eyes. He thought I didn’t know? But that era was history.

“With that said...” he went on. His gaze followed me as I took a pull from the smoke. “Some of my favorite memories are from when we had our rivalry with the Canucks.” Aw fuck yeah, those were good times. Ben grinned a little. “They got PTSD just from hearing ‘Chelsea Dagger.’”

I let out a laugh. Too fucking true. “We went to a lot of games in those days,” I admitted. “My old man took me—said he wanted me to see it live whenever we beat those freckled fuckin’ Swede twins. In his words.”

Ben laughed softly. “Ah, the twin sisters. They were annoyingly good.”

Right. The trash talk back then was something else. I smiled and shook my head, so many fond memories rushing back. Each one kinda made me miss Dad.

Fucking Florida.

I took another drag and let out a long breath as I peered up at the night sky.

Aside from missing my dad, I was more and more determined to ask Ben to stick around. I really liked him. We couldn’t afford another employee right now, but it was only a matter of time. Adam and his family went back to California in a few days, and Sandy’s wife was pregnant. Said wife was also the main breadwinner, so it wouldn’t shock me if Sandy took paternity leave.

Ben would probably make a good addition in both the kitchen and behind the bar.

I shivered as a wind blew past, and I threw the smoke down into the snow-covered pot next to the stoop.

I cleared my throat and folded my arms loosely over my chest. The only reason I stayed outside now was because I’d be a liar if I said I didn’t want alone time with

Ben.

We had an hour until the place closed, and then cleanup, which took another hour.

Maybe I could dig a little.

“You ready to go back in?”

Uh, no. But he was freezing. I supposed I could dig when we mopped the floors later, so I nodded. The cold had sobered me up, and we’d see if that was good or bad.

* * *

I was always eager for the last customers to get the fuck out.

Tonight, I was also eager for the staff to go home. I played it off with expert-level bullshit. Oh no, Tonya, you gotta catch that train. Sandy, go home right now because you’re on early tomorrow. Jamaal, you too. One by one, they trickled out. All the workstations were clean and the tables had been wiped down, so we just had the mopping left. Which meant we had to put the chairs upside down on the tables first.

My stomach snarled and tightened, reminding me we hadn’t eaten since...fuck, five thirty? Thereabouts?

“I’m hungry,” I said. “You wanna split some leftovers with me?”

He nodded and flipped one more barstool upside down on top of the bar. “I could eat.”

We headed out to the kitchen, and I went to the staff fridge where Petey and Julie always stored our leftovers. Container after container, labeled in Julie’s neat script.

Cheesy bread, pizza soup, some wings... Fuck yeah, this was gonna be good. Our budget options for pop too. I was a Crush fan, and Ben took a Pepsi.

I brought everything to the nearest stovetop and pulled out two pans and a small pot.

So...I should start off easy, right? To feel him out?

“Can you tell me about your son?” I asked.

Okay, I didn’t fucking know which topics were safe or easy.

Ben pretended to be interested in opening his pop, but he didn’t look too bothered. “I’d hate to remind you of your ex, so I better answer.” His slight smirk put me at ease. Banter was good. “His name is Alvin.” The humor faded, and his expression turned wistful. “From the moment he was born, he’s been the light of my life.”

I kept him in my periphery as I started preparing the food.

“Unfortunately, it, uh... Things haven’t been easy,” he said. “By the time he was three, we knew he was different. If we pulled him away from something he was engrossed in, he screamed himself into a full-blown panic attack. He was very late to learn to speak, and his developments came in rapid bursts. Like... Okay, so when he started speaking. He went from absolutely nothing to...fuck, being able to carry on conversations with adults within the span of a year. And then nothing again for a couple years.”

“Damn.” I didn’t know what else to say.

He nodded minutely and set his drink on the counter. “After endless screenings and a string of doctors and psychiatrists who came and went, we learned he was autistic, and he, uh...” He made a gesture, as if he couldn’t find the right word. “Lindsey was

the one who learned all those terms and shit I never understood, but in short, he has brain damage—he was born with it. At least, everyone agrees that’s the most likely event. It was a difficult birth, and they had to do an emergency C-section because he wasn’t getting oxygen.”

I had not started him off with something easy. Mother of Christ.

I felt stupid for distracting myself with the food, but we had to eat, and honestly, I didn’t know how to act. If I stopped moving around, I’d open my big fucking mouth and say something that made shit awkward. And I wanted to keep him talking.

“He’s happy today,” he said. “As long as we don’t mess with his structure, he’s a very happy young man. He just can’t manage on his own.”

Now I had to ask, because though I remembered the talk about the divorce, how it was several years ago, and then that Lindsey had died... Either way, I had this vision in my head that the kid was young.

“How old is he?”

“Eighteen.”

Shit.

Ben retrieved his wallet and smiled a little to himself. “It probably makes me the shittiest dad on the planet, but a big part of me is relieved his developing slowed down as a young teenager. In my eyes, it’s easier for him to go through life if he gets to keep being carefree and...you know, a kid. I don’t know.” He dug out a tattered photo from one of the pockets. “He never reached that mental age where self-awareness makes you think there’s something wrong. He knows he’s different, and he hates his anxiety, but some of the young people I’ve met over the years—” He shook

his head. “Too many teenagers struggle with depression and loneliness because of their disorders and the alienation that often comes with them.”

He showed me the picture, and I wasn’t sure what I’d expected to see, but it wasn’t that. I mean, I could see the kid was older than what he came off as, standing there next to Ben with a big grin, both wearing matching Bulls tees. Alvin was significantly shorter than his old man, though I could clearly see the resemblance. Alvin’s features were just...softer and way, way younger. He wore glasses too.

“That was last year,” Ben said.

I lifted my brows. Okay, damn. I would’ve guessed thirteen or fourteen, maybe.

He pocketed the photo and his wallet again, and I didn’t know how to ask. ’Cause I knew shit like this was always sensitive. Tina and Scottie—one of their daughters had bipolar, and that whole world had its own language. I didn’t wanna offend anyone by putting my foot in my mouth, but in the end, I also wanted to understand.

After putting a lid on the wings and lowering the heat, I straightened and rubbed the back of my neck. “So, I don’t know if I’m using the right terms, but brain damage can stunt growth, or what?”

“It depends on the damage, but yes.” He nodded. “Now, Lindsey was very short, and her DNA is in there too. I don’t know where that ends and the birth defects begin, but it has to do with the regulation of the growth hormone.” He scratched his jaw and looked like he was trying to remember something. “Sometimes, I wish Lindsey were still with us—for other reasons than she was simply a great mother to Alvin. But all these diagnoses... Whoosh.” He made a gesture, how things went in one ear and out the other.

It made me smile.

He didn't sound like a shitty dad to me. He wanted to protect his son from thinking there was something wrong with the way he was, and I told Ben as much.

He shrugged a little and picked up his pop again. "I do what I can, but the wrong parent got leukemia."

I winced.

Fuck.

The way he said that—he really meant it.

I swallowed a bout of discomfort that was stuck in my throat, and I stirred the soup.

What a fucking idiot I'd been for even thinking about banging one out with this man. It was laughable. Hookups had to be the last thing on his mind.

"Did I quench your curiosity this time?"

I glanced over at him, finding him smiling faintly.

Funny, I didn't feel like smiling at all.

"No. I have more questions. Sorry."

He snorted softly and leaned back against the counter. "Figures." He watched me put the cheesy bread into the pan with the wings. "Interesting reheating technique."

"Trust," I said. I knew what I was doing. I had half a stick of butter in there too. I'd take the bread out when it was soft and warm, and then I'd sear the wings for a minute or so. Perfection every time. "So where's Alvin now?"

He paused, about to take a swig of his drink. “With my mother.”

Oh.

Let me guess, out in Elmwood Park.

“And you can’t stay with them,” I said. I didn’t wanna ask or assume. People’s living situations... They all had their reasons for why they could or couldn’t take someone in.

Ben shook his head and drank from his pop. “If you don’t mind, I’ll save that story for another day.”

Oh, but I did fucking mind, and it was starting to frustrate the shit out of me. Why did I care so much about this dude?

“Another day sounds good.” Technically not a lie, because I was holding on to the another-day part.

Chances were, he wanted to create better living arrangements for himself and his son, maybe his mother too, and he needed a job for that. So maybe he’d be interested in staying here. He could look for jobs, knowing he had a bed to come back to at the end of the day, and when we were ready to hire, he could work here.

“What about you?” he asked. “What’s your life story?”

Yeah, we weren’t going there.

“I don’t have one.”

“Everyone has a story, Trace.”

Mine was classified.

Perhaps that was a stretch. I didn't have much of a story, but I had two years of my life that still haunted me. That was enough.

I could easily gloss over that time in my life, though.

"Your whole family must have an interesting story," Ben noted. "According to your sign outside, you opened in the late 1800s."

I inclined my head and grabbed two bowls to pour the soup. "We managed to document that story pretty well," I conceded. "My ancestor's family scraped together enough money that he could leave Ireland during the famine. He got settled in Chicago and worked at a lumberyard to send money home. Some of them eventually followed, but I'm sure a smart cookie like you can guess what happened next."

He scratched his forehead. "The famine was what, mid-1800s? So I'm assuming the fire."

Bingo.

"Everything he'd worked for was destroyed," I said, plating the cheesy bread. I cranked up the heat next, to get the wings back in shape. "He had no home, no job, no money. Then one day—and I don't know if this is true or just legendary bullshit, but...whatever. He was walking around this area right here, and the owner of a restaurant barged out, grabbed hold of John—that was his name—and spat out, 'You take it. Take my wife too! I'm done!' And he stormed off."

Ben laughed through his nose.

I shrugged. "So John had himself a gander, ya know. Fuck details, I guess," I

chuckled. “I don’t know how it played out, but he opened The Clover in 1896.” I lifted the pan and dumped the wings on our plates too. “Some years later, they started building the Dearborn Station, and John had to move the establishment a few blocks. He found this place through a friend who owned the building—same family that owns it today, actually—though, it was split in two back then. There was a small publishing house next door.” I reached for the wing sauce. “John added Dearborn to the name, and nothing new happened until my grandmother took over. The publishing house was shutting down, so she and her sisters decided to expand.” Holding up our plates and the wing sauce, I finished with a good, “The end. Take our soup and drinks.”

I’d amused him, at least.

“Riveting story that left you out completely.”

I mean...not really. “Their story is mine. When my folks retired last fall, it was my turn.”

“You may still be wet behind the ears, kid, but you didn’t start living last year. There’s more to you than the family sports bar.”

The fuck? Wet behind the...? Get the fuck out.

But fine. I could give him the same CliffsNotes he’d given me earlier. “All right. Up until I started kindergarten, we lived in a one-bedroom in Irving Park. According to Ma, they were the worst years of her life because we had virtually no space, and my sister and I were at each other’s throats all day long. She’s a year younger.” I set the food on the bar where we hadn’t put up the stools yet, and I grabbed us spoons and napkins before I took a seat. “Then we moved to a Sox stronghold, Bridgeport, and Sarah and I showed Ma that space wasn’t the issue. It was us.”

Ben chuckled and sat down next to me.

“It was just a regular upbringing,” I said and shrugged. “Money was tight because Dad invested most of it in this place, but it kept us afloat. And you know...teenage years came, teenage years went. I had my usual rebellious years, when the last thing I wanted to do was follow in my old man’s footsteps.” I broke off a piece of buttery cheesy bread and crammed it into my mouth. “For a minute, I thought I was gonna join the Army, but I managed to piss off two recruiters, and I was advised to pick something else. So I decided to become a cop, which, in retrospect, I chose partly to rebel against myself too. I’m not what one might call a stickler for rules.”

I liked the smile that reflected in his eyes. That was my favorite.

“I can’t picture you as a cop,” he admitted.

“Neither could the police academy that kicked me out,” I replied. I’d been a mouthy shit.

Ben rumbled a laugh as he tucked into his soup.

There wasn’t the slightest indication I’d skipped over something important. “In the end...here I am. I did find my happy medium with authority and structure—I became a self-defense instructor. That’s come in handy. I’ve taught some classes too, primarily to women and at-risk teenagers. But otherwise, this is it.” I gave the bar a glance. “Irving Park and Bridgeport don’t matter in the end. I have more memories from running around here with my sister.” I nodded toward the main entrance. “We’d always steal mints from the host’s desk.”

I doused my wings in sauce before I got my hands dirty. Fucking perfect. The best wing sauce out there. It had enough of a kick to set your lips on fire.

“It’s easy to see that the bar is a family member.” Ben dipped the bread in the soup. “I’m sure it’s equal parts love and headaches.”

Damn fucking right.

I side-eyed him and chewed what was in my mouth. “You know what it’s like. You had your business.”

“Hardly since 1896,” he chuckled, though it sounded hollow. I got it. It hurt to lose something you’d built up.

“You cut yourself off earlier,” I said. “You were gonna say something about your brother-in-law—about your business. Then you said it didn’t matter, but I’m guessing it does.”

His face was blank as he poured some sauce over his wings too. “He fucked us over.”

I had a feeling.

He blew out a breath. “Long story short, I had to pick up the pieces of fucking nothing, and he went to prison for money laundering and embezzlement.”

Jesus fuck.

I shook my head and licked sauce from the corner of my mouth. “World’s full of fucking scum, man. That sucks.”

He hummed around a mouthful of food. “There are some bright spots, though.”

The way he eyed me there for a sec made me so certain he was implying that I was a bright spot, and I had zero tact. I gobbled that shit up with a sauce-drenched grin and

kicked at his stool.

“Get outta here, you sweet dingbat. You’re talking about me.”

He laughed and threw a napkin at my face. “I was clearly referring to my son.”

Fuck that! He was lying. I was a bright spot.

* * *

After we’d eaten, I couldn’t postpone cleanup any longer. Luckily, my second attempt at approaching the topic of Ben possibly working here one day was more successful. As we worked on clearing the floor of all the chairs, I told him about my hope to find an Adam 2.0 in the near future.

“I held out hope that they’d eventually settle here in the city, but I’ve lost them to California,” I said.

“Fucking California,” Ben muttered.

A man after my own heart.

But that wasn’t the point. “Anyway...I hope this spring, I’ll be able to hire someone full time.”

“What about Jamaal?”

What about you, you slow fuck?

“He’d be great at it,” I replied honestly. “But he’s been talking about going back to school.” I went over to the last table and flipped those chairs too. “That’s the problem

with the younger staff. Jamaal's an exception—he's my age. But usually, it's the college students. They don't stick around for long. Or they only wanna pick up shifts on breaks and whatnot. Which I get. I get it. I just need more stability for the staff that has responsibilities that go beyond showing up and taking orders."

"Makes sense."

I was learning to read him. When he grew pensive like that, he was mulling something over, and then maybe he'd propose a suggestion...or get a fucking clue. He could apply for a job as a plumber up in fucking Skokie but not even consider working in a sports bar? Maybe the hourly pay wasn't much to write home about, though we made sure it was above average, but we did well on tips in this joint.

It was highly possible that I was the poorest fucker working here, not counting the waitstaff. Wasn't that always the case with business owners on the small side? We couldn't skimp on anything when we hired people, because nobody would apply for the jobs. We got the scraps, and the month dictated everything. The seasons mattered as well. Football season was good, and it was a combination of the fans and the weather. The beginning of the hockey season too, when fans still held out hope. Hope made us generous.

Summers were terrible unless it was a game day—or they used to be. We'd become creative with themed nights, pub quizzes, and throwback Thursdays when we showed old games. But even then, most didn't wanna spend their nights in a dark sports bar when they could be at the lake or whatever the fuck they did on vacation.

With all the chairs flipped, I went to grab us the mops and buckets, and by the time I came back, I noticed Ben had cleared our dinner spot. And he was inspecting the crack in the wooden top.

"You weren't kidding about this."

“There’s another one farther down.” I pointed toward the other end of the bar. “Some of the booths need fixin’ up too, but I could only afford new padding last time we worked on upgrades.”

Having mopped these floors more times than I could count, I worked on autopilot, starting with the dining section farthest away. Up to code, down with rats, my ma liked to say. It was why we never turned off the lights until the whole place smelled of the degreaser we used.

“Hey, the curious kid has another question,” I said.

He was on his way over with the other mop. “I can’t wait for this. What is it?”

I grinned to myself and maneuvered the mop under the table of a booth. “Were your folks happy?”

“With each other, or in general?”

“Uh, each other.”

“No.”

Christ. “In general?”

“Not that either.”

I cracked up. Then why the fuck did he need the distinction?

I caught him smirking to himself as he got started in the next section.

“Okay, I exaggerated a bit,” he admitted with a chuckle. “Ma’s happier these days.

She's a natural worrier, bordering on neurotic, but she's happy. It started around the time my dad kicked the bucket."

I spied a correlation.

"Why?" he asked.

I shrugged and dunked the mop in the bucket. "I've been thinking about my folks lately—since they retired and abandoned me."

"Lemme go find a tiny violin."

I flipped him off, unable to shake the grin. And it was bad. Because it made me think of something my dad had said once, right on the topic I'd just begun this conversation. I'd been...thirteen? Fourteen? It was just before I'd come out to my folks, and I'd crafted a lie about a made-up girlfriend I'd proclaimed my love for. Dad had smacked me upside the head with the newspaper and told me I didn't know shit about love.

My regular response back then had been, "What the fuck do you know, Dad?!"

"What do I know? Oh, I'll tell you. Sit your ass down."

I blew out a breath.

"Lemme ask you this. Do you feel like everyone else can just fuck off? When you're alone with this...person...do you feel like nothing else matters in the world? There's no other place you'd rather be?"

I'd nodded like an idiot, completely missing the hint. He'd already suspected I was gay.

“Yeah, well. That ain’t love, boy. That’s a silly crush. It’s called attraction. It makes you wanna shut everybody out and keep the high to yourself. Love, on the other hand...? Love is something you wanna share with the whole fucking world. Now, go get me another beer.”

I let out a chuckle through my nose and shook my head. “My parents are happy,” I said quietly. Fuck. Time to backtrack. Man, had I spiraled. I wiped my cheek off my shoulder and cranked up the dismissiveness. “But I was just thinking about it because Ma’s the romantic who isn’t afraid to show it, while Dad’s, you know. Not. But I have a handful of sayings that’ve rubbed off on me over the years, and it hit me that all of Ma’s shit is about cleaning and hygiene. Dad, on the other hand, has, in his drunken wisdom, taught me all about love.”

“This gotta be good,” Ben chuckled.

It hadn’t been my intention to actually share what my old man had said. I’d been rambling. I didn’t know why. I was feeling chatty. Someone shut me up. What a great finale it would be now to share Ma’s “up to code, down with rats” quote.

I rolled my eyes at myself and moved on to the next table. “I’m way too sober for love quotes. Let’s focus on degreasing the floor.”

“The hell...? You build up this big thing, and then you rip out the last chapter?”

I threw him a smirk over my shoulder. “How’s that for a bright spot?”

That earned me an eye roll. “You’re somethin’, all right.”

So was he.

Like a silly fucking crush.

There was no other place I wanted to be.

* * *

Okay, here was the deal. If I could just get railed by him, this little obsession would go away. I was 100% sure. I needed one night, maybe two or three rounds of brutal, sweaty, hard fucking with zero foreplay, just slam right in there, tear up my ass until I taste him at the back of my throat.

Was that too much to ask?

Hey, Ben, if you could just do me a solid and...

I suppressed a sigh and led the way upstairs to my apartment.

He was undoubtedly dead on his feet and itching to get some sleep. He'd asked if he could take a shower, and of course he could. Then I'd leave him alone. I was gonna watch TV and eat pretzel sticks.

Ben yawned as I dug out my keys, and he stretched his arms over his head.

Fuck TV; I could watch him instead.

Hey, you wanna fuck?

Or maybe you just deep-throat me a little?

I wasn't picky at this moment. I was clearly fucking desperate.

I unlocked the door and let him enter first.

What bothered me—well, one of the things—was that it evidently had to be him. I had no desire to go on one of my apps. But something had to give. I needed to get laid.

“Are you showering too?” he asked.

With you?

“Yeah, but you go first. I’m gonna cue up a movie to fall asleep to and find pretzel sticks and Nutella.”

He stopped short and turned around, and he gave me a strange look.

“What?” I asked. “It’s delicious.”

“Together?”

Holy fuck. He’d never tried pretzel sticks dipped in Nutella? The fuck was wrong with him?

All right, new plan. I gestured for him to follow me to the kitchen, where I found both items in my snack cupboard.

“Did I just see four jars of Nutella in there?” he asked.

“I had a coupon.” I shrugged and ripped the gold foil off the Nutella. Then I opened a new bag of pretzel sticks, dragged one gently through the chocolaty goodness, and offered it to him.

He eyed it skeptically but didn’t stall or anything. He stuck it into his mouth and chewed.

It was a funny sight. And sexy, but that went without saying. His expression changed, the skepticism morphing into mild disbelief, then softening into a “Huh.” But he wasn’t done. His gaze found mine, and I saw the stubbornness coming from a mile away. Jaw set, eyes narrowed, he headed for the doorway.

“You’re a fuckin’ terrible influence, Trace,” he muttered. Still not done. He came to an abrupt stop while I was failing to withhold my laughter, and he came back. “I’d like one more.”

You can have as many as you want, honey.

I dragged two of them through the Nutella and extended them to him, and then he was gone, stalking toward the bathroom.

“Just admit I’m right!” I called, following him. I treated myself to a couple dipped pretzel sticks on the way, thinking about Ben’s stick and how I could get that dipped too.

He’d left the bathroom door open. “I’ve discovered that every time I say something nice to you, you use it against me. So congrats. You’re forever a jackass, kid.”

I love the way we banter. We should keep doing it.

I came to a stop when I spotted him shedding his clothes in front of the shower. There was no forgetting his immodesty last night, but this time...I didn’t look away. I forced myself to remain casual; this was nothing weird. We were just shooting the shit as he got ready to shower. He couldn’t be too bothered if he left the door open. We might as well be in the showers at a gym. Right?

“Every time?” I questioned. “You subtly imply I’m a bright spot. I only figured that out because I’m a genius. Have you said anything else?”

He didn't miss a beat. "A genius would know."

I sucked my teeth.

And then...he dropped his boxer briefs, so I dropped my vocabulary.

What were words?

Just like yesterday, he was completely unfazed. He stepped into the shower and didn't even wait for the water to warm up properly. Which...could have something to do with his being used to communal showers.

I ducked my gaze for a moment, feeling like a moron, just not enough to leave. Instead, I hopped up to sit on the long counter and eat pretzel sticks.

Well...I kinda forgot about the eating part when he began soaping up.

I had to do something, say something, unless I wanted to be the perv who just stared.

What a perfect fucking ass, though. His whole body. His thighs. The man had calf game too. He was stocky in the hottest way. Plain solid.

"So, uh..." Do you wanna fuck? "Are you looking forward to baseball season?"

Only two months and change to go!

I was so smooth.

He glanced at me over his shoulder for a second, before he closed his eyes and soaped up his face too. "Sure. More twins to hate."

“And tigers,” I pointed out.

“And the Indians,” he muttered.

“We say Native Americans today, you know.” Last I’d heard, the team was changing their name.

He laughed and stepped under the spray.

I smiled. “Not a Cleveland fan, I take it?”

“Who the fuck is, Trace?”

He had a point.

Fuck Cleveland.

Also, fuck the teams the Sox faced. I cared more about the Cubs’ rivalries.

I could go on. Fuck him for not turning around when he washed his junk.

Fuck the Sox.

Fuck me. I finally got a glimpse and?—

“All right, I’m clean.”

“You sure?” Fuck, the words left me before I could stop them.

In my defense, he was plenty dirty from where I was sitting.

“Zestfully so. Your turn.”

Zest what?

“By the way, you should get one of those shower-glass wipers,” he told me, opening the shower door. “The longer you let limescale and calcium buildup stick to the glass, the harder it is to clean off.”

I scratched my forehead. He sounded like Ma now. She was always bitching about hard water.

“I’ll get right on that.” I jumped off the counter and hauled my tee over my head. I threw it into the laundry basket before I shed my socks, jeans, and boxer briefs too.

He side-eyed me as he wrapped a towel around his hips but was way quicker to avert his gaze when I came closer. Me, on the other hand—I was done looking away.

I closed the glass door and turned on the water again.

The hot water loosened some tension in my shoulders, and I hung my head and just relaxed.

Ben started brushing his teeth and retrieved the first aid kit, presumably to redress his wound.

My brain kept shouting at me—the man was more focused on the future and his situation than anything else, but I was past the point of no return. I couldn’t shut off the selfish, greedy, horny little fucker in me who only wanted to know if he was watching me in the mirror.

I took a step back from the rush of hot water and began lathering up. But even when I

let the selfish part of me take the wheel, I wondered if there was anything else I could do for him. I'd been clear that he was welcome to stay; we always needed help for the soup kitchen, and that wasn't reserved just for serving and cleaning up. I always had flyers that came in handy, usually polite pleas that I took to grocery stores and whatnot. Please don't throw away food. Donate it to us. Shit like that. And maybe Ben could help me hand some out. I had to do a grocery run tomorrow anyway.

He had extra clothes now too, since we'd dragged out the donation boxes at today's service. We'd found a new coat for him, a shorter parka with an insulated hood. Spare socks and underwear, and a toiletry kit with the basics. I'd given him an old gym bag too, with straps long enough if he wanted to use it as a backpack.

Now he only needed to agree to stay.

As I soaped up my cock, I glanced over at him to ask bluntly if he could stay for a while, but that thought flew right out the window when I caught him staring in the mirror. He was still brushing his teeth, but yeah, he was enjoying the view. And I acted on instinct before he could look away; I smirked in acknowledgment.

Come on. You want it. I fucking need it.

His jaw ticked with tension, and he dropped his stare to the sink and spat out toothpaste. Then he shook his head to himself, an insignificant response that confirmed the implication. It was enough to raise the temperature in the shower, and lust flooded my senses.

“Don't start something you'll regret, bright spot.”

Oh good, so we'd started.

Why the fuck would I regret anything that had to do with him?

I'd become downright obsessed in, what, thirty-six hours?

It's just a silly crush.

The best way to get rid of a crush was to fuck 'em.

"You never liked playing with fire?" I asked, moving under the spray again. The hot water cascaded down, and I let out a long breath and gave my cock a stroke. "It keeps you warm."

He hummed but said nothing. I heard him dig through the kit of medical supplies.

I tilted my head back and ran my fingers through my hair to get the suds out. I gave that a few seconds before I turned my back on him just a bit. He should see what he was about to screw. I slipped my hand between the cheeks, all absent-like, and brushed a couple fingers over my asshole.

That went on for a while...

'Cause it felt so damn good.

His exhale sent a shiver down my spine, and I was fucking done. I turned off the water and then opened the door.

Jesus Christ, he was something else. He leaned back against the counter, arms folded over his chest, and his cock left a noticeable bump in the towel. And his composure? It frustrated me as much as it turned me on to see him so unruffled. I knew he wasn't; I could see the tension in his eyes and his jaw, but he behaved as if he had all the time in the world.

It was the most intoxicating game to see who'd make the first move.

I reached for a towel, hoping it wouldn't stay on for long, and trailed over to the sink. Come on. Take me. Choke me out or something. I wouldn't resist. Hell, I'd beg. I grabbed my toothbrush, standing mere inches away from him, and felt his eyes on me.

The thought of safety obviously flitted through my skull, but I wasn't worried. I had plenty of rubbers right here under the sink. There might be a few in the bowl on the hallway table too.

My only problem with cat-and-mouse games was that I didn't have the patience. I always lost, either because I wanted to get the show on the road or, in Ben's case, I was itching to enjoy that show.

Before I stuck my toothbrush in my mouth, I wanted to know if there was something we could do first. I was willing to postpone brushing my teeth.

"Wanna fuck?" I asked.

His forehead creased, but otherwise, he didn't move a muscle. "I'd weep for your generation if I had the energy to care about your dating pool."

I guessed I was going to brush my teeth, then. Without breaking eye contact, I stuck the toothbrush into my mouth and tried to decipher what the hell that meant. Had he insulted me or just...fuck if I knew.

"I don't have a dating pool," I said.

"Neither do I."

What did that mean?

I was sure I looked like a question mark, and it seemed to amuse him.

“Trace, you’re an...unbelievably sexy young man,” he murmured. Aw fuck, here came the but. “But don’t waste your time on me. I’ve got jack-shit to offer in return, and that includes a quick fuck.” He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. He was no longer interested in eye contact. “At the risk of embarrassing myself—I haven’t been intimate with anyone in years, and I’m afraid human touch would break me at this point.”

I was done brushing my teeth. I spat into the sink and rinsed my mouth, and I worked up a good response, ’cause he was crazy. Not about the last part. I understood that, and it was painful. But the rest? He wasn’t so much rejecting me as he was deciding that I shouldn’t even consider him.

I wiped my mouth on my arm, then positioned myself in front of him.

He stiffened a bit and kept his arms folded over his chest like a shield.

Forget about a quick fuck. I felt the gears shift in my head, and everything was suddenly about him. I wanted to make him feel good.

If he needed to break, he could do it with me.

I lifted my hand, making sure there were no sudden movements, and I hitched a brow in silent question. We’d start easy. We had time. Right now, I only wanted to touch his arm.

He swallowed and clenched his jaw, and no words came out. I pushed it at a snail’s pace, giving him plenty of time to ease away or say no, but I wasn’t blind. He wanted this. I remembered...what it was like to be starved for comfort, and my situation hadn’t been a fraction as dire as his.

I let my hand ghost gently up his forearm, and he shifted slightly where he stood. He dropped his stare to my hand and didn't look away. As I brushed my thumb over a waterdrop, I felt his muscles twitch underneath. He had gooseflesh across his bicep, and I had a feeling it wasn't about what I was doing but what I might do.

When I brought my free hand to his other arm, he took a deep breath and bent his neck sideways, like an attempt to relax. Maybe it was working. Things hadn't gotten worse, at least. My hands roamed up his bicep, my touch firmer now, and then I eased them down again. I carefully gripped his wrist, and I did my best to offer a reassuring look. If it worked, I didn't know, but he allowed me to loosen his arms, and they fell to his sides.

"Tell me to stop if you're uncomfortable," I said quietly.

He swallowed hard as I took a small step forward and shifted my hands to his shoulders.

"The problem isn't discomfort," he muttered.

"What is it, then?"

His jaw ticked. "Wanting something too much."

Fuck me.

Yeah, I checked the fuck out. My brain powered down, and even though I kept my movements somewhat slow, I couldn't stop myself. I slipped my hands along his neck, to his jaw, and I reached up and kissed him.

His hands immediately came to my sides, but he didn't push me away—or pull me closer, for that matter. He just held me in place and kissed me back tentatively.

Wanting to be as comforting as possible, I cupped his jaw and used my other hand to rub his neck slowly. I closed the distance between us too, hoping to warm us up. The humidity wasn't enough to let me forget I'd just gotten out of the shower.

He shuddered and appeared to relax some. I felt his big hands trail toward my back, just at the base of my spine, and he was the one who deepened the kiss.

Now we're talking.

I tasted him for the first time, and I got a hint of a warning telling me Ben could be hiding something. Because it felt like he was holding back a whole lot.

"I won't break, I promise."

He drew a breath and nipped at my bottom lip. "I'll hold you to it." The next second, he spun me around and pressed me up against the counter, and he towered over me and kissed me hungrily.

Holy fuck.

My pulse went through the roof, and I was more than happy to roll with the punches. Like we were of one mind, he slipped his hand down to the backs of my thighs at the same moment I jumped up to sit on the counter, and that fucking worked for me. Before I knew it, he was between my legs, and we were making out like teenagers.

His hair was too short to grab on to, but I sure tried, and he seemed to like it. He moaned into the kiss and kneaded my thighs, slowly inching upward. Under the towel.

Fuck yeah, get it.

“So, uh...” I sucked in a breath and pressed myself closer to him. “If you haven’t been with anyone in a while, would you say it’s safe for me to choke on your cock?”

He cursed under his breath, then kissed his way down my neck. “Safe from an STI perspective, absolutely. But we’ll see if I’ll let you come up for air.”

I felt my eyes widen as I exposed my neck for him. Mother of dirty talk, let’s do this. He was clearly game.

“I hope that wasn’t too much.”

“Fuck no,” I managed to blurt out. ’Cause, God no. “You speak my language. I’m ready. I have rubbers and a tight ass just for you. No warm-up necessary.”

He hummed and slid a hand up my throat, and he just held me loosely, like a gentle reminder. There was a beast buried within him, wasn’t there?

“And a throat?”

I swallowed. “And a throat.”

He whispered a curse and caught my lips with his again, not holding back anymore. He kissed me so fucking hard and deep, so intoxicatingly sensually, and the way he dug his fingertips into my thighs might actually leave bruises.

With a swift pull, he wrapped my legs around his hips, pressed his cock against mine, and then enveloped me in his arms. His evident strength set off a violent shiver, but it was more than that. It was how tightly and closely he held me. Warmth spread throughout my body, and it just clicked. How good it felt to be all but surrounded by him. Usually, I didn’t want anyone getting too close physically.

“Dammit,” he whispered. “Now I can’t stop thinking about your ass. The way you teased me earlier.”

In the shower?

I licked my lips, getting his bottom lip in the process, and I scratched his scruff a little. I liked feeling it under my fingertips.

“That wasn’t teasing,” I replied, barely recognizing my voice. “That was me serving my ass on a silver platter.”

Fuck, that was hot, how he clenched his jaw. “I don’t need a silver platter.”

Just my ass? He didn’t have to wait.

“Rubbers under the sink.”

He nodded once and stepped back, and he opened the cabinet. He ripped off his towel too, prompting me to do the same as I slipped off the counter. Right then and there, I decided he had to spend the whole night with me. I didn’t care if I broke my rules; I wanted to roll around with him in my bed. I wanted that cock down my throat, and I wanted to ride?—

“Do you have lube or...?” he asked.

“There should be a few single-packs next to the razors,” I replied. Spit worked fine too.

He smirked to himself and snatched one up. “Because this is where you get ready for a night out. You take a couple condoms and lube packets for your wallet before you leave.”

“Yeah, yeah, you got me all figured out.” I turned around and gripped the edge of the counter. “If you could just give me that big cock now, that’d be great.”

He coughed around a chuckle and came back to me. “You’re not fuckin’ real.”

I had no response, and I didn’t wanna interrupt him. I did wanna see, though. I looked at him over my shoulder as he rolled a condom down his hard cock, and it was sexy as hell.

He pinched the tip of the rubber before opening the lube packet, and I clenched down in anticipation. The moment he was slicked up, he had to step up the pace. I felt like I’d been waiting forever.

But did he? Did he step it up? Fuck no. He was infuriatingly patient. He even washed his hands real quick to get rid of excess lube. Christ.

“Are you in a rush?” he asked me.

You fuckin’ kiddin’ me?

“You’re jittery,” he said.

“I’m impatient,” I told him, nodding at his cock. “That thing’s been on my mind since you gave me a show last night when you changed into sweats.”

Surprise flitted past in his expression, but then a soft smirk took over, and I didn’t like that. He better not get any ideas on slowing shit down.

He came up behind me and pressed a kiss to my shoulder, and his hands followed. They roamed up my sides and to my front. I shuddered when he kissed a sensitive spot on my neck. Fuck. An openmouthed kiss. Warm hands, each movement

drenched in seduction. The unhurried kind that was going to drive me bonkers.

I squirmed and shivered, and I pressed my ass against his cock.

“Easy, boy. We’ll get there.”

Jesus fuck. “But you’re getting me all fired up,” I complained.

“That’s the point. You told me to play with fire.” Out of nowhere, he wrapped his fingers around my cock and gave it a couple firm strokes, and I moaned like a fucking whore. Holy fuck, I was strung tighter than I’d thought. Ben let out a breath and kissed the spot below my ear. “Drop your elbows to the counter.”

Yeah, okay.

I dropped forward, and he eased back. He released my dick too, but I forgave him because he pressed the head of his cock against my opening. And then...nothing. He went back to rubbing my back, my sides, my ass, and my thighs. He applied the smallest amount of pressure on his cock as he eased two fingers slowly down my spine.

“Arch,” he commanded quietly. “On your toes a bit.”

I obeyed. The desire mixed with authority in his low voice left me no option. My traitorous body listened to him more than me.

“Fuck, you’re perfect,” he whispered.

A slow, all-consuming shudder rolled through me. I wasn’t sure anyone had ever said that to me, and it felt strange. They weren’t exactly the words you shared with a bathroom hookup, and if anything like that was uttered, it was because someone was

three sheets to the wind.

I screwed my eyes shut and tried to block out the world, including my impatience. It was dumb anyway. He'd already proven that his way made my body react stronger. If we'd gone my way, we'd be done by now.

I directed all my focus on what he was doing. He kept one hand along my spine, rubbing me absently, while he used the other to tease my ass with the head of his cock. Around in circles, spreading the lube, and then half an inch into me, never more. Not enough to get that stretchy pain feeling.

"I could come right here," he murmured. "Watch it trickle out of your little hole."

I clenched my jaw, the images assaulting me, turning me on even more.

"I could also do this..." He eased his cock between my ass cheeks, then used both hands to push the cheeks tightly together. He moaned under his breath as he slipped back and forth, and the heat of him, the soft that met hard, and the vein along the underside of his cock rubbed against me with each pass.

Fucking hell, that felt good. It was way too frustrating and not nearly enough, but it felt good.

I found myself lulled into his assertiveness. Or maybe that word was too strong? Either way, he wasn't letting me rush him, and I dug that hard.

"If I got off right now, you'd have my come all over your ass."

"Hnnngh..." Fucking Christ, did he want me to beg? Because I could.

He chuckled huskily and guided the blunt head of his cock back to my opening. "I

guess I should mention that condoms don't exist in my fantasy."

They never did, big daddy.

"Throw it out before you come," I heard myself say. "Stroke yourself off and cover me."

He breathed deeply and gripped my hips. "Maybe I will."

He had to! He'd seared the damn image into my brain now. I wanted his come all over me. I wanted to roll around in the filth, make out till we couldn't breathe, and fuck till we couldn't walk.

I was right there, about to get on my knees and beg him, when he pushed. The pain flared up so instantly that it punched the air out of my lungs, and he didn't stop. In one smooth thrust, he buried himself balls deep with a moan, and I slammed my fist against the counter.

"Fuck!" Acting purely on instinct, 'cause I knew he was the type of man who'd ask if I was all right, I managed to reach back and hold him in place. My fingers dug into the flesh of his perfect fucking ass, and I just rode through the blazes of fiery pain. Holy fucking shit, why did I get off on pain? Pain hurt. Pain meant suffering.

"Trace, are you?—"

"I'm fine, don't stop, don't fucking stop, I'm fine," I groaned.

"Thank fuck," he exhaled. "You said you didn't want warm-up, and I?—"

"I don't." I blew out a breath and swallowed dryly. "I'm just the idiot who gets turned on by being taken like a savage." Lust and desperation built up within me, though the

pain raged too forcefully at the moment.

Ben released an out-of-breath chuckle and leaned forward until his forehead landed in the dip between my shoulder blades.

“Christ, you feel good.” His hands were back. That warm, firm touch. They glided up my body, circled my waist, and stroked my chest. “I won’t ruin the moment further, then.” Ruin was a strong word. He was just kind. “Because I...” His voice dropped to a whisper. “...want to take you like a savage.”

The impact his words, his voice, had on me bordered on insane. My asshole might as well have opened up and gone all, “Okay, we’re good to go!” With another shudder rolling through me, my muscles relaxed some, and I automatically pushed against him.

It made him groan against my neck, and he reached down and fisted my cock.

It was as if we melted together, and it frustrated me. If he stayed this close, I got all his body heat and his greedy hands. But that left him no room to fuck me properly.

He made the choice for us. His heat disappeared from my back, and he withdrew his cock slowly before pushing in again.

Okay, good choice. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. The wildfire within started raging again, though not as intensely as before.

Within a minute or so, he was fucking me hard, each thrust eliciting the sounds of skin slapping against skin, our heavy breathing, and me shifting up and down on the counter. Couple inches forward, couple inches back.

Another wave of heat fell over us like a blanket, and we got lost under it. There were

too many intoxicating sounds and sensations for me to process them all, so everything just stoked the pressure within. From the way I stretched around his cock to the budding bruises along my hips. From the flush that broke out on my body to the slick sounds of the lube.

This was just round one.

“Fuck,” I breathed. I looked over my shoulder, and he met my gaze. I had no fucking words, except... “This ain’t over. I need you in bed later.”

He slammed in, causing me to grunt and grit my teeth.

Pleasure flitted across his face, and he leaned over me. “Tell me what you need.”

You.

“Just all of it, you know.” I started panting. I couldn’t help it. “From behind, from the front, sideways. Et cetera.”

He flashed a quick, wicked smile and kissed my shoulder. “There are easier ways to kill me.”

I grinned.

How could he be so goddamn beautiful? And sexy and funny and...ouch. He shoved his cock into me, derailing my thoughts.

It wasn’t a good angle for me to stroke myself off, ’cause the counter was in the way, and maybe he knew that. Maybe that was why he did it for me, and the second he started, a wave of pleasure crashed down on me. I moaned and hung my head, and I held on for dear life as he picked up the pace. He fucked me in deep, rapid thrusts, a

string of groans and curses leaving him.

“Almost,” I panted.

I tensed up, and my muscles protested. My calves were sore as shit. I wasn’t used to standing on my fucking toes. But the euphoria overwhelmed every burst of pain, and I was already gone. My moans bounced off the walls, sweat trickled down from my forehead, I felt fucking feverish, and my heart hammered in my rib cage.

“Let go, boy. I’m not stoppin’ till you’re done.”

I shuddered violently, and he tightened his grip on my cock. All I could do was meet every thrust and push back and forth between his addictive cock and his fist.

Before long, I sucked in a breath and felt everything set off inside me. Come spurted from my cock, and most sounds faded behind a rushing noise. Like I was underwater. And he didn’t stop. He fucked me brutally all through my orgasm, spurring me on with his sexy, growl-like groans and tangible hunger for me.

“Fuck,” I gasped. “Stop—stop, stop. God.” The pleasure became too much, and that flip-of-a-switch happened when everything morphed into oversensitivity. I was fucking shaking.

Had he gotten off? I needed him to be done. Fucking hell, I was dead.

But he wasn’t. The moment he’d withdrawn from me, he spun me around and picked me up with sticky hands to sit me down on the counter. I hissed at the pain in my ass but got with the program.

He all but tore off the rubber and tossed it aside before he wrapped my legs around his hips, and I pulled him in for a kiss. I cupped his face in my hands, pushing my

tongue into his mouth, and I felt the jerky motions through his body as he stroked himself over me. Right over my cock.

“Coat it,” I whispered, completely out of breath. “I wanna feel every hot burst hit my cock.”

“Jesus fuck.” He broke away, screwed his eyes shut, and went faster. He pressed his face against the side of my head, but I had to look. I watched rope after rope of come splat against my cock and lower abdomen, all while I had his body heat where I wanted it, his lips against my temple, his labored breaths tickling my skin.

My mouth watered at the smell of sex between us, and I craved more of it. Sensing that he was down for the count, I took over and coaxed a breathless kiss out of him. At the same time, I brought him closer and pressed our cocks together. And our hands, so we could both feel the mess we’d made.

He shuddered and swept his tongue around mine in a lazy, seducti—actually, everything he did was seductive to me. I could give up the word. It was default. Main setting. Always seducing me.

I was so distracted by his passionate kissing that I didn’t see his next move until he was breaking the kiss and sliding two fingers into my mouth.

Hot. As. Fuck.

I sucked them clean while he watched, and then he came in for another deep kiss.

“Shower with me,” he murmured.

I nodded but wasn’t ready to break the kiss yet.

* * *

What the fuck did I know about writing letters?

This was stupid.

I scratched my head with the pen, underneath the beanie, and zipped up my parka as I reread the words I'd struggled with for half an hour in Trace's kitchen.

Bright spot,

Thank you for not turning the other way when I needed help. Most people would. Instead, you opened up your home to me and gave me two days I'll take with me.

I won't mention anything about last night because, to be honest, I don't have the words. I woke up wrapped around you and realized every minute I spend with you just makes this harder.

Your life isn't mine, and borrowing time hurts like hell. It also makes me feel shitty for being a burden. I can't stand it.

I'm sure by the time you're reading this, you're annoyed as fuck. I get it. I took the coward's way out. I don't have any excuses, except I don't wanna see the look on your face. I can take the anger, the annoyance, and a passionate rant about how stupid I am for turning down a warm place to sleep. And you're right. But I can't take what comes after. I don't want to see you disappointed or hurt, because that impression will last longer with me than you will feel it.

In a few days, you'll be relieved you don't have to babysit me anymore. Your energy is better placed at the bar and on all the other people you're helping. You're young and have so much to look forward to, whether it's getting drunk during work hours

when the Hawks are losing or you're settling down with someone one day. He better deserve you. (He probably won't.)

I'm ashamed I couldn't meet you at your level and be as generous as you have been with me. Thankfully, this is harder for me than for you, and that brings me comfort. I would never want to hurt you, although you deserve a smack upside the head for getting me attached.

If only I could live in a dream, huh?

Take care, kid.

Fuck it. It wasn't gonna get any better than this. I was all over the damn place in this letter, but that was my life in a nutshell. I didn't know if I'd gone too far in assuming he'd even give a shit I'd left. At the same time, I wanted him to know he'd made a big impact on me. Whether that was reciprocated was irrelevant—though, to be frank, I'd rather not witness an expression that told me, “Whoa, dude. We just screwed. No need to get all emotional on me.”

I folded the note, flicked off the lights over the sink again, and walked out carefully. I'd woken up about an hour or so after we'd fallen asleep, just to take a piss, and a single step on a creaky floorboard had roused him too. He'd asked where I was going.

Reaching the front room, I glanced over at the bed where Trace was asleep. The covers were riding low, barely covering his naked ass. Fucking hell, this hurt. Literally. I felt it in my chest. I just wanted to get back under the covers and feel his body against mine.

I had really fucked myself over with this one.

I unlocked the front door, all three locks, as silently as I could, and then I left the note

on the duffel bag he'd given me yesterday. As sweet as his gesture was, I didn't need to get robbed again. Everything else he'd given me was more than enough. New coat, clean clothes... I'd taken a few of the energy bars too.

Nerves spiked as I stepped out of the apartment and slowly closed the door. I threw a quick glance at the foldable bed in the alcove and knew I should've stayed there last night instead. But I hadn't been able to resist.

I adjusted my beanie and took the stairs down, and I dug out my phone. No juice. I'd have to charge it when I got to Ma's house.

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Ben O'Cleary

As I got off the train, I drew a deep breath and welcomed the feeling of stepping into a new world, far away from the Loop and Trace Kalecki. Elmwood Park might as well have been in another state. There were no skyscrapers, no dark alleys or gangways, no hordes of tourists and commuters. The streets were wider, everything was more open, and the community clung to their corner of the world being a village. A suburban village comprised mostly of single-family homes with two cars in the driveway.

I'd lived like that once upon a time.

So had Ma, for that matter. Now she was stuck in a tiny top unit of a two-flat.

A new day had started, and the people heading to work stood on the platform like zombies with their noses in their phones, waiting for the train to take them into the city.

Since it'd been a few days, I stayed on the north side of the tracks and headed east on Grand Avenue. There was no use in going directly to Ma's, 'cause she'd just send me to the store with a list right away. Always similar items. Alvin had his food issues, and Ma cooked according to the season.

Besides, I needed to arrive with something. If I came empty-handed and delivered a bullshit lie about my car, Ma would clutch her pearls and go full-on neurotic on me, and she had enough health problems.

I crossed the street at Frank's Barber Shop and hoped Luisa was working this morning. She let me use Ma's senior discount without my even asking for it. She knew what it was like. Our situations were similar; only, she and her son could live with her old man.

Technically, I could stay with my mother too, but... No. I knew what would happen. I knew Ma. I knew what kept her up at night.

The parking lot at Caputo's was pretty empty this early in the day, and that boded well for me. The mornings were the best if you wanted to grab produce and bread on clearance.

That'd be an irresistible dating profile for Trace to swipe past. Check me out, digging for quarters and buying stale bread.

A familiar tightness spread across my chest, and I let out a breath.

My phone didn't even support swiping. I wasn't on social media or whatever the kids used to avoid people out in the wild.

Once inside, I grabbed a basket and started with the hunt for cheap bread. Thanks to Trace sharing his win with me yesterday, I wouldn't have to touch my emergency fund of a whopping twenty bucks in my bank account.

I frowned to myself as I checked the shelves with plastic bags filled with about-to-expire rolls and loaves, and I decided against it. Ma had oil, salt, and baking powder. I'd buy flour instead. Either Ma could bake something, or I could whip up some pan bread. Alvin liked that anyway.

In the produce section, I had better luck. I found carrots, onions, and celery on clearance, and they were running a promotion on potatoes and the kind of apples

Alvin preferred. I scratched my forehead, running the numbers. Six potatoes, two onions, one pound of carrots... I knew we had stock cubes left. If I'd had enough battery, I would've called and checked if Ma had cornstarch. On the other hand, you could thicken a stew with flour too, and I was already buying that.

That settled it.

I walked past the meat, 'cause that wasn't fucking happening, and I went down the aisle with canned goods.

I wondered if I could buy pretzel sticks and maybe some store-brand Nutella...

No. Fuck no, I'd be pissed at myself for a whole week if I did.

For the same amount of money, I could get several of those cheap frozen pizzas Alvin loved. It wasn't fucking pizza, but they were a buck fifty a pop, so I wasn't going to deny him.

* * *

Half an hour later, I was back on the other side of the tracks, and I walked up the path to the two-flat where Ma and Alvin lived. I spotted Alvin in the window, and he waved at me.

I smiled and waved back.

My little neighborhood watch. He demanded to keep his computer close to the window so he could look outside whenever he wanted to.

He bolted from his chair, and I headed inside and up the stairs.

I fucking hated only seeing him once or twice a week. It was like this every time I was out of a job.

Winter couldn't be over fast enough. I was so done. I had built up a decent network over the years, and they always called me when they needed extra help. But this time of year...? I was lucky if I racked up a week's pay in a month.

I remembered when contractors and construction workers were drowning in work. But tax hikes, larger companies leaving the city, expensive improvements in safety protocols, the fucking economy, and higher cost of living were all factors killing our industry. Productivity had never been lower, and I couldn't recall a worksite in the last decade where work hadn't stopped at some point because of a shortage or budget issue.

I'd tried to branch out, but my résumé was hardly impressive these days. Suits wanted to see degrees and shit like that. Now, I could point out a house and say I'd led the entire project, from blueprints to the passing of the inspection, but did they care?

Jagoffs.

I'd been the family plumber and electrician since my early twenties. I'd learned along the way because that was what you fucking did. Or used to. I was all right under the hood of a car too, and I'd installed more AC units than some fresh-out-of-school punk with a slip that said he'd passed a class.

I blew out a breath and shook all that off for now. I was going to spend the day with my boy. The work hunt continued tomorrow.

I knocked twice, and Alvin ripped the door open immediately and lit up. Hell, so did my heart. I missed him every day I didn't get to see him.

“Hi, Dad! Oh—you have a new coat.”

And you’re still in pajama bottoms.

I smiled and wrapped an arm around him. “Hey, small fry.” I squeezed him tight and kissed his temple, ignoring a twinge near my wound. “You’re usually dressed by now.”

He nodded and stepped back, and he adjusted his glasses. “I decided to sleep in after I went to bed at 4:17.”

My brows lifted. “Let me guess. You found a whole new library of videos to watch.”

He laughed and nodded again. “You know me!”

I sure did. Wars could start and end right outside on the street, and he wouldn’t notice if he’d found the perfect videos of tropical waters rolling in over a pristine beach.

Alvin was a 5’4” mini-me in appearance, but that was where the similarities ended, and I wasn’t just talking about his diagnoses. His entire world existed on the internet, and he had three obsessions. Fish, ocean videos, and bath bombs. Everything could be traced back to his love of water, whether it was the creatures that lived in the ocean, how it moved, looked, or how it reacted to certain chemicals and components.

Speaking of bath bombs.

I dug through the bag from Caputo’s and held up a box of baking soda. He instantly gasped and grabbed it, but I wasn’t done. I’d found purple food coloring for him too.

“That’s the second-best brand. Thank you, Dad!”

“You’re welcome.” I smiled to myself as he ran off, rambling about how he was gonna make a new video for his followers.

My son had followers. Followers who enjoyed watching someone take apart bath bombs in water.

I didn’t understand it, but as long as he was happy.

“Are you gonna hide out in the hallway all day, sweetie?” Ma called.

I shrugged out of my coat. “You want me to get snow on the carpet?”

After removing my boots and hanging up my coat and beanie, I left the hallway with the groceries and spotted Ma on the couch in the front room. Wasn’t a whole lot else she could do here but watch TV and knit. It was a 500-square-foot one-bedroom apartment, and she’d given Alvin that bedroom. He’d built a shrine to his water-related hobbies, and Ma had her shrine to cats out here. Paintings and cross-stitch art of cats cluttered the walls, and knickknacks filled the entertainment unit.

I dipped down and kissed her cheek. “How are you, Ma?”

“Eh, same old, but I can’t complain.” She eyed the grocery bag and put away her knitting shit. “You’re early today. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I took the day off.” I moved to the other end of the room, where the kitchenette took over. “Fuckin’ car broke down last night, so I had to get it towed.”

At one point, I’d hated lying to her. I’d felt like shit every time.

Now it was my normal.

“Oh no, what happened? Where is it now? How are you gonna get to work?” As expected, Ma went straight to worry. And at the age of eighty, she was like most old people. They couldn’t let shit go.

“It’s gonna be fine, Ma,” I assured her, unloading the groceries on the counter. “It’ll take me a while to fix it up, but Garrett had space in his garage. Relax.”

Give me a few months, and then I’d say the car was a piece of shit and that I’d buy a better one soon.

When it came to my mother, everything was about cushioning the blow. No, I wasn’t unemployed—I was taking the day off, they were cutting my hours a little, I was starting another project soon, they had to let me go but referred me to a better place. It was all good. Same with my living situation. When shit got really bad, I stayed here for a week or so, and then a new place magically turned up, at least to her knowledge. Right now, she thought I was staying with Garrett, a friend from high school, while I waited for my move-in date to a garden unit close to a job I didn’t have.

I could handle her fretting about flooding and rodents. What I couldn’t take—and what her blood pressure couldn’t take—was me in a shelter or out on the streets.

“Did you take your insulin?” I asked and opened the fridge. I grabbed the creamer, then two mugs from a cupboard.

“Yes, yes, Alvin reminds me every morning,” she said. I could tell by the look on her face that she was still stuck on the car problem. “How are you gonna get to work?”

I gave her a pointed look.

That made her jut her chin, all stubborn. “I don’t like you taking the train, Ben. Catherine has shared so many horror stories—muggings, assault, some people p...”

She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Some pee.”

I chuckled. She could be too funny.

Train cars that reeked of piss, shit, and bleach were the least of my concerns.

“Go sit down, Ma. You got nothing to worry about.” I poured us coffee and figured it was best to change the topic. “You think you can make a stew of what I bought?”

“Of course, of course. Was Luisa working?”

I nodded and handed her a mug.

“Good. How much do I owe you?”

“Not a damn thing.” I didn’t want her money. It was bad enough she was forced to stay in this sham of an apartment.

Ma scowled up at me. “You know how to annoy me, son.”

I smirked into my mug and took a sip.

She huffed on her way over to the couch. “You spend too much money and never let me pay you back.”

Bullshit.

She took care of Alvin when I couldn’t. She gave him a roof over his head and offered stability when my life was chaos, which...it’d been for years now. Years of temporary gigs—some semi-permanent too, but life was too expensive to cover everything. Alvin had an anxiety medication that wasn’t covered by his insurance,

and neither were his sessions with a psychologist. Because it had to be Rose, a woman he'd been seeing since he was a kid.

You couldn't just tell an autistic person they had to see another psychologist when it was so fucking hard for them to click with someone. And he knew better than anyone which meds worked for him. If he claimed the one that was covered by his insurance made him nauseated and feel too drowsy, he wasn't lying.

I leaned back against the counter and sipped my coffee in silence, and Ma went back to knitting. Though, her silence never lasted long.

In the meantime, I enjoyed the quiet and made a mental list of people to call tomorrow. I should charge my phone right away too, because I never knew when Garrett would call. He'd been where I was, so he knew. I was the first guy he called if something opened up at his scaffolding company.

What killed me wasn't work, to be honest. In the winters, sure, shit got tougher. But the worst was all our expenses. It just felt like I could never get off the ground. Last year, I'd had a full-time job for six months, and I'd still struggled to pay rent at a tiny place I'd shared with a friend of a friend. I had to give it up. Even the months we got welfare or food stamps or...whatever the fuck. Assistance wasn't free. It didn't come without conditions, and Alvin couldn't handle conditions. If I wanted to keep him happy, that meant the medication that helped his anxiety, it meant his staying in this shitty place, it meant three therapy sessions every month, and it meant food that was often more expensive because of his issues.

The alternative was out of the question, because I'd witnessed my son's panic attacks. I'd seen the sheer fear and hurt in his eyes. I'd held him while he'd trembled and hyperventilated.

The smallest surprise in his day-to-day routine could set him off.

I suppressed a sigh and took another swig of my coffee.

“Something’s troubling you, sweetie.”

I grunted quietly, finished my coffee, and put the mug in the sink. “Same shit as usual. I wanna get yous outta here.”

With the rent she paid, she could afford a bigger place somewhere else, one we could share. We could have more stability, and I could have a home base. Not knowing where I’d sleep tomorrow was fucking exhausting. It was time-consuming, too.

Ma hummed and reached for another color yarn in her yarn basket. “While you work on that, I’ll keep myself happy by blaming your father we ended up here in the first place. May he rest in hell.”

I grinned and scrubbed a hand over my jaw.

She was a firecracker, my ma.

An unbidden vision showed me Ma and Trace in the same room, and I just knew they’d get along.

Goddammit.

I couldn’t think about Trace. It fucking hurt.

I’d recognized it from the beginning, but not the extent. I’d seen that he was one of those people who made me feel shit more intensely. I couldn’t explain it. I didn’t know why it happened, only that Trace was the first one I’d also felt a mad attraction toward.

The soup kitchen service had made things clear to me. I'd caught myself staring countless times. His fucking eyes, his smirks, his softer grins, his sense of humor...

His body.

I shook my head to myself, at myself, and decided I needed something to do. I was hungry, so maybe some pan bread would work. But first, I went back into the hallway to charge my phone.

I had to get back to Angie too. She was worried and wanted to know my plans now that I'd lost my damn car.

Precisely two family members had stood by me the day I'd told everyone I was gay—my mother and my cousin. Angie was also the one who knew everything about my sad excuse for a life. She worked nights at Northwestern in the city, and she had a parking spot there. So that was where I'd parked most nights to sleep, and then I drove her home in the morning.

"Dad?" Alvin called.

"Yeah, bud?" I paused outside his room and pushed open the door a foot or two.

No need to worry about his two fish tanks. He kept them in pristine condition, one with fish and the other with colorful shrimp. And he actually made some money off the shrimp when they reproduced. A few times a year, he sold some off and made a couple hundred bucks each time. The blue ones were the rarest.

He looked over his shoulder. "Can you watch this video, please? I'm wondering why it doesn't have as many views as I usually have."

Fuck. I opened the door wider and stepped in, and I was already scrambling for what

to tell him. I knew fuck-all about this computer shit and the social media world. I did know he was popular. He had a large following of nearly two thousand people all over the world.

I joined him at the computer and dropped my hand to his neck, rubbing it gently.

He pushed play on the video.

It seemed to be the same kind of video he always posted. He'd claimed Ma's bathtub and sink weren't white enough, so he'd bought a white enamel basin that he used. He had a tripod for his phone too, and it was angled directly over the basin as he broke apart a bath bomb in the water. This one was dark blue and had something sparkly in it.

I'd learned that the sound was important. Something-something ASMR. It was soothing or relaxing to some with similar disorders—autism and ADHD and the like.

“I usually have three times as many views,” he said.

I could throw out a word I'd heard him use many times. I cleared my throat. “Could it be an algorithm issue? The video looks great to me.”

He tapped his chin and eyed the screen pensively. “They do change those a lot.”

I wouldn't know. It was gibberish to me. Angie, on the other hand. She knew this stuff. She helped him from time to time.

She'd helped me too, because I'd been a train wreck when I'd given him the computer for his birthday four or five years ago. I'd imagined him getting scammed and lured into the dark corners of the internet. Then Angie had installed and activated all kinds of blocks. She said it was common for parents of young children—but she'd

gone the extra mile with software that let me restrict his use further.

“I think the next one will be popular,” Alvin said firmly. “I’m doing the rainbow colors again.”

“That sounds good. People love a rainbow.” I didn’t know what the fuck I was saying. I was just happy that he was happy. We were going on two weeks without a panic attack, and that was all that mattered to me. To minimize his stress and find a balance between avoiding triggers and overcoming them.

I let him get back to his videos, and I wandered over to the tanks. It looked like Molly was pregnant again. I bent over and took in all the greenery and fish and rocks. He loved to redecorate but refused to use decorations that didn’t belong in the ocean. No colorful hideouts made of plastic. It had to be sturdy little rock caves, tiny logs, and plants.

I couldn’t lie; it had a calming effect on me too to watch them swim around in there.

“Is Molly expecting more babies?” I asked.

“Yes! Any day now.” Alvin wheeled his chair over to me and adjusted his glasses. “I’m gonna prepare the breeder box today. As you know, she likes to eat her young.”

That damn Molly.

She did serve her purpose, though. Alvin could count his friends on one hand, and one of them was Paulie, who ran the local pet store where Alvin bought feed and whatnot. There was no money in the aquarium fish my boy liked, but he did have a deal with Paulie. If Alvin supplied Paulie with baby fish fry, Alvin received discounts and occasionally free feed.

I called that a good hobby, one that almost paid for itself.

Even if it hadn't, I wouldn't have objected. He asked for so few things. Everything he loved was right here in this little room. His computer, a smartphone, noise-canceling headphones, his two tanks, ingredients to make bath bombs, and his seashell collection.

I pressed a kiss to his temple.

He quirked a grin. "You always do that."

"Because I love you mad amounts."

He snickered and shoved his shoulder to my arm. "Same. Clown."

I chuckled and straightened up. "You hungry? I thought I'd make pan bread."

He beamed. "With melted butter?"

"You know it."

"Yes! I want fourteen thousand pieces, thank you!"

I grinned, fucking loving seeing him this way. "I'll holler in a week when they're all done, then."

He laughed at that.

I left his room with a smile on my face, and Ma gave me a knowing look over the rims of her glasses. Not that it stopped her from knitting. She could do that blindfolded.

“He lights up when you’re around, dear,” she told me. “Has Rose made any progress lately?”

Unfortunately not enough, which I told her. We’d been trying for nearly a year to get him to mentally prepare for a move to a better apartment, but he just couldn’t cope with the thought. Rose had made him understand the why; the apartment was too small for the amount of money Ma paid, and we didn’t have enough space. Additionally, he could occasionally handle half a sleepover with the only local friend he had who was his age. And by half, I meant half. They got together maybe once a month, and at around three in the morning, Alvin reached his limit. He needed to go home and sleep in his own bed.

That was it.

Ironically, my failure to make a decent living for us wasn’t the main problem when we were discussing Alvin’s dream of seeing the ocean. It was his inability to sleep somewhere other than in his room.

Rose was certain my boy had developed a mental block and a case of PTSD from the circumstances that’d once put him here.

“By the way,” Ma said, “brace yourself for his latest obsession with the number fourteen thousand.”

I brought out the skillet before I glanced over at her. “What?”

She chuckled softly to herself and reached for her coffee. “He’s celebrating. He reached fourteen thousand followers the other day, and now he can’t let go of the number.”

Wait, what?

I pointed to his room as shock tore through me. “Fourteen thousand people follow him on that Instagram thing? Because he picks apart dyed baking soda and citric acid in a tub of water?”

She nodded, a hint of pride in her expression. “It’s a whole thing, sweetie. People love it.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

“My son is a celebrity.”

She laughed. “You know, I said the same thing...? He just snickered and said he was a small fish in a big ocean.”

Fuck that, the Sox should invite him to throw the first pitch.

Fourteen fucking thousand?

That was insane.

Safe to say, I was gonna keep buying him food coloring. The whole goddamn rainbow.

* * *

The day went by too quickly for my liking even though we didn’t have any plans. I fixed the leaky faucet in the bathroom, I gave myself one hell of a toothache when I bit down on a piece of semi-burned pan bread, I coaxed Alvin out for a walk—because that was our deal; he needed an hour of fresh air every day—and I dozed on and off in front of the TV while Ma cooked dinner.

“Are you staying here tonight, sweetie?”

I yawned and flicked a glance at the cat-shaped clock above the TV. “I haven’t decided yet. I’m torn between wanting to head over to Garrett’s because it’s closer to work, and gluing my sorry fuckin’ ass to the couch right here.”

“Benjamin!” She shook her fist at me, never failing to crack me up. “I didn’t raise you to use that language. You curse way too much.”

I grinned lazily, only that put pressure on my tooth, and I promptly winced and rubbed my jaw carefully.

Of course she noticed. “What’s wrong? Is it your teeth? You’re taking care of them, right? You have to be mindful. I don’t need to tell you what dental abscesses and tooth decay can lead to if they go untreated.”

I couldn’t even make a grimace without her worrying I was dying. Everything could lead to death.

“Christ, Ma, it’s just my third molar,” I replied. “I’ll go to a?—”

“I’ll call Joseph tomorrow,” she said abruptly. “I want that extracted as soon as possible.” She wagged a knife my way. “I’ve been telling you for years—and you remember when you had issues with periodontal pockets back there?”

That settled it. I was going to “Garrett’s” tonight. Now she’d found something new to fret over, and it was only gonna get worse. Nothing I said mattered. She muttered to herself as she stirred the stew and added the mushrooms.

“It’s all this going back and forth,” she said, seemingly to herself. “Few months there, couple weeks at Garrett’s, new place, and now the car needs repairing too?”

I sighed and scrubbed my hands over my face.

“And don’t think I haven’t noticed you’ve lost weight,” she told me.

I tried to make light of it. “It’s fine. I had some extra padding to get rid of.”

She scoffed and shook her head. She kept muttering too, and it was only a matter of time before she made the sign of the cross.

Growing up, I’d gone to Mass with my folks during holidays. That was it. Ma had visited a bit more often, but nothing like it was now. She went almost every day. Granted, she had her lady friends there; they had coffee and gossiped. But she’d definitely become more religious in her later years. Suddenly, she covered all the Catholic cultures she came from. She was a heritage cocktail of Ireland, Italy, and Poland.

“Grandma?” Alvin came out of his room, holding up his purple-dyed hands. “Do we have more vinegar?”

I felt my forehead crease. “Are you making the bath bombs in your room, son?”

We’d agreed he should do that in the bathroom.

“Only the color paste,” he promised. “I’ve come up with a new ratio that creates better sounds in the final product.”

Right. Of course he had.

“Come here, love.” Ma ushered him over and turned on the water. Then she found the vinegar and grabbed a sponge. “Nothing on your clothes?”

“Not this time!” Alvin was triumphant.

My mouth twisted. He was too cute.

While he hadn’t been able to graduate from high school, he’d always done well with science. He’d loved chemistry and physics.

“I think you should stay here tonight, Ben,” Ma said. “Don’t you think so too, Alvin? It’s gonna be dark soon, and it’s just not safe out.”

“Ma,” I warned tiredly. She couldn’t fucking keep projecting her fears on to Alvin. He had enough anxiety in his life.

Alvin chewed on his lip and flicked his gaze between us. “I can take out the air bed.”

Fucking hell. No, I shouldn’t. It was better I found a spot over by there on Harlem and Wellington. I knew of at least two apartment buildings where the locks on the front doors were broken. That way, Alvin and Ma didn’t have to rearrange everything. Because the air bed only fit in Alvin’s room, but he couldn’t sleep in the same room as me since he claimed I snored—and if we brought that up, Ma would go on another bullshit rant about how only anxious people snored. I didn’t know where she’d gotten that from, but it was her firm belief that a stress-free person slept peacefully and quietly. That, in turn, posed a new problem because Ma couldn’t get up from the air bed on her own, so that resulted in me on the couch, Alvin in the air bed, and Ma in his bed.

No. Tonight wasn’t an emergency. I would make do. I’d be back here soon enough, when my exhaustion won out, when I hadn’t eaten in twenty-four hours, and if the weather got worse. We’d just survived a snowstorm and a ten-below-zero cold spell with icy winds. Whatever we had today—I guessed around twenty-five or thirty—was practically spring for me.

* * *

A few days later, I scored a job interview that actually made me nervous, because I was qualified. In truth, I was overqualified, but it beat showing up with zero credentials to back up my experience.

Once in the city, I took the L toward River North and texted Angie.

If I dont text within the hour Ive thrown myself into the lake. Otherwise Ill see you outside McDonalds.

She responded pretty fast.

You got this! Btw, I forgot to ask how you found the listing? In the meantime, I'm gonna work on my breakup speech for tomorrow. Pretend you're surprised.

Shit, again? She seemed to be a magnet for douchebags. After her divorce from Whatshisface almost ten years ago, she'd jumped from one to another in hopes of finding the guy she wanted to retire with. Luckily, she had some time left. She was only forty-five.

I sent her a message back.

Im mindblown. Job hunting at the library as usual. I applied an hour after the listing went live and they called right away.

The pay wasn't great, but I'd long since stopped comparing wages to what I'd been used to when I'd had my own business. These days, twenty bucks an hour was enough to put my chest in a vise of hope, anxiousness, and dread. Plus, the company had good benefits, both healthcare and dental.

Not that I'd need the latter for a while, I hoped. I was still recovering from an extraction without local anesthesia. I wasn't gonna complain; I was lucky Ma stayed in touch with coworkers at the clinic where she used to work, but fucking hell, that Joseph bastard was a sadist. He was long overdue for his own retirement, but I guessed helping sad fuckers like me for free was a hobby of his.

I got off the train at Grand and walked five blocks to my doom, and I couldn't shake the emotions stirring within. I needed this job. I was fucking desperate to feel a semblance of...fuck, I don't know, being a human? A provider?

Someone who might look decent standing next to a cocky Cubs fan who ran his own sports bar.

I blew out a breath and peered up at the building.

One of these days, I'd get over Trace. I hoped. But right now, I couldn't get him off my mind—and it was ridiculous. I'd spent less than two days with him, for fuck's sake. I had no business acting like a love-sick idiot. You didn't catch feelings for someone that quickly.

Even if you did, what did it matter? I'd just been a liability, as fucking always.

I braced myself and walked through the revolving door, revealing a large lobby.

I'd been instructed to head straight to the twelfth floor where this maintenance company had their offices.

I could be a maintenance guy.

I had plenty of experience.

* * *

Deep breaths.

I walked out into the cold and zipped up my coat, and I wanted to fucking scream. Those words—we'll be in touch, Mr. O'Cleary—still rang in my ears along with a low rushing sound, but the hope was there too. The guy had seemed so positive, and he'd even asked if I was interested, considering I was overqualified. And I'd made it abundantly clear that this job would be perfect for me. Because it was a full-time position with primarily night shifts.

I liked night shifts when I didn't have a place to sleep.

I hadn't expected an official yes or no today, but I could usually tell if they were likely to call back. Here, fucking nothing. The interview had gone well, and I hadn't felt the need to exaggerate or lie about anything. Building maintenance was the little brother to construction in a way. It was just a matter of maintaining all the things I knew how to install and build. Granted, my expertise lay in single-family homes, and running maintenance in apartment complexes and office buildings was a bit different, but I knew what I was doing.

By the time I veered right onto East Ontario, I'd let Angie know I was five minutes away, and I'd decided to stay in the city tonight. Ma was still fretting over my car and living arrangements, and she was under the impression I was working late today anyway. So if I showed up, she'd just grow suspicious and more worried.

I had my survival technique for the city down pat at this point. When Angie was off to work, I'd stick around for another hour or so, and then I'd go to one of the larger McDonald's locations in the Loop, stay there till it was nearing midnight, before I found a dark corner the world had forgotten.

Recent mugging aside, I'd managed to avoid much of the violence many faced on the streets. I had my fair share of scars, sure, but it could be a lot worse. Because my rule of thumb was avoid, avoid, avoid. Avoid crowded places, avoid locations where crime was more prevalent, avoid junkies. I could think of a single exception, and that was when the weather forced me indoors. Otherwise, I'd rather take a snow-filled gangway than a twenty-four-seven open fast-food joint around Michigan.

As I rounded the corner, I spotted Angie across the street, heading into the McDonald's. I picked up the pace and slipped between a horde of Asian tourists and a family with four kids.

Doing a quick count of my riches, I figured I could set aside four bucks for today. I could stretch that to get me through the day.

Say whatever you want about McDonald's, but their dollar menu had saved my ass more times than I could count. Even more so when I came here with Angie, 'cause she had the app that contained more discounts. And occasionally free fries and coffee with my purchase.

I opened the door and found Angie by the kiosks, and I went over to her.

"Hey."

She looked up from her phone and smiled. "How did it go?" She stepped in for a hug, and I gave her a quick squeeze and kissed the top of her head.

"I wanna say good, but he was fucking unreadable," I replied. "I guess we'll see."

Angie did what she always did; she said she had a good feeling about this job, and then she distracted me with shiny coupons in the app. It was just as well. I needed the distraction to keep from hoping.

Hope was the most painful poison.

“What’re you in the mood for?” Angie asked. “I have a double shift coming up, so I’m gonna go to town on a Big Mac and extra fries.”

I snorted softly under my breath, wondering why we kept up with this charade. She knew me better than anyone, and we still fed each other bullshit to spare my ego, which I wasn’t sure I had left. She always ordered way more than she could stomach, and I always ordered coffee and a cheeseburger, claiming I’d already eaten.

Today was no different, except the coupon. She got a free dessert that she’d give to me, because halfway through her meal, she would discover that she’d ordered too much food.

My one and only comfort that prevented me from feeling like a freeloading piece of shit around Angie was that she always needed help with something in her apartment.

I could understand giving up space and paying a higher rent if you really wanted to live in a good neighborhood in the city, but her building was falling apart, and the maintenance team was useless. So not only was she paying seventeen fucking hundred a month for a small one-bedroom, but the whole place was an accident waiting to happen. Door hinges coming off, leaks, crappy plumbing, and for the past year, a boyfriend.

We found a semi-private corner once we’d gotten our food, and my stomach tightened with hunger. I was gonna have to eat slowly.

“You gonna tell me what’s going on with your man?” I asked.

I emptied a packet of sugar into my coffee and removed my beanie.

“Well, at least this one hasn’t cheated,” she drawled. “He just wants to change everything about me, so I thought I’d do him a favor and end things tomorrow.”

I shook my head, half relieved I didn’t have to bother with that shit. Fucking obviously, my mind went straight to Trace, but two things could be true at once. I could crave human touch and company and still know better than to seek it out. Because I would eventually be the jagoff who got dumped for being low-hanging fruit.

“Speaking of,” she went on. “As soon as he moves out, I want you to come stay with me. I’ll get you allergy meds.”

I smiled but shook my head again. She was sweet, but I couldn’t. And her four cats weren’t the problem, even though I was allergic. Both Ma and I were, though it was only a problem for her because she was obsessed with cats. I wasn’t.

“I appreciate it, but?—”

“Here we freaking go,” she groaned. “Always with the ‘I appreciate it, but’ bullshit. When are you gonna let your family help you, Ben? Seriously.” Oh, she wasn’t done. In the meantime, I bit into my burger and chewed slowly. “I understand why you protect Alvin from these problems. I even understand downplaying them to your ma, ’cause—I mean, yeah.”

I grinned and took a sip of my coffee.

“You think this is funny?” She got a bit of an attitude there. “I text with Garrett sometimes, you know. You never stay at his place either.”

What the fuck? “Because his wife hates me,” I said in my defense. “She thinks I’m somehow gonna drag Garrett down.”

“Well, what the fuck does she know,” Angie huffed. “Whatever. You need to let us help you, Ben.”

I wasn’t getting into this with her again. All traces of humor vanished, and I couldn’t help it. My fuse ran short.

“Quit pretending like you don’t already,” I told her. “I’m sure I’ll end up on your couch at some point, but you gotta understand that my willingness to keep fucking breathing is entirely tied to my son.” I watched her face fall, which stole some of the fight in me. “I’m sorry, Angie, but my self-worth gets boosted by accomplishments and feeling like I contribute, and right now...” I sighed heavily and set down my burger.

I couldn’t make eye contact anymore, and a chunk of self-hatred settled in my stomach. It was fucking mortifying. At this rate, I’d turn fifty in a little over a year and be a goddamn nobody.

Fuck.

I scrubbed a hand over my mouth as the ringing noise in my ears came back. So did the tightness in my chest.

My eyes burned, and I clenched my jaw and pushed back my emotions. I had to get that job. I had to. I needed one chance. With a full-time job, I could at least pay for more frequent therapy sessions for Alvin. It would help Rose with what she was trying to do, and if we could move—if I could get Alvin on board...

Ma’s words from the other day whooshed by in my head, and although I couldn’t keep myself happy by hoping my old man was suffering in hell, I had no problems directing some bitterness his way. That dumb son of a bitch was to blame for that apartment. He’d fallen for a shady builder’s scam about how those apartments were

going to be the luxury homes of retirees. It was a block of two-flats, and how he'd even for a second believed there would be doormen...? All kinds of shit had been promised in the brochures. Personal doorman, security, a park in the back that was reserved for residents only... And a rent to go with all those amenities.

He and I hadn't been on speaking terms since I'd come out, so I hadn't gotten a chance to see those brochures until they'd signed the lease. Besides, I'd been balls deep in losing Lindsey and guiding Alvin through that grief.

We'd been much better together as exes. Well, once she'd found a way to forgive me for lying to her for so many years.

She'd even defended me when my father and a couple of my uncles told me what God thought.

And none of this matters, including Dad's dumbass decision to move in to that apartment.

It all boiled down to Alvin. He couldn't leave. After Lindsey died, Alvin had lost his footing, and I had already been struggling to make rent.

If anyone was to blame, it was me. Because I was the one who'd sent Alvin to Ma—and my old man. He could hate me all he wanted, but he'd been a good grandfather, and they'd taken Alvin in. Temporarily, of course. My plan had been to get a better job, stay at a friend's place, save up money, and... But then Dad had kicked the bucket too. Heart attack in the middle of the day.

I blew out a breath, grasping at fruitless ideas I'd discarded. But when I got desperate, I was ready to look for work anywhere. Grocery stores, restaurants, whatever the fuck. Except then I remembered I'd get nowhere even faster on minimum wage. If I was stuck in a store all day, I'd be dead on my feet by the time I had to go out and

look for a better job, plus finding a place to sleep that night.

Alvin could kiss his therapy goodbye, his medication, and our shot at ever leaving Elmwood Park.

Angie placed her hand on top of mine but said nothing at first.

I swallowed hard.

Not for the first time, I wished I could take Lindsey's place. She would've handled this much better—and without becoming homeless in the process. She'd been the better parent, she'd had way more patience, and she could work the system. She wouldn't have quit before Alvin had gotten all his needs met.

"I'm so sorry, Ben," Angie murmured. "I keep seeing this from my perspective, and I hate going to bed at night, knowing you're out there somewhere."

I nodded with a dip of my chin. "I know."

* * *

What the fuck was I doing in this neighborhood?

In my defense, the area around the old Dearborn Station was dead at night as soon as you got away from the rows of bars and restaurants.

My breaths misted in the cold air as I got closer and closer to the Dearborn Clover. I could see the green glow of their sign from two blocks away.

It was the closest I'd been to Trace in over two weeks.

And when was I gonna forget about him, again?

If only he wouldn't insist on haunting me in my dreams.

He'd probably forgotten me by now.

I crossed the street and decided I was just gonna take a quick look through the windows. I'd had a shitty fucking week, and evidently, I was in the mood to feel even worse. But if I got to see him, I knew it would be worth it for those few seconds before regret crashed into me.

A couple patrons came out from the bar and lit up smokes, both tipsy and in a good Valentine's Day mood.

I didn't know if there'd been a game on today.

I peered through the semi-tinted window. Despite that they were closing in an hour, plenty of people were in there.

Fuck me.

I saw him behind the bar.

That grin of his. He was pouring beers and talking to a customer. My stomach tightened with unease, and it didn't feel good at all. I'd thought...maybe seeing him would give me a hit of that high. If I could just forget my reality for a few moments...

I swallowed hard and shuddered at the cold.

Jamaal was working too. Whatever he said made Trace laugh hard, and I'd seen

enough. I'd gotten my confirmation. Christ, I shouldn't have left him that damn letter. We'd fucked. That was all.

I went down the alley where we'd met under the worst circumstances. Only this time, I went deeper into the darkness. I passed the first heating vent, knowing there was one more.

If I didn't catch a break soon, my depression was going to suffocate me. This week, it'd been one blow after another. They were clearly not getting back to me about that maintenance job near Northwestern, I was averaging one meal per day, I'd had to borrow money from Angie to cover Alvin's therapy, and I'd fucking walked between Elmwood Park and the city three times. That was a solid four-hour stroll through sleet and icy winds. On top of that, I'd gotten a single night's decent rest, when I'd stayed at Ma's place.

I went to the library every day to look for work. I'd even applied to some gigs that paid way too little. I hadn't been this exhausted in months.

Opening my coat, I pulled out the newspapers and the seat pad Angie had given me today. A foldable, foam-like pad I hadn't seen since I was a kid when we went hiking sometimes. Then I sat down in the snow, across from the last dumpster, and pulled up my legs. I brought out my pocketknife too.

It was going to be a long night.

I burrowed into my coat as much as I could, and I zipped up to keep half my face hidden within. Then I closed my eyes and immediately pictured Trace. If I concentrated, I could pluck sensations from one of my last memories of him. The heat of his body pressed against mine, the scent of his body wash...

His big pullout couch had been ridiculously comfortable, and I'd loved being buried

under the covers with him.

I remembered how his lips had brushed over my jaw, tickled my neck, and ghosted along my ear.

“You promised to deep-throat me.”

I smirked and palmed his perfect ass.

I had promised that, hadn't I?

He sat down on my spent cock, teasing me, and kissed my neck. “If you need convincing, I don't have a gag reflex.”

Christ, this boy.

I didn't need convincing, but I did need recovery time. So...

I chuckled under my breath, knowing exactly what to say to bide my time. “Of course you don't. You've been desensitized as a Cubs fan.”

He shot right up, surprise written all over him, before he scowled down at me. “What. The. Fuck.”

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

I shuddered as a harsh wind tore down the alley, and I swallowed hard and shook the images. I was a fucking dumbass for indulging in an illusion.

Clenching my jaw, I pulled forth images of Alvin instead—but what good did that do? No matter who I thought of, this putrid self-hatred took over and told me I'd

never be good enough for them. I couldn't take care of myself, much less anyone else. Not even my own son. My flesh and blood.

Goddammit.

Unshed tears burned behind my eyelids, and I fell down a familiar void, where I tried to summon the guts to fucking kill myself already. But that lasted all of a second, because every dollar mattered. I had to keep fighting to make Alvin's life a little bit easier.

I'm sorry, son. I'm so goddamn sorry.

I sniffled and screwed my eyes shut harder—but then I heard a noise, and all the alarms sounded in my head. I shot my stare toward the mouth of the alley, relief settling as quickly as I turned wary. It was just a dog. But they came with their own set of problems. They didn't pull a knife on you or anything; they just had sharp teeth and weren't afraid to use them if they were hungry. Hopefully, it wasn't a stray.

* * *

“Good night, boss!”

“Fuck off!” I grinned and shook my head. That boss name was catching on, and I hated it. But they all thought it was fun, so...whatever.

I flicked off the lights once Julie was out the door, and I grabbed my food container on my way out. Alarm activated, the place smelling like no rats would like it here—it'd been a good day. I released a breath and headed up the stairs, and I started working on how I could repay Adam.

Because fucking hell, he'd brought me back from the dead today.

The Clover was officially on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. The sneak had done everything behind my back, safely back in his California haven, including updating the website. Oh, and he was developing an app for us.

I dug out my keys and side-eyed the foldable bed, but I refused to let myself go down that road again. No more pity parties. No more rage rants. The motherfucker was out of my life, and he better stay gone.

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Trace Kalecki

Holy fuck, was I nervous. My hands had turned into running faucets, they were sweating so much, and there was no such thing as a resting pulse today.

I'd had my first marketing idea ever last month, and Adam had decided we should go with it. So we were, and it was wreaking havoc on my stomach. What the fuck did I know about marketing? But I'd just figured...we needed more tourists to come in, and they were all gathered up on the Riverwalk to watch the river turning green and then the parade. So I'd called up a buddy who worked for his old man's riverboat cruise business, and they'd jumped at the chance to collaborate. We provided the draw, the challenge, and they got more customers who they brought our way.

Adam believed it was the start of a new tradition. The Clover Run. If you could make the run from the dock on Wells to here in five minutes, you got a free beer. If you completed it in three minutes? Congrats, you won a shot with your free beer.

It was totally doable. Chip and I had walked it in eight minutes, and then I'd jogged the stretch in four minutes the other day. But that was the point. Easy wins attracted more people with open wallets.

In other news, karma was real, and Jamaal was having fun with her. This whole week, my old man had joined Jerry and Malcolm at the bar, and I was fucking over it.

I'd obviously known my folks would come home for St. Patrick's Day, but I hadn't anticipated them being in my face so much. They went to Sarah's to sleep; that was all. Well, Ma went off with Chip a lot too. But Dad? He was an official member of

the Senior Circuit now.

“I want everyone in front of the bar in five!” I yelled. We were opening in fifteen, and I needed to run through everything once more.

We opened late every Saturday before this holiday, because we had so many preparations to finish, and with St. Patrick’s Day falling on a Sunday this year, it meant we had two days in a row to do it up big. And I was going really fucking big. The Clover had turned into a shamrock factory, and the entire week had led up to this weekend. Adam and Everett were in town too, and both had helped me run promotions for the bar. The ceiling was a sea of green balloons, streamers, and leprechauns, and every item on the menu came with something green, whether it was dye or a decoration.

I had spent money we didn’t really have in order to magnify everything Dad had done in previous years.

He sat quietly at the bar and just watched me with an easy smile on his face.

I didn’t fucking like it.

Maybe because I felt the pressure. I had a note with the total of this weekend’s expenses burning a hole in my back pocket. From alcohol and food to decorations and marketing material. From extra staff and everyone’s wages to ad spends and additional bar tables we’d rented.

One by one, the staff gathered around the bar, Adam and Jamaal staying behind it with me. Almost everyone was working today, with several of us doing double shifts. A total of sixteen for each shift. We were open from five PM to two AM today, ten AM to one AM tomorrow. Because tomorrow, we were doing a St. Patrick’s Day lunch with burger specials and ice cream sundaes. We’d put a bit more focus on

families than drunks for tomorrow, partly so we could run the soup kitchen as usual. It seemed to work anyway, because we were fully booked.

Despite that, I saw expenses everywhere.

Deep breath.

I grabbed a chair we kept back here and climbed up to stand on it. “All right, listen up! Green shit’s about to hit the fan, and today and tomorrow, it’s extra important we run a tight ship. The only people allowed behind the bar are Adam, Jamaal, Tonya, Julie, and me.” I found the girls and addressed them next. “Four drops of dye in each beer glass, three for cocktails, one for shots. We need the bar constantly packed with glasses.” I turned to Petey, Colin, and Sandy next. “Petey and Sandy, I trust all yous to run the kitchen as you always do, and Colin, you keep slinging glasses. Soon as you fill a rack, you wash it.”

“Yeah, boss,” Colin replied.

Next up, waitstaff. “Marisol, you’re in charge of the servers today,” I told her. “It’s gonna get stressful as shit, but we gotta keep the energy up—I wanna see smiles on all our faces, ya hear?” I nodded at our three security guards. Two of them were from a security company, and Armas worked here. “Armas, you keep an eye on our staff. We know from previous years that motherfuckers get handsy and disrespectful. You focus on our people, and Antoni and Billy will focus on the customers.” I pointed to our rentals. “No excessive force, or I’ll get fucking violent. Just get them outta here if they cause problems.”

They nodded once in understanding.

I moved on. “Okay, so...Marisol and Sandy, you each have one or two people on cleanup duty. It’s gonna get messy real quick, and...hold on.” My phone buzzed in

my pocket, and I reckoned it was Vince—yeah, it was. I read his message, and a breath gusted out of me.

Thank fuck. Oh fucking hell, that was a relief.

I swallowed as an overwhelming rush of nervousness and anticipation washed over me.

“The, uh...” I cleared my throat. “The first two riverboats are on their way, and both are full.”

“That’s fucking awesome!” Tonya cheered, applause erupting among the staff.

“Now we’re talking!”

“This is gonna be wild.”

We were used to wild on St. Patrick’s. I was shooting for the level above that. My hope was that we’d be in the black halfway through the service tomorrow.

I cleared my throat again, and I twirled a finger to get us back on track. “Settle down—we have more ground to cover.” Jesus, I’d never been this nervous before. I took a deep breath as everyone quieted, and I was painfully aware of Dad watching me. “In order to stay on top of things and maintain a high level of performance, it’s important you take your breaks. But we also need you to choose the time wisely. Communicate with each other, okay? You get five minutes every hour to take a breather in the alley, and the kitchen staff will keep the fridges full. Drink water, grab a snack in passing, sugar it up with pop. Same with your meal break—choose wisely and feel free to use the office or the stairs in the back for peace and quiet.”

Adam stepped closer to me and geared up to say something, so I nodded.

“Remember to encourage customers to take pictures and use the hashtag #TheChicagoCloverRun! Don’t be afraid to ask them to take a selfie with you for our social media accounts either. Just make sure to get their consent before you send me the photos.”

Which reminded me. “As of last week, we have a domain for the Clover Run, and Adam, Julie, and Marisol have spent the week talking us up on Tripadvisor, Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. So whether people use the Clover Run hashtag or the Dearborn Clover tag, all roads lead back to us one way or another.”

“And don’t forget!” Adam hollered. “Our Google score is up from 3.9 to 4.1 since November! We have all the reasons to celebrate!”

I grinned as everyone applauded again, and I couldn’t describe the feeling. But I knew one thing—I was going to do everything in my power to make the Clover a workplace you didn’t wanna leave. Granted, the bar was in desperate need of a financial buffer, but my employees came right after that.

* * *

“Jules, can you help Colin?” I yelled over the music. “He’s lagging behind with the racks!”

She nodded and scurried toward the kitchen.

At ten PM, I was ready for the night to be over.

“You in pain?” Adam asked.

“No!” I flexed my hand a bit more subtly and reached for another glass.

I was also ready for Adam to go back to California. Ev and Bella could stay. They didn't fuss over me.

"I swear I will stage an intervention, Trace!"

I flipped him off over my shoulder as I— "Ope! My bad." I almost crashed into Jamaal. Christ. We managed to avoid each other, and I continued putting together a new order. Four beers, three vodka tonics, and two Guinness.

Adam would have to choose another time to bitch at me about how much I supposedly worked. I mean, sure, we'd had a lot this month...and the one before...but I wanted to keep busy. Busy was good. Busy kept my brain occupied.

The Irish punk rock blared loudly, though nothing could drown out the shouting, the laughing, and the bad singing of all the shit-faced patrons here tonight. We were at maximum capacity and officially turning people away at the door.

At least Dad had gone back to Sarah's—and Jerry and Malcolm hadn't even shown up today.

Adam, Jamaal, and I worked as fast as we could, and Tonya kept adding food coloring to the empty glasses that flooded the counter. God forbid your Paddy beer wasn't green.

By the time we were closing in on midnight, I was the only one who hadn't taken a break to eat, so I'd see if I could sneak away for a few minutes soon. In the meantime, we cranked up the charm, because at this hour, every drunk woman was a flirt, and every drunk dude was looking for either a fight or a best friend. Charm worked on everyone, whether it was the flirty variety or the rhyme and reason that calmed someone down.

When one order was fulfilled, I took a swig from my water bottle and then moved on to the next, and I leaned over the counter a bit to hear what the woman was yelling.

Two beers, got it.

“And one for you, sweetie!” she added.

I grinned and grabbed two glasses. Since she was clutching cash in her hand, my answer was a given. “You wanna make my day, hon? Consider this instead.” I pointed to the nearest tip jar for our soup kitchen. “If I drink any more, I won’t be able to serve you.” I threw in a wink for good measure.

She flushed and bit her lip, which I was sure worked on many men, and she stuck a five into the jar.

“You’re an angel,” I told her.

“Oh, stop it,” she laughed.

Nah. I couldn’t see exactly how much money each one contained, but we’d gotten a lot of donations tonight. I loved it.

“Trace!” Marisol called, coming out from the kitchen. “Sandy needs you!”

I nodded and finished up what I was doing before I let Jamaal know I’d be right back.

“Actually, you can take your fuckin’ break, man,” he said, busy pouring beer. “Adam and I got this.”

I stared at him. “He’s not a good influence on you.”

He laughed. “Just get outta here! We have Tonya and Julie too.”

Fine. That was fair, I guessed. The girls weren’t exactly strangers to bartending.

I removed my apron and threw it under the bar, then headed out into the kitchen. I’d eat whatever was available?—

“Boss,” Sandy said. Right, he’d wanted something. I headed over to where he was preparing three servings of wings. “That homeless guy with the dog is back. He’s in the alley.”

Wait, what?

“You want me to give him food or...?”

That made no sense. Cliff had overdosed over a month ago, and I’d assumed a shelter had taken the dog.

“I’ll handle it,” I replied absently and headed for the hallway. He was dead, wasn’t he? I was sure of it. I’d woken up to the sound of sirens down in the alley, and it was unfortunately not the first time. Cliff had spent more than a few nights outside my apartment over the years, but he’d been one of those people you knew would never get rid of his addiction.

I grabbed a larger flashlight in the hallway, just in case, and shoved the door open. Greasing the hinges was on the list, ’cause the snow melting wasn’t enough, evidently. We’d had nice weather the past couple of weeks, and spring was in the air.

A second or two before I’d flicked on the flashlight, I heard a dog barking, and sure enough, it was Cliff’s shaggy little Ziggy.

As I descended the stoop steps, I shifted the light so I could—never mind. I saw a man on the ground farther in. Curled up like that, he could be drunk or high off his ass, he could be asleep, he could be dead, or he could be ready to pounce.

“What’re you doin’ here, Zig?” I asked, keeping my eyes on the man. This was no sneak attack on my part; I wanted the man to hear my voice.

Ziggy barked again, tail wagging, and he ran over to the man.

I approached more cautiously. “Is everything okay here, sir?” Or ma’am? I supposed it could be, but I was playing the odds here, and it would be a very, very large ma’am.

Ziggy had zero qualms and even licked the man’s face, which caused a reaction. Good, he was awake. He grunted something and batted Ziggy away, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say the dog was anxious. He wouldn’t leave the man’s side.

I came to a stop some seven feet away, and I dimmed the light just a bit. The man didn’t pose an immediate threat, so there was no need to blind him. But—nuh-uh. It wasn’t him. Was it? No. This guy had a beard. He was scrunching his face together and his beanie was pulled down to his eyes, but it couldn’t be.

Oh, I’d fucking kill him.

I took a couple steps closer, and I cursed to myself. That parka looked exactly like the one I’d given Ben.

“Go away,” he slurred, his voice thick with raspy disuse.

Ben wasn’t a drunk. It couldn’t be him.

I breathed a sigh of relief and closed the distance some more, and Ziggy wagged his

tail faster, as if rescue had arrived. The question now was, did someone need rescuing?

“Sir, can I call someone for you?” I asked. “A new twenty-four-seven shelter just opened up over there by?”

“No,” he croaked.

I frowned. Something about his voice was off, and it still reminded me too much of Ben.

I noticed he was shaking, and I wondered if he was sick.

Fuck it. I had to do something. I couldn't leave him like this. So if he wouldn't come inside, I'd have to call an ambulance. Having spring around the corner didn't mean it was warm, and if he was sick or going through withdrawal...

I made a second attempt to get a look on his face, and I squatted down a couple feet away from him.

Motherfucker.

I clenched my jaw, a storm of a million thoughts and emotions surging up within. It fucking was him. What're you doing back here, asshole? Had he started using? That seemed unlikely. You're here. I don't have to wonder if you're dead. You're alive. I swallowed hard. Now you can fuck off again, 'cause you fucking hurt me, you fucking piece of shit. Great, I'd boarded the crazy train.

Since it was him, I lost my patience, not to mention the need to ask questions. I pocketed my flashlight and went over to him, and I bent down and tried to get a grip so I could help him up.

“Quit it,” he groaned. “Stop.”

Something had to be wrong. He wasn't reacting the way he'd told me he usually did. He'd shared a couple anecdotes about how he always had to be prepared to be jumped. And right there—he'd been holding a small pocketknife, but it fell from his hand when I yanked him into a seated position.

I instinctively pushed off his beanie, and I felt his forehead.

Fuck, he was burning up.

Now I knew what I'd be forced to do on my break.

“We're goin' upstairs.” I sucked in a breath and tried to haul him up, and it took all my strength. “Ben, you gotta help me out.”

“No,” he coughed. He said no, but he did pull up a leg so he could stand. It was easy to see he had very little energy, though. “Don't...don't tell Trace I'm here.”

Oh yeah?

Fuck you.

I was so goddamn sick of worrying about him. Worrying, hating, resenting, missing... His dumbass letter had shot my brain into a million directions, and I'd spent weeks analyzing every word. I'd been a shitshow. Obsessed and pissy, obsessed and scared, obsessed and understanding. I'd hosted live debates in my head—with one part defending him and reminding me of his low self-esteem, and then another part cursing him to hell, and... The part I detested the most was the one asking why I fucking cared so much.

It took a while, but I managed to get him over to the stoop of my apartment's entrance.

"Did the dog adopt you?" I asked, out of breath.

He coughed again and grabbed on to the railing. "He won't...leave me alone."

I nodded and scratched my nose. "Try'n write him a letter and walk out when he's asleep."

"What?" Ben gave me a bleary-eyed look, his gaze unfocused. He hadn't made the connection yet, had he? "I...I tried to drop him off at...a shelter."

"Okay." I unlocked the door before I rejoined him down the three steps.

"They were gonna put him down because...because he's not ch-chipped," he muttered. "And—" He made a gesture, dismissive. "They're overcrowded."

So he'd kept Ziggy. Because Ben would rescue anyone but himself.

Dick.

I helped him up the stairs and opened the door, and I didn't have to make a decision about Ziggy. He snuck in faster than I could react—but he was staying in the hallway. I loved dogs, but I wasn't having a flea infestation in my home.

Just as we got inside and the door closed behind us, Ben half collapsed against the nearest wall, and he grabbed on to my arm. He lifted his head unhurriedly, as if it weighed a ton, and he stared unseeingly at me. He was trying. He blinked and frowned and squinted, and I could tell the moment it was dawning on him. He drew a ragged breath, and his sluggish focus followed as his hand slowly slid down my arm

until he let go.

He knew where he was. He knew who he was with.

Even with a high fever, his shame burned hotter.

I hated it, because he made my heart pound, and I knew it wasn't shame over how he'd left. It was shame over his situation and that he felt useless.

"Come on." I cupped his elbow and nudged him toward the stairs.

Once this fever passed, man, I was gonna lay into him. The motherfucker had screwed me over and made me feel a bunch of shit.

I didn't fucking do feelings. Anymore.

Actually, this crap was new. This was some next-level torture.

Ziggy barked from the top of the stairs, and I agreed with him. Ben was taking forever.

"When did you eat?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

I suppressed a sigh and pulled out my phone. I'd been gone, what, ten minutes?

How much could I accomplish in twenty? I had to figure out what was wrong with him—if it was a case of the flu that was going around or if it was dehydration, malnourishment, food poisoning, whatever the fuck. The fatigue was clear as day, as was the fever, the confusion, and the difficulty to speak. I couldn't leave him alone

until I knew whether I was up for taking care of him or if I should call an ambulance.

“I shouldn’t be here,” he said groggily. “I’m s-sorry.”

“Just shut up, Ben.” I retrieved my keys when we finally got up, and I ushered him over to the door.

He took a step toward the foldable bed in the alcove, and fuck that.

“No, you’re coming with me,” I told him. “Ziggy can sleep there. I’ll bring him water and something to eat soon.”

His forehead wrinkled. “Who’s Ziggy?”

Oh. Yeah, he wouldn’t know the name, would he?

“It’s the name of the dog,” I replied, ushering him inside. “He used to belong to a guy who slept in the alley from time to time. He died last month.”

Ben frowned to himself, and I guided him to the bathroom as soon as I’d shut the door on Ziggy. Which, yeah, made me feel like a scumbag, but I had my priorities. I’d make it up to him later.

“He wagged his tail when I called him Pippen,” he muttered.

“Well, who wouldn’t.” I flicked on the lights in the bathroom and sighed. We’d sure as shit been here before.

Ben winced, his breathing labored. “But...he also wagged his tail when... Fuck. When I called him a rodent.”

I snorted and left him at the counter so I could turn on the water. “Take your clothes off and get into the shower. I’m gonna get you juice, water, and whatever WebMD advises.”

“Trace, you don’t have?—”

“Didn’t I tell you to shut up?” Annoyance flared up, and I left the bathroom.

Fucking jagoff.

Not just him. Me too. For still being worried, for still caring.

For still missing him.

I could too easily imagine him sitting in the dark somewhere, going through various Chicago teams as he tried to figure out Ziggy’s name. All alone, in the cold, with no food in his stomach. Constantly worrying about his son, about the future...

I blew out a breath and did a quick Google search, and I hadn’t been far off. We needed to get lots of fluids in him. Sugary drink, check. Water, check. Something salty too. I reached for the pretzel sticks, but that couldn’t be enough if he’d barely eaten.

In the end, I brought a little bit of everything with me back into the bathroom. It was the first time his nakedness didn’t faze me, and that said it all. The fucker had my chest in a vise of worry.

I checked the time again. Fifteen-ish minutes to go.

I lifted my gaze just as he walked under the water spray, and I noticed he was shaking. Like, really fucking shaking.

I swallowed hard and couldn't stop myself. I grabbed the orange juice and walked right over there, and I didn't care I got wet.

"Please drink this right now." I handed him the juice carton, in which there wasn't much left, and I snatched up the body wash. I wanted him under the covers within the next few minutes. "Can you tell me if it's the flu, hon?"

"I d-don't know." He took a gulp of the juice, then another and another. It was weird seeing him with a beard, even though it wasn't very long. "It probably is." He shuddered violently as I began washing him. Baseball stats, baseball stats, not thinking about my hands being back on his body, just baseball stats. "Angie was sick last week."

"Angie...?" Who the fuck was Angie?

"My cousin." He took another swallow, and I decided not to analyze my relief. I need help. "She helped me find the dog shelter and paid for the exam—wait." He went rigid, panic visible in his eyes. "What date is it?"

I furrowed my brow. "The 16th. Saturday." Had he missed the whole damn city turning green?

"Oh, thank fuck." He let out a breath, eyes welling up, a sight that shocked me so much that I missed the juice carton slipping from his fingers. It landed on the floor with an echoing thunk. "Goddammit—sorry. I'm sorry."

I shook my head, a bit dazed, and wondered what the hell had just happened.

"What's with the date?" I kicked the carton aside, then rubbed more body wash into his skin. The water was washing it off too quickly, but I didn't want to pull him away from the warmth.

He sniffled and wiped at his cheeks. “I-I got a job. I finally got a job.”

I didn’t know what cracked my chest wide open more, the good news or how emotional it made him.

“That’s...” I had to clear my throat and push back my own emotions. “That’s incredible. What’s the job?”

He sniffled again, and he scrubbed his hands over his face. “I’m sorry. I’m a mess.”

I didn’t fucking care.

“It, uh...” He took a deep breath, and I dropped my stare. Shit. I couldn’t go lower than his stomach. That’d be weird. So I let my hands go north instead, and I rubbed his neck. “It’s—they... I applied for a job there a while back, but they never gave me an answer,” he croaked. “Then they called me earlier this week and asked if I would be interested in another position.”

“Doing what?”

He seemed to come to; he glanced around us, maybe now acknowledging what I was doing for the first time, and he poured a little bit of body wash into his hand. “Maintenance in residential buildings around the city.”

Well, shit. That was great.

“It’s full time,” he added, making quick work of washing his hair. And beard. “I start on Monday, and I g-get a company car to get around.” The moment the last word left his mouth, he swayed and had to steady himself with a hand on the wall, and it killed my smile before it could break out fully.

“Okay, let’s get you ready for bed.” I grabbed the showerhead and moved it over his head and down his body.

Of course that was the moment he chose to wash his cock, when he could barely stand. But...I’d seen this before. Not...not actually seen it, but I knew getting clean was high up on the list of priorities for people who finally got a night off the streets.

Did he have to be so fucking handsome?

He’d lost some weight, though. That worried me.

Fucking everything about this son of a bitch worried me.

Once he was done, I turned off the water and snatched up two towels, one he could wrap around his hips, and the other for around his shoulders. Then I threw my wet tee over my head, and it landed with a splat in the shower. Christ, my gym shoes too. I’d really come in here without a single functioning brain cell.

“Is it just me, or is it freezing?” he asked, shivering.

“It’s just you.” I unbuttoned my jeans next and pushed them down.

My boxer briefs were still dry, so I had that going for me.

“I gotta get dressed,” I said. “Dry off and go to bed. I’ll bring the food.” I grabbed it on my way out and went straight into the front room, where I unloaded water, pretzel sticks, Nutella, and cold pizza on the coffee table.

I’d see if Petey could put together a soup downstairs for later, though I wasn’t sure. At this hour, and today of all days, nobody ordered fucking soup. They wanted wings, fries, hot dogs, and onion rings.

Back in the hallway, I opened a closet and put on my other pair of jeans—thanks, Ma, for doing my laundry—socks, and one of my countless Clover tees. My gym shoes would have to dry for a day or two, but I had a pair of All Stars in the meantime. Not the best pair of shoes to work in a bar, so I was glad we closed for the night soon.

Ben had sat down on the foot of the bed when I returned to the front room, and I wanted to strangle him as much as I wanted to hug the crap out of him. Nobody had ever forced me into a tailspin of mental gymnastics like this motherfucker. I had no issues with gray areas and nuance, but this was too much. I had at least fourteen different voices shouting an opinion about this man and what we'd gone through together.

Gone through? You fucked. Get over it.

It was more than a fuck. You started caring for him.

You invited someone into your home. You never do that.

Special circumstances. It wasn't like you met him in a club.

Yeah, but?—

Shut the fuck up.

“I gotta go back downstairs.” I walked over to him and unwrapped the pizza from the foil. “I’ll ask you again—when was the last time you ate? And can you wrap the fucking covers around you? Christ.” Irritated as shit all of a sudden, I snatched up the covers and blanketed them around his shoulders. “When I get back, I want you to have eaten all of this. Don’t forget to drink. I’ll bring more with me later.” Which reminded me... “Hold on. I’mma find some painkillers.”

Good job, man. Ramble like Ma, and Ben will be too overwhelmed to answer.

I stalked out of the room, realizing I came off as a lunatic, but I couldn't help it. I'd really worried about him—and I'd cursed myself for having forgotten his last name, because I couldn't remember how many times I'd wanted to look him up. If only to make sure he was still alive.

Cleary, something. Ben Cleary, Benjamin Andrew Cleary—except, it wasn't. At least, I hadn't found anyone under that name who could be him, and I'd even reached out to a cop buddy I hadn't spoken to in two years.

“When was the last time you ate, Ben?” I asked for the third time as I dug out a bottle of painkillers in the bathroom.

I heard him sigh heavily.

“Yesterday.”

Go fucking figure.

I grabbed a pop from the fridge too, since the juice hadn't survived the shower. Then I was back, and he was at least getting started on the food. Well, if one could call pretzel sticks with Nutella food.

I opened the pop for him and handed over the painkillers. “Take both right now.”

He swallowed what was in his mouth and accepted the pills and the drink. “You're angry with me, but I can't figure out why.”

That was the fucking problem.

“I can leave?—”

“No.” The thought alone put me on edge, where I’d essentially already lived for the past two months. “Well, I know you can—you’ve proven that.”

He flicked me a brief, confused look before he downed the pills. Then he must’ve found the Coke good, ’cause he immediately started chugging.

It was my favorite drink for when I was sick too. Ice-cold Coke.

He lowered the can after a moment, and he shuddered and looked down. “You’re mad I left without saying goodbye.”

I’m mad you left at all.

He nodded to himself. “I knew it was a coward move.”

As he’d stated in that goddamn letter. By now, I could recite it word for word.

I cleared my throat and knew I was out of time. “We can have a lovely chat about that later. Right now, I’m gonna sacrifice my cold cuts and give them to your new pet. Then I’m going back to work. We close at two. And if you leave?—”

“I won’t,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry, Trace. You’ve been so happy that I assumed?—”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, I...” He gestured tiredly at the door. “I’ve seen you. When I stay in the alley, I look sometimes. You’re always in a good mood behind the bar.”

I rubbed my forehead and—no, I didn't have the time to unpack all that now. He stayed in the alley a lot? Why? And me flashing a grin and laughing it up when I worked didn't fucking reflect what I was going through. But after reading his letter a million times, I could see how the slightest grin might strengthen his belief that I would be "relieved within a few days" of his leaving. Because I wouldn't have to "babysit" a "burden" anymore.

I shook my head. "Just be here when I get back."

* * *

"See you tomorrow, boss!"

"Yeah, see ya. Get home safe," I responded absently. I smiled to myself as I tore off the EOD receipt and looked at the total.

I mean, I'd been here all night, so I knew we'd done well, but this...

I grinned and headed straight for the office with the money. We kept our drop safe in a supply closet just outside the office, the safe camouflaged by an old moving box, and tonight's shindig was definitely gonna give me a good night's sleep.

We needed eighty-nine bucks, and then we were in the black.

I could barely fucking believe it.

I was so glad we hadn't gone the bar crawl route that many establishments did for St. Patrick's Day.

Holy fuck.

Despite it being almost four in the morning, I was too wired to go to bed. Instead, I walked around and made sure everything was set up for tomorrow. Every surface had been wiped down, the bar tables had been pushed together somewhat to give more room to the dining areas for the lunch service, the donation boxes had been emptied, doors were locked, all broken glass had been cleaned up...

As I stood there in the center of the place, with the bar area behind me, the dead street outside in front of me, and dining areas on both sides, I finally understood what Dad had talked about so many times. The Clover could be a fucking menace, but when things went well... The sheer joy was indescribable, and it was the calmest sensation. I didn't feel like jumping up and down or taking a victory lap. I just wanted to stand here and soak it all up.

We were on the right path, and now we kept going.

On my way upstairs, I grabbed a few food containers from the staff fridge. We didn't have soup, but we had chicken fingers, cheesy bread, Ma's lasagna, and pickles.

Ziggy was waiting for me right outside the door as I went to activate the alarm, reminding me that he might need something more to eat too. I'd given him turkey and water earlier. Maybe if I scraped the fried goodness off the chicken fingers...

Fuck, did he have to go out? I didn't know what to do with a dog. My grandmother had owned a yappy little thing, but I just remembered giving it treats so it would stop stalking me.

That had not worked.

To play it safe, I opened the door to the alley. "Go on. I promise I won't close the door on you."

He cocked his head at me, then trailed out and immediately pissed on the bottom of the door.

Thanks, you little asshole.

He moseyed down the steps next and sniffed around, and I leaned against the doorway. I guessed I could pick up waste bags and dog food tomorrow. I had to go out for a few more items before the soup kitchen anyway. We'd be spread thin up until the soup kitchen closed at five, but if Ben didn't ghost my sorry ass again, maybe he could help.

Unless he was still sick, obviously.

I yawned and shifted the food containers to my other arm. "Ziggy! Let's go. If it ain't happening yet, it's not gonna."

I wondered if Ben had cleaned him, however unlikely that sounded. I just remembered Ziggy's fur being way dirtier when Cliff had been around. More gray and black than yellow and white.

Ben had mentioned a dog shelter—and an exam? Oh, and his cousin.

Ziggy darted back in and up the stairs, and I followed at a more human pace.

This next part should get interesting. Did I crash right next to Ben? I wasn't gonna wake him up, nor was I planting my ass on the foldable bed in the hallway. So...I already had my answer, yet things felt uncertain and weird.

That summed up our entire situation. Uncertain and weird.

In the end, I could be butthurt all I wanted—and I fucking was—but there was no

manual for what we were going through. His life was so different from mine in terms of perspective and priorities. He didn't view himself as someone I might suddenly catch feelings for. He didn't see himself as anything good at all. In his eyes, he'd done me a favor by leaving.

And Christ, he'd teared up just because he'd gotten a job? That spoke volumes of his relief. My heart had fucking broken for him.

I couldn't imagine the weight on his shoulders. But knowing it was there made it difficult to hold on to my anger, and we'd become sort of close these past couple of months. I'd used it to keep my worry at bay. I'd used it to distance myself.

I'd failed on both accounts, but what a ride it'd been.

When I reached my door, I set down the food containers on the floor so I could fold out the bed. I didn't have kibble for the shaggy little mutt, but I had a bed and chicken.

Ziggy jumped up on the bed without prompting, and he was ridiculously well trained. Was this normal? As I started scraping the batter off the chicken fingers, he merely sat there and waited.

Don't look at me like that.

"You can come inside when I know you're not covered in fleas, okay?"

He tilted his head like he'd done downstairs.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, grabbing a fourth chicken finger. That better be enough. He wasn't very big, maybe thirteen, fourteen pounds, give or take.

“I’ll be your friend if you keep an eye on Ben,” I told him. “Like, legit. Stay on him. He’s a major flight risk.” I extended a piece of chicken to him, and he was quick to take it. “You do that for me, and I’ll fatten you up in no time. Deal?”

He was busy eating. I’d get his answer tomorrow.

I rose to my feet and eyed the water bowl. He had plenty, so I declared myself done for the day. With the rest of the food under my arm, I headed inside and was met by the same silence and darkness I’d left earlier. The TV was on, that was all. The big lump on the bed wasn’t moving, and the sound was off.

I kicked off my shoes and left the food in the kitchen for future nuking. Then I felt the need to check in on him, and I brought more Coke and water. I didn’t know why, but I got this flash of fear that he might be dead.

And I might be losing it.

The optimal approach would be if I could only creep forward, feel his forehead, and make sure he was breathing. However...sneaking up on a homeless guy? Not the brightest idea.

“Ben?” I flicked on the floor lamp next to the bed. “Ben, can you wake up?”

He’d eaten, at least. The pizza was gone, and the water bottle was empty.

Over by the coffee table, I lifted the Coke can. Empty too. Good.

“Ben...” I put my hand over his foot, ready to press it down if he went with instinct and tried to kick me. All I got was a sleepy grunt from underneath the covers, but it was enough to bring comfort. “How’re you feeling?”

He shifted slightly and coughed. “Sweatin’ my fuckin’ balls off,” he rasped.

“Don’t do that. It’s a solid pair.” I walked up to the head end again and dared to pull back the covers a bit. Sweating was good. I always sweated buckets when my fever was beating whatever virus trying to kill me. I felt his forehead. It was still hot, but I wasn’t a thermometer.

I sat down on the edge and opened the Coke.

“Turn around so you can drink,” I said.

He actually listened and complied.

Pushing himself up on his elbow, he glanced around blearily and eventually met my gaze.

Fuck, he could be cute sometimes. Downright adorable.

Wait.

He’d shaved.

“You shaved?” I extended the Coke. Just then, I noticed two tiny pieces of toilet paper on his neck, so he must’ve nicked himself.

“Mm. It was all itchy.” He licked his lips and brought the pop closer.

I scrunched my nose. “Ziggy better not have given you lice or fleas or something.”

He frowned as he guzzled from the Coke. “Who? Oh. You mean Pippen.”

“I mean Ziggy,” I chuckled. “He’s resting it up in style in the hallway.”

“Pippen sounds better.” He took another swig, and I had no argument. I’d grown up idolizing Pippen and MJ, just like every other kid in Chicago—though, I’d been too young to appreciate them when they’d been at the peaks of their careers. “He doesn’t have fleas or anything, by the way,” Ben added in between sips. “My cousin insisted on a whole grooming package. And he’s been on some kind of pills in case he’s got worms.”

“Angie,” I stated with a nod. “That was nice of her.”

He stifled a belch and sat up properly, the covers pooling around his middle. “She loves two things in this world. Animals and her balcony view of the lake.”

I felt my mouth twist. A view was a nice thing. I was happy with mine too, even though we were only on the second floor. But the windows up here were big enough to sit in, and we had tall buildings all around. I liked the city lights. Almost as much as I liked the view right in front of me.

“I suppose she loves me too,” he sighed. “I’m just awful at accepting it.”

I lifted my brows. No shit?

“I’m stunned.” I offered him the water bottle next.

He swallowed and took it but made no move to drink. He just stared at the can and the bottle, and it was so like him. I hadn’t forgotten his pensive moments.

“I gotta get something to eat before I crash,” I said. “I’ll make a plate for you too. And don’t tell me I don’t have to.”

He smashed his lips together, making me snort. He'd been about to say something stupid, hadn't he?

"Come on." I nodded toward the doorway. "If you feel better, you can keep me company."

"Sure." He nodded with a dip of his chin. "Thank you for...you know. Saving my ass again."

"It's a nice ass," I replied, walking out.

I was tired, fucking exhausted, but still too wired to sleep. Hopefully, the food would help. At this rate, I wasn't gonna get to bed till five in the morning, and I had to get up at nine.

Tomorrow was gonna be awesome.

"So, does Angie live here in the city?" I opened the microwave and dumped the lasagna onto two plates.

"She does," he confirmed.

I glanced over at him, thankful he was at least wearing boxer briefs. With him, I could never be sure.

"She's a coordinator of some sort at Northwestern Memorial," he said. "She wants me to go stay with her now that her ex has moved out, but?—"

"But why would you do that?" I retorted. It'd been the reason I'd asked in the first place. If he could live with family somewhere. "You can spare me another rant about you being a burden, Ben."

“You sound like her.”

I put the microwave on two minutes and then leaned back against the counter.

I didn’t say anything, because I didn’t need to.

He wasn’t stupid. Was he?

I went in another direction instead. “How come you’ve been staying in the alley?”

He cleared his throat and averted his gaze to the floor space where a kitchen table should stand. There wasn’t one, because I had no use for it.

After a moment, he swallowed hard and winced, and he rubbed at his chest.

Either something was up, or he was struggling to phrase hims?—

“Excuse me.” He stalked off abruptly, and I stiffened as I heard him shut the bathroom door.

Was he?—

Fuck.

He was throwing up.

I ran a hand through my hair, and I had to fight every urge to fret through the door. Nobody wanted a million questions when they were emptying their stomach. But what if it wasn’t just the flu? Had he eaten too fast? He’d told me he hadn’t eaten since yesterday, and I assumed he hadn’t exactly had the healthiest diet. I knew how many homeless people lived on cheap bread, coffee, fries, and whatever they could

find on clearance or the cheapest takeout menus.

The microwave dinged, and I hesitated. Ma's lasagna wasn't too unhealthy, though maybe I should add something? I could run downstairs and get lettuce or whatever. Or maybe he couldn't stomach food at the moment. I probably wouldn't.

I'd ask him.

Fuck, why was this so hard? And why did my chest feel all...uncomfortable? I had this tightness—I couldn't describe it. But it was as if a physical restraint was slinging more worries on the pile. What if he needed to go to the hospital? I didn't know how long he'd been surviving on too little food. He could be severely dehydrated too.

Screw it.

I headed for the hallway and knocked on the door. "Ben? Are you sure it's just the flu?"

I heard him wretch and spit into the toilet.

Maybe Ziggy had given him rabies. If Ben started foaming at the mouth, I was calling animal control.

"You need a priest?" I threw that out there too.

He made a croaky, coughy sound. "Jackass."

I grinned slightly, quickly, just wanting him to be okay.

"I'm fine," he said hoarsely. "I caught whatever Angie had and..." He flushed the toilet. "Kinda hard to be your own nurse out there."

I could imagine.

“I haven’t eaten well. Too little to drink too.”

And undoubtedly not enough proper rest and warmth. Yeah, no wonder. Okay, but this felt better. Additionally, he’d chugged two Cokes and eaten two slices of pizza. Maybe that wasn’t the best way to reintroduce his stomach to food and drink.

I made a mental note to talk to Ma tomorrow. She was helping us at the soup kitchen.

Hearing the telltale sound of someone brushing their teeth, I returned to the kitchen and opened the fridge. Which...was a sorry sight. I mean, the door was filled with condiments, but that was about it. I did have a banana that was reserved for my favorite weekend breakfast, toast with Nutella and sliced banana. Would that be better? ’Cause otherwise, we were looking at beer, two Styrofoam containers, a packet of kielbasa, two jars of Ma’s giardiniera, and half a churro from Costco that Chip hadn’t finished.

Banana, it is.

I was going to eat lasagna, and Ben was going to eat a banana and drink water—if he could stomach anything at all.

Good deal.

I brought everything to the front room and practiced patience while I sat down on the foot of the bed and channel-surfed.

When that didn’t work, I pulled out my phone and texted my mother.

I know it’s late. Don’t give me shit. Just wondering what foods to eat when u have

the flu. (It's for a friend.) Answer when u wake up.

Finally. The bathroom door opened, and Ben soon reappeared in the doorway.

I chewed around a mouthful of lasagna. "Banana?"

He let out a breath and trailed closer. "I...maybe. My stomach's still unsettled." He sat down a couple feet away and draped the covers around his shoulders. "Now I know what Coke looks like when it comes up."

Intriguing.

"It looks like Coke," he finished.

I grinned.

"I think I drank too fast," he admitted.

He didn't even look at the lasagna; he seemed way more interested in getting more sleep, and I couldn't blame him.

I jerked my chin over my shoulder. "Go to bed. I'm right behind you."

He hesitated and glanced toward the front door. "Are you sure you don't want me to?—"

"Are you fucking serious right now?"

Could he quit rejecting me? It fucking hurt.

My evident irritation made him furrow his brow at me.

“I just don’t wanna be in the way. You can’t honestly get pissy about that.”

“Try me.” I scowled and shoveled more food into my mouth. “Where you’re concerned, I can get pissy about anything.”

Against my better judgment, I wanted him to stay. More than that, I wanted him to want to stay. Was that too much to ask?

He sighed and reached for his water bottle. “It seems I keep making the wrong call about you.” He uncapped the bottle and cleared his throat. “I’ve been staying in the alley a few times a week because I wanna see you.”

A few times a week.

That was too many nights in the cold, in the rain, and before that, in the snow.

Because I wanna see you...

Just not approach me? He wanted to watch from a safe distance?

Correction: he didn’t wanna be a bother.

What was it he’d written in the letter...? My energy was better placed with others.

Idiot.

I had to be blunt.

I set down my plate and pulled up a leg to face him better. “Can you stay? Without fucking off in the morning.”

He swallowed and nodded minutely. “If that’s what you want.”

Oh, for fuck’s— “What do you want?”

His jaw ticked with tension. “I want you next to me, of course.”

There was nothing “of course” about that. One of the reasons his letter had fucked me up so much was that he’d claimed one thing and acted as if the opposite were true. He’d told me I’d gotten him attached, and then he’d just left. He’d implied spending that time with me had been a dream, right before he’d jumped back into his own nightmare.

I wanted that nightmare to end.

I...I wanted the dream back, and I realized I hadn’t told him this. Not that he’d given me a chance to; I’d had my rude awakening in the days following his disappearance.

“You finally said the right thing,” I muttered. “But just so you know, you leaving never became a relief. It only pissed me off, until I realized I was so angry because it hurt.”

He frowned to himself and scratched at the label on the water bottle. “I never wanted to hurt you.” Yeah, he’d said that in his letter too. “Hell, the opposite—I...” He released a breath, deflating. “I’m sorry, kid.”

Kid.

We’d work on that.

“From now on, I’ll be in your life for as long as you want me to,” he added. “Friends?”

We had a lot to work on.

Come on, friends?

And his self-esteem...

“Sure. Friends,” I said.

What exactly did he mean by friends?

* * *

I was going to show him.

For some bizarre reason, he wanted me in his life, so I was gonna make sure I earned my spot.

Never in a million years had I thought he’d be upset with me for so long just because I’d left.

I should be questioning his taste in friends.

Friends...

Fucking hell. I’d set myself up for heartbreak now, hadn’t I? But he was worth it. Despite that it was difficult to believe my actions had caused harm, I’d never thought I’d speak to him again, much less share a bed.

Part of me was desperate to hope, though. Starting my new job on Monday would make me feel like a human again, and I could finally contribute properly. So...I’d be here. I’d help whenever I could. I’d be his friend.

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Trace Kalecki

He should be back by now, shouldn't he?

Even though we'd officially exchanged numbers, I couldn't shake the fear that he'd split.

"Unca Trace, look at me!"

I looked over to the main dining area, where Chip was currently doing cartwheels between the tables.

"You don't even pretend to be sick, chipster," I told him.

He jumped up and bobbed his head to the music. "I swear my tummy hurts!"

Uh-huh. Sarah was just a sucker. He liked his kindergarten just fine, same with his babysitter, but none of them came close to Uncle Trace. And I couldn't blame him. I was awesome. I let him run wild in the restaurant while I treated the bar area as my unboxing station for soup kitchen supplies.

Since we were closed on Mondays, I used the day to catch up on paperwork—as in, send that shit to Ma—and prepare for this week's soup kitchen services. The floor was flooded with the hygiene kits we were restocking, and I'd do the energy kits next.

Speaking of Ma, she should be here soon too. She and Dad were heading back to

Florida tonight, and she wouldn't waste a moment to dig into my personal life. Ben had started feeling better after being dead to the world for nine hours, and he'd come down, all disoriented from sleep, and bitched at me for not waking him up. Then he'd taken his spot at the bread station, and of course, Ma had noticed. She knew I didn't date—and loved to remind me how much that “broke her heart.”

“He's just a friend, Ma. Chill.”

“Who spent the night upstairs where you only have one bed?”

She could be so annoying.

I could be slow too, 'cause it hadn't occurred to me to tell her that we'd moved the foldable bed into one of the spare rooms or anything.

“Can't I keep Ziggy over here, Uncle Trace?” Chip asked. Sadly, “Unca” was slowly turning into “Uncle.” My nephew was growing up. “He won't mess up the bags!”

I smirked and dropped another travel-size body wash into a bag. “It's not about him messing up what I'm doing here, buddy. We can't have pets in the restaurant. People have allergies.”

Apparently, Ben was one of them, and he'd been surprised that he hadn't reacted to Ziggy. Then he'd also reasoned that it was mostly cats that bothered him.

Where was he?

I checked my phone. He'd guesstimated he'd be back around four, and it was...ten minutes past.

Christ.

I might have some issues to work through.

The last thing I wanted was for my past to come back to haunt me when I should be focusing on Ben's milestone. He'd been so adorably nervous this morning, which, I was learning, manifested itself in minor mood swings. He was a man of few words, so one had to read between the lines and watch his actions. He'd washed his clothes twice, even though the first round had done the job. He'd been testy in an innocent way—like, the tension hadn't been bad or anything; maybe cranky was a better word. Grumbly. Knee bouncing, checking the time over and over—kinda like me right now.

I was incredibly invested in my friend.

Chip came over to me and eyed all the bags as he chewed on a Twizzler. "Where do you buy this crap?"

I coughed around a laugh and ruffled his hair. "Since when is soap and toothpaste crap, punk?"

"Bath time is so boring!" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, but you don't wanna smell," I pointed out. "And we don't buy this. People donate it." Call it a principle, but I couldn't waste money on hygiene products when people had drawers filled with shit they'd taken from hotels. It was better to reach them and let them know we could put the products to use.

Chip nodded. "'Cause they think it sucks too. They don't want soap. Grandpa calls that something. I don't remember the word, but it's when you tell people they gotta do it."

I rolled my eyes, knowing exactly what word it was. "Grandpa calls everything totalitarian?—"

“That’s the word! Totaltrian.”

I looked away from him to hide my grin, but Jesus totaltrian Christ, I wanted to laugh. How fucking adorable could a kid be?

“Probably best Grandma and Grandpa are going back to Florida today,” I said, stifling a chuckle. “Your mom already calls me a bad influence.”

“I don’t know that word, and I don’t wanna know either! I’m gonna dance now!”

That was one approach to life.

Hopefully, the guy Sarah had started dating was a good egg. Chip deserved a sibling or two to terrorize. If I wasn’t mistaken, the dude had a kid already. Sarah had been more interested in sharing that there was no ex-wife involved, which I could understand. She’d been through her fair share of shit with Chip’s sperm donor, who’d neglected to mention that he was already married and had a family when Sarah had become pregnant.

“This song!” Chip stiffened and looked at me before he lit up like a Christmas tree.

I grinned. There was hope for him yet. A song about the Cubs...? He knew how to melt my heart—and it sure fucking beat the Red Sox ball cap he’d had when they’d moved here.

My nephew wasn’t growing up a fucking Boston fan.

“Do you remember the lyrics yet, bud?” I asked.

“Yeah!” He shook his butt and clapped his hands over his head. “Go Cubs, go! Hi, Chicago, what to say—go Cubs, go, they win on Saturday! Yeah, hey, hey!”

Eh, close enough.

I smiled and scrubbed a hand over my mouth, and— Someone banged on the door, so I looked over my shoulder and spotted Mom and Dad.

Which reminded me... “Chip, when my friend Ben comes here in a bit, I want you to sing that song for him.”

“Okay, but that sounds a bit weird, man!”

I chuckled and headed over to let my folks in.

Dad beamed proudly as soon as he saw Chip and heard the music.

“Hi, sweetie.” Ma came over to me, and I dipped down and kissed her cheek. “Is Sarah here yet?”

I shook my head and locked the door. “She was gonna have coffee with that guy first.”

Ma lit up like Chip. “So soon? Oh, that makes me happy. They were on a date yesterday morning, you know. He took her to Kasama.”

I felt my forehead wrinkle, and I scratched the side of my head. For one, my kind of date didn't involve standing in line for a fucking hour before I could eat. For two, I didn't need the foreplay gossip, just two pink lines that gave me more eggs to put in my Clover basket.

“Thanks for the update.” I patted her gently on the head, which always got her riled up.

“I swear, Trace.” She batted my hand away, and I laughed as she fixed her hair. Like it was necessary? I’d barely touched it. “Kell! Talk sense into your son.”

They switched places; Dad left Chip and strolled over to me, and Ma went to gush over her “little Charlie.”

I’d never fucking call him Charlie. Ma and Sarah did that.

“So...” Dad had his easy smile on, which he’d had all weekend.

We were the same height, but he had a little less at the top and a little more around the midsection. He also had a tan. I did not. Fuck Florida.

“Am I getting the verdict now?” I was waiting for it. This was the first weekend he’d seen me fully in charge of the place.

“Why would I be givin’ you a verdict?” he asked.

I shot him a look. “Come on. You’ve been Smiles and Mr. Chuckles all weekend, and I don’t fucking like it. Just tell me if I passed the test.”

He let out a gruff laugh and stuck his hands into his pockets. “Boy, if you still needed testing, the Clover wouldn’t be yours.”

Fair point, I guessed.

He nudged my elbow with his. “You got nothing to worry about, son. You’ve made all the changes I didn’t wanna admit we needed. It was why I knew it was time to hand over the reins to you.”

Well, shit.

If he was gonna be all honest and sweet like that, I couldn't crack a joke.

So I went with the truth, because if one person understood, it was him.

“After we closed on Saturday, I stood over there—” I pointed to the floor where the bar area met the main dining room. “I just...stood there and looked around. We were eighty-nine bucks short. Practically all of Sunday was profit. It felt surreal.”

He grinned faintly and scratched his arm. “Those are the best moments. And you'll have plenty of 'em, I'm sure.”

I hoped so, but I didn't mind the grit. I was born to work hard. It gave me purpose.

Like it does for Ben.

Fuck. We were similar in a lot of ways, weren't we?

I folded my arms over my chest and looked over to where Ma was nodding at whatever Chip was saying.

“Hey, when did Nana start the soup kitchen?” I asked.

Dad hummed and rubbed his chin. “Early seventies, I think. Why?”

I shrugged, mostly curious. “Did she have a particular reason, or...?”

Because ever since I'd met Ben, I wanted to do more. More collabs with local churches and organizations. Hand out more flyers, maybe even create a social media account for the soup kitchen—I could talk to Adam about that. He and his family had returned to California this morning, and he'd said he had plenty of material for future posts. He'd given me instructions, too, about what I should send him—pictures of

food, the staff, how we worked, the service in general.

“Well, it was your grandfather,” Dad replied. “He lost his job. He and thousands of others during that time.” He paused. “In the sixties and seventies, more and more corporations were relocating to the burbs.”

I nodded, remembering that from school. I’d written a paper on manufacturing.

“Unlike many others, my old man could come here and work,” Dad went on. “But he saw all his old coworkers struggling. Those who couldn’t afford to move...” He shrugged slightly. “One day, he asked Ma to make a big pot of soup. He’d seen the ladies at church with their coat drives and soup kitchens, so... And Ma ran with it. She started asking for donations and organizing late-night services where she gave away leftovers.”

I remembered that part too, from Nana’s stories. People would flock outside the bar in the middle of the night, and nothing went to waste.

I cleared my throat and debated whether to say anything about Ben. I couldn’t talk to Ma about this, ’cause she’d jump to conclusions that weren’t there. She wanted me to settle down and shit.

A few months ago, I would’ve laughed it off, but now...

Whatever. All I knew was, I couldn’t get Ben out of my head.

Friends.

“That man you saw briefly yesterday,” I started by saying. “My friend who helped out at the soup kitchen?”

Dad nodded. “Mom mentioned him. She thinks you’re dating.”

I snorted under my breath. “We’re fuckin’ not. He’s a friend. I’ve tried to help him, I guess. He’s, uh... He’s been homeless on and off for a few years. Shitty luck, if you ask me. He has a special needs kid, and I guess all the money’s gone to his care.”

I was missing most of that story, I was sure. But he’d made some comments yesterday about finally being able to afford more therapy sessions for Alvin.

“That’s rough,” Dad said. “He stayin’ with you, then?”

“For now...?” I asked rather than stated. Because ultimately, I had no idea what Ben’s plans were.

I’d told him bluntly that he could stay for as long as he needed, and I’d used his language too. I’d told him I wouldn’t mind help around the bar, whether it was the soup kitchen or handyman work. It was the best way to get him to agree, if he could contribute.

“Either way, I wanna do more for people like him,” I admitted. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m continuing with the soup kitchen. I just feel like we can make more of a difference for people who just need a minor nudge back into society.”

Dad shifted where he stood and faced me more. “You got any ideas? Because...a minor nudge in theory is still a mountaintop in reality.”

I knew that.

“Take day care, for example,” I said. “We see a lot of single parents lining up for the soup kitchen every week, and I don’t know how many times I’ve heard mothers say they can’t afford day care, which means they don’t have the time to look for work,

because they gotta be with their kids.”

Dad furrowed his brow. “You’re not turnin’ the bar into a day care center, Trace.”

“What the fuck?” I laughed. “Of course not. And before you go there, I know the Clover comes first. You don’t gotta remind me.”

“Good. So what’re you thinking?”

“I don’t know.” It almost came out as a groan, because I was getting frustrated. I hadn’t thought this through yet. Something so simple as laundry had been on my mind too. Being poor was expensive. It was difficult to get off the ground when you were paying extra at a laundromat because you didn’t have a washing machine at home, or when you lived in a high-crime area where prices on food and gas were hiked up.

“I don’t know,” I repeated. “I’ve just been narrowing down the obstacles to see if I could come up with something—like, I don’t know, a babysitting initiative. Money’s tight for many of us, but sometimes we can give our time.” I shrugged. “I’m gonna see if I can talk to that Christin chick at Ma’s church. Maybe she can—” I stopped abruptly and glared at him. “Can you fucking stop looking at me like I’m crazy?”

That set him off, and he went from smirking to full-on laughing.

“You’re not crazy! You’re sweet.” He threw an arm around my shoulders. “You’re also ambitious, and I don’t want you to burn out. You do enough already, you hear?”

Goddammit, he wasn’t saying the right things. He was parroting shit I always heard from Adam and Julie.

“You weren’t planning on babysitting the kids yourself, were you?”

I shot him a sideways scowl. “Fuck no. But I could help organize shit. I can talk to people.”

“Good.” He nodded firmly. “Because thanks to you, Chip can spell jagoff.”

“I only teach him the essentials.”

“I might agree, but your sister does not.”

I was right, my sister was wrong, end of story.

I opened my mouth to respond, but two knocks on the door interrupted, and I looked back— Oh, thank fuck, finally! It was Ben. It was Ben, and he... Fuck me sideways, I didn’t know I’d needed to see him this way so badly. Utility pants? Check. Hoodie? Check. Beanie with the logo of the company he now worked for? Check. Stubble that glinted silver in the sun? Oh, fucking check. But those pants... We were talking heavy-duty road worker pants. Dark gray instead of orange, but with neon-yellow reflective stripes.

Straight-up porn.

I opened the door for him, and the day had clearly breathed life into his eyes in a way I hadn’t witnessed before.

“Could you open up in the back?” He nodded toward the alley. “Your entrance, not the kitchen.”

Baby, I can open up any entrance for you.

“Uh, sure...? What’s in the back?” Except for my willing ass.

The corners of his eyes crinkled with a faint grin. “You’ll see.”

So, should I get undressed, or...? I had absolutely nothing against getting fucked by him in the alley.

He pulled out a pair of utility gloves and headed back to the alley, and I had to shake the case of stupid clogging up my brain. After relocking the door, I told Dad I’d be right back, and then I headed for the kitchen. Through said kitchen. Unlocked the door to the stairwell, where Ziggy waited for me, looking like he’d just woken up from a nap.

Maybe Ben could take him to the park. I’d already done that with Chip a few hours ago, and we’d discovered that Ziggy could be incredibly lazy. He was all energy when he was buzzing around someone’s legs, but faced with a park and greenery to run wild, he sat down next to the nearest park bench.

Hearing noises on the other side of the door, I knitted my brows and opened it, only to find Ben not alone. A big-ass truck was parked in the alley, and Ben and another man were hauling out wood that looked like it belonged in a junkyard. The planks were all different colors and types of wood, some long, some short.

There would be no fucking here, not that I’d actually believed it, but I was clearly walking into a scene with its own energy. They had to know each other, and the other man laughed at whatever Ben had just said.

Ben saw me and offered a quick smile before turning to the other guy. “Garrett, this is Trace, the young punk who’s saved my life twice.” That was going a bit far. “Trace, Garrett. We went to high school together, and he’s saved my ass too.”

“He’s exaggerating,” Garrett told me, coming over.

I nodded once and met him halfway down the stoop, and we shook hands. “Good, we’re on the same page. Nice to meet you.”

“You too, kid.”

Kid. Friends. Kid. Young punk. Friends.

Ben grunted as he dragged four wooden planks out of the bed of the truck. “If I’m gonna stay with you for a while, Trace... Ope—fuck.” He almost dropped one. “I’m building you a new bartop.”

My eyebrows crawled all the way up there.

“I called Garrett yesterday and asked if he had anything he wanted to get rid of,” he continued. He proceeded to carry the planks up the steps and into the stairwell. “Hey, Pip. How are ya, boy?” Ziggy ate up the attention.

“And I always do,” Garrett filled in. “We got cherry, hawthorn, oak, walnut, teak...”

I turned back to Ben, too dumbfounded to contribute a single response.

“It’ll take me a few weeks, but I think it’ll look great,” Ben said, coming out again.

I rubbed the back of my neck, and then Ben wiped sweat off his forehead, and I wanted to fucking die. Was everything he did gonna turn me on?

Also, I’d had that priced once, because I was curious what replacing our bartop would set me back, and the answer was roughly four grand from start to finish.

“I’m just happy to get rid of your crap, bud,” Garrett laughed.

Ben flashed a grin and turned to me. “I hope you don’t mind I store some tools upstairs. I left them with Garrett a few years ago and told him to throw me in the lake if I ever tried to sell them.”

Uh-huh.

“Not that they’re worth much,” he added, digging out his phone.

“Still quality shit,” Garrett said.

“Mm.” Ben nodded absently and read whatever, a message maybe, on his phone. “Gare, you mind dropping me off at my ma’s place? Alvin’s anxious. He had therapy today.”

That brought me out of my daze, like a rubber band snapping away every question and ounce of confusion.

“No, of course not,” Garrett replied.

I cleared my throat and stepped aside as Garrett carried more wood through the door. “Ben, can I have a word?” I walked down the last steps and gestured toward the dumpsters.

“Yeah, sure.” He pocketed his phone again and followed me down the alley. “Everything okay?”

Uh, that was my question to him.

I exhaled a laugh and rubbed the back of my neck. “Let’s start over. Hi,” I said pointedly. “How did it go today?”

Maybe it dawned on him that he'd sort of steamrolled in here like a new man.

He let out a chuckle and removed his beanie. "I'm a full-time employee with decent pay and good benefits. I haven't felt this good in years."

That made me smile. He'd mentioned yesterday that the original job he'd applied for was, like, twenty bucks an hour, and the one he'd eventually been offered was almost twenty-six, with opportunities for overtime. And he'd talked about a 401(k) as if it was a strange concept.

"Today was a short shift," he said. "I have a week of in-house training and tagging along with someone who's retiring soon, and that's about it. I got my work clothes, my schedule, I pissed in a cup, and I'm picking up my work phone tomorrow."

Fuck, I wanted to hug him—and then some. "What's the schedule gonna look like?"

"Two weeks day shifts, one week nights," he replied. "What they do is, I have a set of assigned buildings for the day shifts, and then I'm on call for the night shifts where several of us cover buildings throughout the city. Best part, I can stay here until I get called in. I just gotta report to my manager a few times."

That was fucking amazing.

"I'm really happy for you." I dared to reach out and give his arm a brief squeeze, and he smiled that gorgeous fucking smile. "So, can we celebrate when you get back, or are you staying at your ma's?"

He grew hesitant and pulled out his phone again. "It's never a good idea I stay there. Her place is too tiny, and we gotta get creative with the sleeping arrangements. If you don't mind, I'd like to come back here, but I might be late. It depends on Alvin."

I nodded, totally understanding that part. I was just glad he was coming back. “I don’t mind—and...I need you to get that through your thick skull. I want you to stay with me. I’m not doing it to do you a favor.”

He tilted his head. “Then why are you doing it, bright spot?”

Oh, so that nickname was making a comeback, huh?

That was fine.

“We have stellar banter going on.” I shrugged. “Plus, you’re gonna save me a ton of money if you’re building me a bartop. You’re practically doing me a favor.”

He laughed quietly and shook his head. “I liked the first part—and I agree. But the rest was bullshit.”

No, it fucking wasn’t.

“What’re you talking about?” I had to push. I couldn’t help it. I wanted him to see. “Every improvement in the bar leads to better reviews and more customers. This is a win-win situation, Ben.” I folded my arms over my chest and tried to stand a little taller. I felt like I would’ve sounded more convincing if he weren’t such a damn skyscraper. “You’ll be doing what I can’t afford—and trust me, I got a long list if you ever get bored.”

At least he didn’t dismiss what I said. He was listening; he was mulling things over.

When his gaze met mine again, the affection and soft mirth were unmistakable, and a beat later, he cupped the back of my neck and pulled me in for a hug.

“Thank you. I needed to hear that.” He pressed a kiss to my temple and was gone

long before I wanted him to, long before I'd gotten a chance to process anything, and he started walking backward to the truck. "I'll text you when I know how late I'm gonna be."

I nodded dumbly.

Fuck me, I wanted him. A rush of nerves and desire and longing swept through me and stayed there. This went so far beyond lust and temporary attachments. He was threatening my sanity as it was, and nobody had done that before. Even with Eric, I'd maintained a level of emotional distance, and it hadn't only been because of his addiction.

* * *

During that week, I felt myself take a step back. My feelings were terrifying me, and Ben was busy settling into new routines. He was too stubborn to let me lend him money, so he insisted on working extra. When he wasn't at his actual job, he helped out around the bar, he got started on his "reclaimed wood" bartop for me, and he assisted with soup kitchen preparations. Only then was he comfortable eating the food in my fridge.

When he wasn't busy working, he was with his son and mother.

He came home one day visibly relieved because his ma was in higher spirits now that he had a full-time job he seemed happy with, not to mention living arrangements that didn't worry her half to death. She was seemingly impressed by Ben's new address in the city, mostly because she hated the idea of him living in a garden unit or basement somewhere that flooded.

Given that she was an Elmwood Park resident, I could understand her concerns. I didn't know what that suburb was most famous for, Johnnie's Beef or the frequent

flooding in the area.

Either way, Ben's ma was happy, and Alvin was now gonna go to therapy once a week instead of two or three times a month.

I had to admit, I was curious about Ben's family. As always, he was a man of few words, and he didn't share a whole lot. But I could just be impatient, because he dropped some minor details here and there. Like their whole situation out there and how Ben wanted them to move to a better place where his mother wasn't forced to sleep on the couch in the front room. Or that it was Alvin's anxiety and panic attacks that prevented them from leaving.

I was becoming familiar with an ounce of that anxiety, though it was more related to Ben leaving, and I didn't know why. He'd settled in fine upstairs. He was weirdly neat when it came to laundry and actual cleaning. Like, he could make a mess and leave his clothes on the floor just like I did, but he'd probably used the vacuum more than I had in the years I'd lived here, and the bathroom had never been so spotless. He'd even cleared the shower glass of most of the limescale buildup.

In other words, he showed no signs of making other arrangements anytime soon, and yet I walked around on eggshells as if I'd wake up tomorrow to find him gone.

I was fucking pathetic.

If this was what it was like to develop deeper feelings for someone, it was garbage.

Besides, he didn't give me anything to look at anymore. He closed the door to the bathroom when he showered, and he went to bed—right fucking next to me—in boxer briefs and a tee.

That was probably the worst torture. Sleeping next to him every night without any

touching. He stayed so close to the edge that it seemed deliberate. He was serious about us being friends.

At the same time, I couldn't even call him a cocktease, 'cause look at where he was in life. The last thing on his mind should be me. He'd finally achieved a sustainable stability where he could move forward and build a future for his son. If anything, his focus and dedication only made him all the more appealing to me, and wasn't that just a bitch.

* * *

On Friday, I took a few hours off once Petey arrived, because he offered his car when it was time for the weekly grocery run for the soup kitchen. I had a pocket filled with coupons, apps overflowing with deals, and screenshots of weekly ads stacked with promotions.

Some played games on their phones when they were on the shitter...

I started with the Costco on Ashland, and color me surprised when I spotted Ben right outside finishing up a hot dog. He wasn't alone either. An older man wearing the same utility clothes stood next to Ben with his own food.

Ben smiled in surprise when he saw me, so I didn't feel the need to avoid him. I mean, I didn't wanna interrupt him in the middle of his lunch. I guessed he was fine with borrowing money from his ma and cousin, but God forbid he let me help him till he got his first paycheck.

"Hey," he said. "You shopping for the soup kitchen?"

"Yeah. You're on your lunch, I take it."

He nodded, crammed the last of his hot dog into his mouth, and gestured to his coworker. “Gio bribed me so he can go home early. He says I don’t need a babysitter anymore.”

I smirked a little.

Gio shrugged. “I’d rather nap on my couch than watch him get us all fired.”

Huh?

Ben snorted and elaborated. “He got on my case yesterday for not calling in professionals for something I could fix on my own.”

“It’s in the damn job description,” Gio bitched, though there was no actual heat to it. “Maintenance and basic repairs.”

“Fixing a radiator is basic,” Ben argued.

Gio eyed me and jerked his thumb at Ben. “You see what I gotta deal with? Management’s gonna notice, and he’ll make the rest of us look bad.”

I shook my head in amusement.

So I guessed Ben was going to be popular with his manager for not racking up invoices from outsourced professionals, but maybe he wouldn’t make many friends at work.

Gio muttered that he was glad to be retiring soon, and he handed over the car keys to Ben before he called it a day. At...noon.

“How are you getting home?” Ben asked.

Gio was already walking off. “Ever heard of the train?”

I smirked.

Ben was amused too, and then it was just the two of us.

“You need a hand with the shopping?” he asked. “I don’t have anywhere to be for another hour.”

“Hell yeah, you can push the cart.” I was suddenly happier about this outing. “They have insane deals on peanut butter, Barilla pasta, and Rice Krispies.” And some other shit.

We headed inside, with Ben dutifully pushing the cart, and he let me ramble about the next few services’ menus. On Sunday, I was thinking mac and cheese with bacon, ’cause we’d been stocking up on cheese, and I had collected sixteen BOGO coupons for bacon from Aldi’s weekly ad. I’d handed them out to our staff, so everyone had come to work with bacon. Each ad was limited to four packs, but I could get creative.

“And Rice Krispie treats for the kids,” I added. “My sister’s coming over tomorrow to help me make them.”

Obviously, I’d check if store-brand cereal was cheaper first, but sometimes you struck gold in the world of coupons.

“Then next Thursday, I’m thinking hot dogs to celebrate the new season starting,” I went on. “I ordered extra fries from our suppliers too.”

Would this be the Cubs’ season? Well, I’d be a shitty fan if I said outright it was unlikely.

We went down the aisle where the peanut butter was, and just as I started counting on my fingers, I remembered I had a math whiz with me.

“How many tubs do I need?” I asked him. Because they were actual wholesale tubs. “At this rate, we’re pushing three hundred servings twice a week, and I think we’ll do ramen and PBJ sandwiches the Sunday after this one.”

Ben stepped closer and grabbed one of the tubs, and he checked the label. “It literally states fifty servings, Trace. You need six of them.”

Oh. I scowled. How the fuck was I supposed to know?

I started filling the cart. “Thank you.”

He chuckled and draped an arm around my shoulders. “You’re cute, you know that?”

Oh, hell fucking no. I straightened in an instant as a bolt of...something...shot through me, stripped me of all filters, and let the bruised ego out to play.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” I told him. “You’re welcome to stay with me and be my friend, but you don’t get to cozy up with me like this and call me cute unless it comes with a big side of dick. Are we clear?”

Aside from a second-long flash of surprise when his eyebrows hitched, he remained his frustratingly unreadable self—and he stayed close too. He kept his arm around me. He maintained eye contact.

“Is that what you want? A big side of dick?”

Hnnghff.

His voice in that low tone robbed me of most of my fight as a violent shiver rolled through me.

I swallowed dryly. “Are you fucking serious?”

“Yeah. I am, Trace.” He let his arm drop and positioned himself right in front of me instead, and he was essentially towering over me. “When were you forthcoming about wanting anything other than friendship? How am I supposed to know what you want when you’ve been distant all week?”

I opened my mouth to let my anger out, but it was shoved back when my brain replayed the question. You’ve been distant all week. Fuck. Oh fuck. How am I supposed to know what you want? Motherfucker. I’d been so cooped up in my head, and I was acting as if he could read my fucking mind. Jesus Christ. Cue mortification.

It wasn’t only this week either. Other than the night we’d fucked back in January... I hadn’t shown my interest in the slightest.

So, uh...maybe I had sharing problems too...?

Maybe.

“I’ve only held back to give you space to settle into your new routines,” was my weak defense.

He huffed under his breath and eased back. “How kind of you. But I can multitask.” He nodded up the aisle. “Come on. Tell me what’s next on your list. And then we can talk about your taste in men.”

Excuse me? “What’s wrong with my taste?”

“You can start with raising your fucking standards,” he told me. “You want a quick fuck? Say the word. I’m fairly confident I can deliver. But you gotta learn to aim higher. You deserve more than?—”

“Okay, you can stop.” I was done. I was so goddamn done that I felt dead inside. Zero emotion, including anger and annoyance. If he was gonna circle back to that again, like he’d done in his stupid letter, I didn’t wanna hear it.

Friends, it was.

Fuck him.

* * *

I stuck the key in the ignition and rested my forehead against the wheel.

What was wrong with me?

I’d fucking told myself not to make decisions on his behalf, and here I was, pushing the kid away because I was so certain he didn’t know what he was getting himself into. And he didn’t. He really didn’t. But that wasn’t all on him. I wasn’t even giving him a chance.

This was better in the long run, though. I needed stability and people who stayed in my life, and I could think of a million ways I’d fuck up a relationship because I couldn’t be a good partner. I had to focus on my son, on getting him and Ma out of that apartment. I had to save up money. I had to work.

A friendship was easier to maintain. Trace wouldn’t have the same demands, and I’d hopefully have him in my life for as long as I breathed. Because that was where I’d landed. He had to be a permanent fixture.

I didn't even know what he wanted. I just picked up on our chemistry every single day, and it fucking killed me, because there wasn't a chance in hell we'd ever be on the same page. He was young, driven to go further with the Clover, passionate about the projects that helped people, and...he had a more "fuck it, let's see what happens" attitude. I didn't. I couldn't afford that. For one, I'd already screwed myself over by being halfway in love with the little shit. For two, Alvin.

I wanted them to meet. I wanted to coax Alvin out of hiding and eventually find comfort in a social setting with people he liked, and I knew he was going to like Trace. Which made it all the more important to keep the pressure off so I didn't do something that sent Trace running.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Trace Kalecki

“I remember when you were fun, babe,” Eric slurred lazily. His head lolled back against the couch, and I eyed the mess all around. Two dudes were lost in their highs on the floor. Pizza boxes, empty bottles, fucking needles, and tinfoil.

“I remember when you were sober,” I replied absently. Why had I come? Why had I bothered tracking him down?

It used to be just booze. Then he’d tried his ma’s pain meds. Then he was buying Tramadol on the street. Then benzo. Then he discovered oxy. And now...

He was one party away from shooting up fentanyl.

Who knew what he was on right now.

“Come on, Eric. Let’s go. You can crash in my room.”

He found that funny for some reason. “Like your dad’s gonna let me in.”

“We’ll wait till he’s gone to sleep.”

He shook his head and sprawled out across the cushions. “Life’s too good, Trace.”

The edges of my vision grew blurry and my lungs burned and... I sucked in a breath, the images faded, and I cursed and rolled over to bury my face in my pillow. God-fucking-dammit.

It's just a bad dream.

Unfortunately, the memories pulled me back in.

“Are you breaking up with me?”

“What's there to break up? I haven't heard from you in weeks!” My voice bounced off the walls in the alley, and I had to get a grip. I was fucking working. I couldn't deal with another ride on the Eric roller coaster. I was so done.

He glared at me, though it fell short 'cause he was still affected by whatever he'd been on. “What the fuck happened to you, Trace? We used to do everything together, but ever since your old man put a lock on your?—”

“He didn't put a lock on shit,” I seethed. “He offered me help—he gave me an out, and thank fuck I took it. Otherwise, I'd be you right now.”

I was so mad that I couldn't see straight. How fucking dare he come here? Selfish motherfucker. He wasn't even one of those friends who'd struggled with depression and never got help; he was an arrogant party animal who didn't wanna stop. He'd stolen from his family, from me, and from his friends. He was an excellent manipulator, and he came and went as he pleased. Nothing was ever his fault.

Drugs had killed everything I'd once liked about him and amplified the shit I hated.

Trace, wake up.

I wrenched away from the voice, and the touch, and catapulted myself out of the nightmare in the process. What the fuck? I was in bed, it was still mostly dark out, but I could hear the faint sound of traffic. Sleep-laden anger and images of Eric morphed into disorientation and...there was Ben.

I sat up and scrubbed my hands over my face.

Why did I have to dream about that motherfucker? Eric belonged in my past—a part of my life that still made me cringe.

“Are you okay?” Ben asked quietly.

A breath gusted out of me, and I nodded and let my hands fall.

I was okay. Sort of.

“You wanna talk about it?”

That wasn’t what we did. Ben and I didn’t talk. Not on that level anyway. We were infuriatingly awesome at being friends in a more casual way. We could talk sports for hours. We could hang out and play pool, prepare soup kitchen kits, cook, play darts... He was too good at darts. In pool, we were evenly matched. I could lose track of time watching him work on the bar, which was almost finished. He could talk forever about Alvin.

We just didn’t dig into each other’s pasts or any topics that were sensitive.

“Not really.” I glanced over at him as he got ready to go to bed. He must’ve recently come home from his night shift. He’d showered and changed into a new tee and boxer briefs. “Busy night?”

He shook his head. “Just two calls, and I got the second right as I finished the first.”

That was better than the time he’d come home exhausted and got a call right as he’d slipped under the covers.

“Come on.” He nodded toward the doorway. “I’m hungry.”

How was that my problem? I grabbed my phone on the armrest of the couch. “It’s six thirty.”

“You could probably eat too. You didn’t touch my ma’s casserole last night.”

Because my emotions had devoured a whole bag of pretzel sticks!

Whatever.

I got out of bed and pulled on my sweats, and then I followed him out into the kitchen.

Ziggy was like, fuck that nonsense. He stayed on his stack of blankets.

The empty corner in the kitchen was a mess, ’cause Ben was restoring a kitchen table he’d found for free on Craigslist.

I yawned and aimed for the coffeemaker. I didn’t drink much of it, but that cup in the morning was vital.

Thank fuck it was Monday today. I was off. The bar was closed.

I had to go out and find a birthday present for Ben. May was here, and he turned forty-nine tomorrow. He’d made reservations downstairs for four. I was gonna meet his mother and son.

I’d already become well-versed in Elsie’s cooking, and it was next level. Actually, Ben was a great cook too. Whenever he had dinner in Elmwood Park, he came home with leftovers.

Once the coffee was brewing, I grabbed two bananas. He was putting bread in the toaster, so I knew what he was in the mood for.

“When I came out to my folks, Ma cried and apologized for struggling to understand,” Ben said out of nowhere. “She said she loved me and supported me, no matter what, but it was difficult for her.”

I side-eyed him and chewed on the inside of my cheek.

Made sense. His parents were of that generation. You had to give them time—if they didn’t kick you to the curb outright. My mother had struggled too, but mostly because she didn’t want me to get bullied and shit like that. Dad had been weirdly understanding. He was usually more old-school and set in his ways, but he had his moments.

“My old man, on the other hand,” Ben continued wryly. “He stopped speaking to me. He turned the whole family against me—except for Ma and Angie.”

I frowned to myself and grabbed a knife and a cutting board.

“What else,” he sighed. “Oh, first time I spent a night outside, I bawled my eyes out. I felt like the biggest failure on the planet.”

Okay, ouch. And he had to have an agenda with these confessions, right?

“Why are you telling me this?” I had to ask.

“Because we know everything and nothing about each other, Trace,” he murmured. “I know you talk shit about your old man but have a very special relationship with him, and you act like a married, bickering couple on the phone when you discuss the bar. I know you’re generous. I know you look out for your staff. I know the first thing you

do on Wednesday morning is go through the For U deals on the Jewels app.”

“Cause without coupons, they’re fuckin’ expensive,” I defended.

He chuckled quietly, and the toast popped up. It was our cue. I sliced the bananas, he spread the butter, I spread the Nutella, and then he put the banana slices on top.

“What I don’t know is why you’re having nightmares about someone you called Eric,” he went on. I winced. “I also don’t know why you don’t date. I think there’s more to the story of how you learned self-defense and eventually taught it to women and at-risk teenagers.”

So now he wanted to get real?

Fuck.

I poured us coffee and grabbed the milk while he plated our toast, and then we went back to the front room.

It’d become an automatic thing; one of us turned on the TV and muted the sound. We both liked to have something running in the background.

It was especially helpful if I was going to rehash anything from the two years of my life I’d rather forget. Except...maybe the part about Eric wasn’t that rough. Where Ben was concerned, I mostly dreaded him figuring out that my past was coming back to haunt me because of him. And I knew how quickly he rushed to blame himself for shit. It wasn’t like he’d intended to hurt me, and I was the one who’d told him we didn’t have to discuss the letter. He’d asked me a few days after his return if there was something we should resolve because he didn’t want anything to go unsaid.

Ben was right. We knew everything and nothing about each other. And we both

sucked at talking about what mattered.

I poured some milk into my coffee and braced myself. “Eric and I went to high school together, and we...I don’t know, hooked up from time to time. I can’t say we ran in the same circles, but we ended up at parties together on the weekends.” I took a sip to test the temperature. Ah, cheap and milky, my favorite. “After graduation, we started hanging out more, which I know today is because I was a fucking mess. I didn’t know what to do with my life, college held zero appeal, and it wasn’t like we had the money to send me to a good school.” Even if we’d had the money, I wouldn’t have gone. I’d been so tired of school. “I took a few classes to appease my folks, but the more Dad pushed me toward business and economics, the harder I fought back. It was so clear that he wanted me to take over the Clover one day, and it wasn’t on my radar at the time.”

Ben hummed around a mouthful of toast. “No surprise. You’d just gotten free from school.”

Exactly. He got it.

“Right. So I went the opposite direction because I’m a dumbass,” I said. “I started going out more. Eric and I were suddenly a couple, and I got hooked on his way of constantly turning us into the life of every party.”

Even though I kept my stare fixed on the TV or my food, I sensed his gaze on me.

“I drank a lot. Did some coke...” I swallowed. “Did more coke, smoked more... And quickly realized I was too poor to maintain a coke habit. So Eric introduced me to cheaper thrills, but they weren’t my jam. He wanted downers, and I craved uppers. His version of parties turned into funerals. He just wanted to sit on a couch and act like a sloth.”

“And you preferred clubs,” he guessed.

I nodded. “Fake ID, Boystown, and ecstasy. At the same time, I had enough self-awareness to know I was spiraling. I knew that if I continued down the path I was on, I’d get stuck. I became kinda grossed out by myself, because in that environment, I saw so much shit, and I did fuck-all to help anyone.” Those memories could still give me guilt trips to this day. Young girls doing anything for a hit, guys trying to prove themselves in front of friends, theft, abuse... “Dad tracked me down at the exact right time,” I admitted. “He was furious. He physically dragged me outta there, slammed me up against a wall, and asked if I wanted a future or not.”

I’d broken down like a fucking baby.

“I never had to spend a night on the streets,” I said. “Dad kicked me out of the house because I was upsetting Ma, but I had friends to crash with. A week here, a month there... And that went on for roughly a year, before Dad found me at a party.”

“Good man.”

“One of the best.” I guessed I’d reached the worst part now. “After that, I...” I exhaled a laugh, even as my stomach churned with unease. “I rebelled again, this time with myself. I got this idea that I needed structure and a good authority figure.”

“Ah. The Army and your attempt to become a cop.”

“Exactly. And then self-defense and some martial arts. I vowed to myself never to look the other way again when a piece of shit should pick on someone their own size.” I shook my head and finished my first piece of toast. My last too. I had no appetite. “I still had a foot in the door of the place I’d left behind. I was trying to get Eric away from drugs and all that shit.”

Back then, I'd had a studio apartment on the edge between the South Side and Evergreen Park, and I'd never forget how Eric played with my hope. He'd made so many empty promises.

"Dad didn't trust me around the bar yet, but he'd called in a couple favors so I could work elsewhere," I continued. "I worked part time at Sam's Club and Mariano's close to where I lived. Hunting down Eric was also a part-time job, I guess." I picked up my coffee mug, seeing his intoxicated expression in my mind. How I'd fucking hated it. "Every time I managed to pull him away from one of his parties, he promised to get clean and start fresh. Then when I woke up the next morning, he was gone."

Eventually, he'd stopped making promises.

Eventually, I'd stopped hunting him down.

Eventually, he'd OD'd and died.

I took a swig of my coffee, but it tasted of old memories.

I noticed Ben was no longer interested in his toast either.

"Why do I get the feeling I'm the reason you're having nightmares," he said with a sigh. "I take it Eric's story didn't end well."

"I found out he was dead seven months after he'd been buried," I confirmed. "And before you give yourself a hard time, you weren't my boyfriend when you walked out without a word, Ben. I didn't know you leaving that way was gonna stir up old shit. Besides, I'm not actually sure that's why."

He furrowed his brow and glanced my way.

It was time for me to be honest.

I swallowed and set down my mug. “My biggest fear is that’s gonna happen again, and everything’s different now. It would hurt way more.”

Right then and there, I realized I was willing to lay it all out. After weeks—fuck, months—of shitty communication on both our parts, he’d taken the first step today. More than that, he’d been very open in that damn letter. So it was my turn to make myself vulnerable, despite that it scared the shit out of me. Because it was so new. Other than Eric, I’d had one brief relationship, and it’d crashed and burned within a few months. I hadn’t been able to commit as much as he’d wanted, so he’d moved on without telling me for a while.

Ben wasn’t like my pathetic pool of exes. I knew that.

“I’m not going anywhere, Trace,” he told me quietly. “I wish you’d told me, though. We should’ve hashed this out weeks ago. You should’ve let me grovel.”

I shook my head tiredly. It was pointless. “In your shoes, I probably woulda done the same thing.”

I knew firsthand how feelings could freak someone out, and he’d hinted at an attachment. That it hurt to borrow a page from my life or whatever. He’d felt the need to leave because he’d crash once the illusion burst.

“Can I share my biggest fear now?” he asked.

I eyed him wearily.

He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat to face me more. “Other than losing what I’m currently trying to create, I’m...” He trailed off and scratched his forehead,

seemingly changing his mind. “Maybe it’s not even a fear. I’m more resigned.”

“About what?”

“Never catching up,” he admitted. “Dating and all that shit—it doesn’t exist for me, because it can’t.”

I felt myself go cold at the same time as my heart caught on fire in the worst way. It fucking hurt. It pounded, as if screaming for help, and a cloud of anxiousness billowed up in my chest.

“Alvin will always need me.” He dropped his stare to his food. “The day I manage to get him to move, it has to be a place I’m prepared to spend the rest of my life in. And...” He swallowed. “While I’d never trade being his dad for anything, it’s painful to accept that my inability to be flexible will make sure I’ll always be alone. Most of my money will continue going to his care, and I highly doubt I’ll be able to get to where I once was, work-wise. Having my own company, feeling somewhat secure with my finances, having a buffer. I’ll always worry.”

But I can be there.

Fuck.

“What happens to him when I die?” he asked. “What happens when my mother dies? What happens if, in a year or two, there’re layoffs and I lose my job?”

A low, rushing sound invaded my senses, and a new fire ignited. He was never going to pursue anything with me, because he had bigger problems, and he didn’t want to burden anyone with them. More than that, he didn’t believe the person who might wanna share all this with him existed.

I knew the person existed, though. He was sitting right fucking here, and it was almost as if he'd been waiting for Ben to give him a new purpose in life.

I understood Ben and Alvin were a package deal. Of-fucking-course they were. Ben's ma, too.

My stomach knotted with nerves and discomfort as a quick flash of an image shot its way into my brain. I saw Alvin in one room, Elsie in the one with the half-bath, Ben and me right in here. And despite the immediate urge to run from such a commitment, I forced the scenario into the forefront of my mind. I let the image grow and unfurl. I saw way more laundry in the bathroom. I saw home-cooking and a reason for having a kitchen table. I saw my family merging with another. I saw Ben and me sharing every struggle...

For every second that ticked by, each glimpse crystallized further and became part of my new dream.

I saw a future that scared the shit out of me with how much I wanted it.

My brain started spinning, and I took the leap the second I realized I was conjuring strategies to win him over. Because this was fucking happening. I understood he was too afraid to even hope, but I wasn't. I was gonna make him see that we belonged together.

Ben had fought for his survival for years. He'd had just enough energy to get through the present. And now he was on his way. Now he could see a tomorrow too. Then...? Goddammit, I was gonna give everything for the chance to share a future with him.

Holy fuck.

So, yeah. I should get my ducks in a row.

“I don’t think you’ll be alone,” I said.

He knitted his brows together in confusion and reached for his coffee. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“Sh-yeah,” I chuckled.

Elation buzzed within me all of a sudden, because I was so fucking determined. I was sure the nerves and the fears would cause me to waver from time to time until the day he joined my fight, but we’d get there.

One of the obstacles was what he’d told me at Costco a few weeks ago. In order to get him to promote me from fuckable—or however he’d label me with his statement of being “confident to deliver on a quick fuck”—to...someone he wanted to shack up with and hopefully fall madly in love with, I was going to need to up my game.

I had to start behaving more honestly in terms of openness, flirting, and interest in knowing everything about him. Meeting his ma and son tomorrow would help. I’d dig all the way to China if I had to.

Which, come to think about it, I’d essentially done from the start. I’d snooped around to find his damn wallet in order to get to a place I could trust him more, so I could help him more. I’d wanted to go the extra mile for him way earlier and to a higher degree than I’d ever wanted before, and it was sure as fuck not only tied to wanting to be helpful.

“Are you gonna elaborate?” Ben drawled.

Right. That seemed like a logical follow-up question, but the answer was no. He wasn’t ready.

“What’s there to elaborate?” I deflected. “I’m just confident your Irish luck’s about to change.” And speaking of Irish and...his wallet...I should confess.

“When did I tell you I’m Irish?” His forehead wrinkled.

“I was getting to that,” I replied. “Your last name is Cleary or something, right?”

“O’Cleary,” he corrected.

“That’s what it was!” Fucking hell, I should’ve remembered the O. “I found that out back in January because I dug through your wallet when you were in the bathroom, but then I forgot most of the information, and it’s been bugging me for months.” I scratched my head. “But yeah, I knew it was Irish.”

He stared blankly at me.

I grinned sheepishly. “The more information I had on your tight-lipped ass, the more I could trust you, and the more I could help out.”

“My tight-lipped...” He shook his head as if to clear it, and he shot me a little scowl. “You fuckin’ sneak.”

“You left without a word! Call it even?”

That earned me an “Are you fucking serious?” look.

I slid closer to him and linked my arm with his, and that evidently earned me some suspicion too.

“Think about how cute I am.” I threw that out there, reminding him of the word he’d used at Costco. Fucking cute. What about irresistibly sexy? I’d rather be that.

He narrowed his eyes at me, and I cranked up my innocence and rubbed his arm.

This might actually be fun.

Unfortunately, my phone started ringing, and only one person was ballsy enough to call me this early.

Ziggy woke up and looked our way, quickly losing his interest.

“Hold that thought,” I said and stood up. “Or move on to a better thought if the current one isn’t working in my favor. We don’t need negativity in our home.”

I grabbed my phone from the armrest, and sure enough, it was the Spawn of Satan calling.

“Mornin’, sis?—”

“Thank God you’re awake,” Sarah croaked. She sounded like death warmed over, so I guessed my day off now included uncle duties. “Is there any way you can watch Charlie after kindergarten? I woke up with a fever and haven’t stopped barfing.”

“Thanks for the image.” I made a face. “Do you need help getting him there first?”

“No, one of his friends’ mothers is picking him up in an hour,” she replied. “I don’t have the freaking time to be sick, and this week is so busy.”

Yeah, I knew that. I was gonna watch Chip on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday.

“We’ll work it out,” I said. “When do I pick him up?”

“Three-fifteen. The problem is, I promised him we’d go to that color run thing by

Navy Pier—the Monday to Monday in Color I told you about? Today is the last day.”

I didn’t remember Sarah saying anything, but Chip had been buzzing about it for days.

“Okay, so I’ll take him.” I shrugged. We could get a couple beefs afterward. “What time is the run?”

“You’re the best, Trace—thank you so much. They start a run every hour from noon till six. I’ll email you the information. It’s free, by the way. And it’s in that park right before the pier, you know where Lake Stage is?”

“Yeah, I got it. So we’ll head over right after I pick him up. No worries.” I paused and figured it couldn’t hurt asking. “You sure it’s not morning sickness?”

“Not this again,” she grated out. “I’m not fucking pregnant!”

“Easy,” I bitched. “I’m just lookin’ out for the family.”

“No, you’re looking out for the bar by treating me like a baby factory.”

“Is it working?” I asked.

She hung up on me.

Fucking rude.

I sighed and dropped my phone on the mattress, then turned back to Ben, who was handing out one of his wry smirks.

“I’m watching Chip today,” I said.

“Oh, I heard everything. You were sweeter than sugar right up until you started hinting at Clover heirs again.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. He and Sarah had met a single time, for about ten minutes, and it’d been enough for Ben to be Team Sarah on the baby front. Fucking White Sox fans. They always picked the wrong team.

“Anyway. Shouldn’t you go to bed?” I thought it was best to change the topic. “I’m gonna hit the shower and think about what I’m buying for your birthday.”

That was code for, be nice to me because I’m giving you a present tomorrow.

He grinned faintly and scooted up on the bed. “I already told you what I want.”

I rolled my eyes and walked out of the room. It’d be a cold day in hell before I put on a Sox tee and posed for a picture.

* * *

Chip was feeling pumped by the time we arrived at Polk Bros Park by Navy Pier, and I couldn’t lie. The music, the freaking T-shirt weather, and the view breathed life into me too. The green slope was lined with parents and dancing organizers of the event; there were big balloons, food vendors, a DJ on the stage, and colors everywhere. The part of the lawn near the finish line was an explosion of colors from that powder they threw over the kids when they completed their race.

I could give Sarah a lot of shit, but she was an amazing mother. She was always bringing Chip to events like this one.

She’d already texted me twice with reminders to take a ton of pictures, but as I spotted one of the two organizer tents, I noticed they offered photos for...holy shit,

fifty bucks?!

Uh, I had half a mind to call the cops, 'cause that was highway robbery.

I scratched my forehead, then turned my ball cap backward.

So, blurry photos on my phone or professional pictures that robbed me blind?

“Where do I get my number, Uncle Trace?” Chip looked around, then started jumping in place and pointed up the slanted lawn. “Here they come! They run so fast!”

Aw, fuck it. He was worth it. I was splurging today.

I looked up toward the gaggle of maybe twenty kids running down the lawn, and the DJ scratched the turntables and boomed out, “Here come all the winners!” Parents cheered, and the staff got the dust cannons ready.

The run was a quarter-mile long and probably started on the other side of the tree line. I’d have to make sure to score a good spot where I could see Chip. He was a fast little shit, and I didn’t wanna miss the moment he ran through the dust. Or when he received his gold medal that was made out of chocolate.

Uncle Trace liked chocolate too.

“Let’s go get your number, chipster.” I ushered him to the other side of the finish line, and we ended up in another line.

I had no complaints, for once. Except for the price tag on that photo package. Christ. But otherwise, it was a good day. Unseasonably warm, over seventy degrees, which was promised to last for a whole day before we dropped to sixty and rain for a week,

and the skyline was obviously a highlight too.

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket and assumed it was another text from Sarah.

Huh. It was from Ben.

Is there room for one more?

Was he here? I glanced around before I responded to him.

Of course. Where are u?

“Right behind you, kid.”

Shit. I spun around, only to come face-to-f... Face-to-sternum with Ben. Delicious-looking Ben in jeans, a beater, and an open flannel shirt. He only wore flannel when he was working on something handymanly. Was that a word? It should be.

“It’s Ben!” Chip declared cleverly. “Hi, Ben. I’m gonna run and get color powder in my face!”

Ben’s faint smirk morphed into a smile as he glanced down at Chip. “Well, I couldn’t miss it. Are you excited?”

“Yuh, super! Oh, this song!” Chip instantly turned to me and held up his arms, and I laughed and picked him up. Which didn’t happen every day anymore. But yeah, we had this song.

We didn’t even know the language, but it was a club-worthy remix of an African artist’s song, with a fast beat, tribal fusion, saxophone that Chip pretended to play like a pro, and lyrics we could sort of lip-sync to.

We bobbed our heads to the beat, and I didn't exactly stand still. I had to put some oomph into each dance move Chip performed seated on my hip. The boy went all in with his hands in the air, his whole body shimmying.

I smirked. "Take it away, sax player. Here's your solo."

He was ready. Fuck air drummers and air guitar players—Chip beat them all with his air sax.

I bumped my hip to Ben's, and he grinned and shook his head at us.

Chip made time move faster, and the line got shorter and shorter until it was our turn. I added his name to the roster, and a woman gave him his number for me to pin to his shirt. Scripted instructions were rambled, and I got the gist.

The line for the photography was a hell of a lot shorter, and no wonder. I pointed to the price tag and leaned closer to Ben.

"If you ever wonder if I love my nephew..." I said.

He followed where I pointed, and he lifted his eyebrows. "Jesus Christ. That's highway robbery."

Exactly what I'd thought!

"Is the camera included?" he joked.

I laughed. "Right?"

When it was our turn, I filled out a form with Chip's name and, more importantly, his race number and my email. One of the photographers would keep an eye out and

guaranteed ten photos we could choose from. One print and three digital files were included in the price.

Fifty bucks poorer, I headed over to the staff that was gonna guide the kids through their run, and due to the growing crowd on the last day, they were adding extra runs. That suited me perfectly, because it meant less waiting.

A woman introduced herself as Terri, and she had nine helpers to make sure no kids veered off track.

“You stay close to Terri, you hear?” I leveled Chip with a serious look. “You listen to what she says.”

“I will!”

“Good boy. Ben and I will be at the finish line. Oh, and remember to close your eyes when they shoot the color dust, okay?”

One of Sarah’s reminders.

“You sound like Mommy—that ain’t cool,” Chip laughed.

I sucked my teeth. Fucking brat.

As I’d guessed, the run started just on the other side of the lawn, over the small hill, but it still made me a tad nervous to let Chip out of my sight. Thankfully, the race was gonna start in a few minutes.

I bit at a cuticle as I watched Terri and her staff usher approximately fifteen young kids up the slope, and Chip turned around and waved excitedly to me.

I smiled and waved back.

Ben came up next to me. “I never wondered, by the way. If you loved him.”

I glanced over at him.

He smiled, still looking in Chip’s direction. “I miss those days sometimes. Alvin was never into activities that tend to attract crowds, except for one thing. He was obsessed with watching marching bands at games.”

I smiled too.

“He’d wear noise-canceling headphones and fuse himself to me right up until the band started playing,” he said. “He became a whole other person.” He nodded up the hill. “Kinda like Chip. For a short moment, Alvin was all energy and excitement. Couldn’t sit still to save his life.”

I was looking forward to meeting him tomorrow.

“And now...” Ben sighed. “Now he’s into bath bombs and chalk.”

I chuckled—wait, chalk? “Chalk?” I’d heard about the bath bombs, and I’d actually read up on it. Because every now and then, in between reels of bar food and sports, I sometimes saw those videos pop up on Facebook. Bath bombs being taken apart, sparkly fingernails clicking against glass, people cutting soap of all things...

It was a whole thing where visuals and sometimes primarily sounds gave off pleasing vibes for viewers.

Ben laughed through his nose and nodded with a dip of his chin. “Yeah, that’s the latest. He orders blocks of gym chalk online and breaks it apart in his videos. Can you

fuckin' believe it? His last one got four hundred thousand views."

Seriously? Four hundred thousand?

"Jesus."

"I know." He shook his head, and we started walking back toward the finish line.

"He's got nearly twenty thousand followers now. It's insane."

Gym chalk, huh? I made a mental note.

Because one thing was clear. Ben missed the fuck out of his son, even though they saw each other at least three or four times a week these days. In other words, Alvin was my best weapon. If I could get that guy to like me...?

"Speaking of Alvin, I reserved a corner booth for tomorrow," I said. "He can have his back to the whole dining area if there are too many impressions."

"I appreciate it. Thank you." He folded up the sleeves of his flannel shirt. "He's mostly sensitive to sounds, but too much movement will drain him too." He nudged me with his elbow. "He's looking forward to meeting you."

"Oh yeah?" I grinned. "Have you talked me up good and proper?"

He chuckled. "I, uh...I introduced him to Nutella and pretzel sticks. No talking up necessary after that."

That made me laugh. Priceless!

"He says they have the perfect crunch. Plus, he loves Nutella."

Well, I was a genius, so...

We found a good spot near the finish line that wasn't too crowded, and I circled back to how Ben had ended up here today. After a weekend of working extra, he only had today off before he returned to day shifts tomorrow, so I'd assumed he'd sleep more.

"I was in the area," he replied. "Someone in River North wanted to get rid of two solid oak kitchen tables on Craigslist, so I hightailed it over there. The tables look like shit, but it's good material."

I smiled to myself and scratched my nose. "That explains your slutty handyman outfit."

He didn't precisely take the bait. "Should I worry that you have named all my outfits? The slutty handyman, the slutty casual wear, the slutty road worker?—"

"And it stops there," I pointed out. "You only have those three."

"I don't need any more."

"I didn't say you did. I'm just saying it hasn't exactly been a huge project to come up with three names."

"Clearly," he snorted. "You've shown zero creativity."

I grinned and scrubbed a hand over my mouth, beyond addicted to the way we talked. He was just so fucking easy to be with.

"It's actually four now," he added. "Ma bought me a button-down at Old Navy the other day. Apparently there was a sale."

“What color?” I eyed him. His casual wear included jeans and a dark-green Henley that he looked incredible in.

“Black.”

I nodded. “Hot. But it doesn’t count as a fourth until you have pants that go with it.”

“What kind of bullshit rule is that? I have the same pair of jeans for the handyman and the casual.”

“Yeah, but you have a pair of sweats too to make up for that.” I frowned up at him. “Don’t you know anything about fashion?”

He gave me a look and folded his arms over his chest, but before he could sling back a wisecrack, we heard a blast go off in the distance. It was quickly followed by kids cheering, and I vaguely remembered having heard it before. Only, it hadn’t registered until now. The race must’ve begun.

I waited for the little runners to appear and changed the subject. “We’re getting something to eat after. You wanna join?”

“Yeah. Not here, I hope.”

Fuck no. I liked Navy Pier, but the food was overpriced.

“On the way back to Grand,” I replied. “I suggested we get beefs, but he wanted a hot dog.”

“Sounds good to me,” he said. “But I drove, so no need to take the L.”

Ah, of course. He’d picked up the tables. Craigslist was his one exception; otherwise,

he didn't touch the work car unless he was on the clock.

Then I cursed, because life wasn't easy with a five-year-old. "Chip doesn't have a car seat." If he'd been taller or a little older, I'd be okay bending the rules with a makeshift booster seat, but Sarah would be so pissed if I accidentally killed my nephew.

It wasn't like she had any spare kids, which I told Ben too.

He closed his eyes and shook his head at me, shoulders trembling with silent laughter.

I smiled.

We'd figure it out. Chip and I could take the train. No worries. Right now, we had a color run to watch.

The DJ cranked up the music again, and I eyeballed a motherfucker who thought he'd position himself in front of me. Think again, jagoff.

"There they are." Ben nudged me.

I refocused and saw the little crowd of kids coming down the slope, and I grinned as I spotted Chip near the front. Pride filled me to the brim. Just seeing him so excited was contagious.

Ben and I applauded with the other family members.

"You got this, Chip!" Ben let out a sharp whistle.

"As fast as you can, chipster!" My cheeks hurt from smiling, and we were about to get what we'd come here for. The staff on the sidelines got ready with the color dust,

and the DJ announced that all the winners were inbound.

A beat later, the colors exploded in the air, and the kids sprinted into a rainbow of neon yellow, pink, green, blue, and orange.

The first line of kids emerged with triumphant grins and crossed the finish line, with Chip following shortly with a few others, and then the rest. Fuck, he was cute. And completely covered in color powder, from head to toe. So now it made more sense that Sarah hadn't let him wear his usual gym shoes to kindergarten. Shoes weren't as easy to get clean. Clothes could be thrown in the washer.

"Come on," I said at the same time as Ben put a hand on my back and nodded at the kids.

We exchanged a quick smirk, then went over to meet up with Chip. And collect our photos. They'd better be fucking stellar.

"Chip!" I called. He'd just been handed a chocolate medal that he quickly put around his neck, and he spun around in an attempt to locate us.

I was almost there when he saw me and beamed, and then I scooped him up and hugged the shit out of him.

"Did you see me?!" he exclaimed. "That was so fun!"

"You were fucking fantastic." I grinned and wiped some orange dust off his cheeks. And fuck, it was rubbing off. I was definitely doing laundry tonight.

"Did you see me too, Ben?"

"You kiddin' me? I saw every second of it." Ben made the mistake of ruffling Chip's

hair, which sent a cloud of purple and green dust over all of us.

“For chrissakes,” I laughed. “Let’s go see if the photographer earned his money.”

“Can I sit on your shoulders?” Chip begged.

Ben answered before I could. “You can sit on mine, buddy. White Sox fans tend to stand taller.”

I swung an incredulous look his way, and he just laughed. Oh, the motherfucker needed to be brought back down so both his feet touched the ground. But it would help if the Sox hadn’t won their last two games. And if the Cubs hadn’t lost their most recent one.

The moment Ben’s knee hit the ground, Chip was all too happy to climb up.

“You’re not corrupting my nephew,” I warned.

“Corrupting or saving?” Ben helped the boy into place, then rose to his feet, eliciting a wheeeeeee! from Chip.

“Corrupting,” I insisted.

Ben ignored me. “Hey, Chip? Do you know the most common words spoken by a Cubs fan?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. What was he up to now?

“Like, words they say a lot?” Chip questioned.

“That’s exactly it,” Ben replied. “Can you guess?”

“I will end you,” I whispered.

Ben winked. He fucking winked. Maybe half a percent of the population could pull that off. He had to be one of them?

Chip giggled. “I don’t know! Go Cubs!”

“Close,” Ben said. “But correct answer is, Maybe next year.”

I rolled my eyes and decided to give him the cold shoulder until I’d scrubbed the memories of my old man saying, “Well, there’s always next year” a million fucking times over the years.

“Is he teasing you, Uncle Trace?” Chip asked.

“He totally is,” I was quick to reply.

That only made the boy snicker. “Mommy does that too.”

What the hell? Was this Gang Up on Uncle Trace Day?

I left the shits in the dust and stalked over to the photo tent.

“Wait!” Ben called. “I have more Cubs jokes!”

Oh, screw it. It was on now. I handed over Chip’s race number to the guy at the tent, then turned around to face Ben.

“You want jokes? Look in the damn mirror, man,” I said. “Or how about a quiz? What do the Sox have in common with a possum? Both play dead at home and get killed on the road.” I wasn’t done. His scowl only fueled me. “What do you call forty

rich fuckers sitting at home watching the World Series? The White Sox.”

Chip started guffawing, though I doubted he understood the digs.

“What does a Sox fan do after his team has won the World Series?” I pressed. “He turns off his PlayStation.”

With that said, I turned my back on him once more, and I took a deep breath. It was important to stop before things got too heated.

“Here we go, pal.” The guy adjusted his laptop so I could see the images they’d taken. There were more than ten, and he explained they took extra to ensure I had ten quality pictures to choose from.

One of the first I clicked on became an instant pick. It’d been taken a second or two before Chip ran into the color explosion. His arms were raised in the air, hands balled into fists, a warrior cry frozen in time, and eyes screwed shut. Fucking perfect.

The other two, I had to go with when he emerged from the dust cloud. I scrolled through a dozen of them, and they were all good. He looked so damn happy. Sarah would probably like the one where he’d just opened his eyes and he was reaching the finish line.

“Okay, so those three there.” I pointed at the screen. “And the last one in print, thanks.”

“No problem. You’ll get all three in a zip file on your email, and your print will be ready in a few seconds.”

“Thank you.” I nodded and stepped aside for the next schmuck who’d shelled out the big bucks. But at the end of the day, fucking worth it.

* * *

“And how do you want your hot dog, champ?” I asked, helping Chip down to the ground again.

Trace’s preferences were eerily similar to mine, so that would be an easy order.

Chip stepped closer to Trace and tugged on his tee, to which Trace bent down to hear what the boy whispered in his ear.

We’d ended up at a vendor in the middle of rush hour, so I hoped the plan was to return toward Navy Pier so we could eat in peace. It was just a couple blocks away.

“Next!”

I jerked my chin and stepped up. “Hey, two dogs with everything, except pickles—and extra mustard on one.” I turned back to Trace, who was nodding.

“Yup, and next time you see Grandpa, you call him totalitarian for deciding what you put on your food, you hear?”

Chip grinned and nodded. “Okay!”

Trace smiled and met my gaze. “One with just relish and ketchup.”

Fair enough. Suddenly, I understood the whispering, and I could guess what Trace’s old man had said. I sincerely hoped he hadn’t been serious. Alvin loved his ketchup too.

I placed the last order and dug out my wallet from my back pocket.

It was still an indescribable feeling to be able to pay for my food and treat Trace and Chip. I was feeling like a human being again. One who was currently fucking starving—and losing his mind. But the latter was Trace's fault.

Coming up here today hadn't helped.

It didn't matter what Trace did; everything about him reeled me in. He was talking about his worry of waking up and seeing me gone, but at this point, I wasn't sure I physically could. Helping out at the bar made me feel like I was contributing well enough—I mean, I'd replaced the entire bartop, and now I was gonna fix the booths that needed a makeover. Trace was right. It was a win-win situation. For once in my life, I wasn't the only one on the winning side when it came to people helping me.

Moreover, I was rediscovering traits that'd been buried for years. For one, I wasn't one of those who naturally felt shitty about themselves. Low self-esteem wasn't my default setting. I was feeling better now that I could afford the care Alvin needed. I could make sure Ma's fridge was stocked, and I could pitch in with rent.

I didn't have to lie to anyone anymore.

When we got our food, I held on to Chip's for now, and I noticed Trace had dug out a twenty from his pocket. He eyed me carefully, half in question, and I smiled and shook my head. I knew he wanted to offer to pay as much as he understood this was important to me.

"Thank you." He reached up and kissed my cheek.

Fuck me, I was so screwed.

How could one person be so fucking disarming that he could control my heart rhythm?

It was bullshit.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:18 am

Trace Kalecki

I yawned and knew I had a decision to make. I could not choose violence today. This tape dispenser wasn't gonna get the best of me?—

“Are you fucking serious,” I whispered, yanking out my fingers from the tape clusterfuck. Maybe wrapping gifts wasn't my strong suit. Jesus Christ.

Ziggy sat at my feet and wagged his tail.

“Not now, boy,” I grumbled. I'd taken him outside for a quick piss, I'd given him fresh water and a dog bone; that was enough for... I checked the time on the microwave. Fuck. Almost five thirty. I had to step on it. Ben's alarm would go off in forty-five minutes.

At some point, Ben and I would need to discuss Ziggy's future. We had a good deal going where Ben took the longer park walks and I took the more frequent down-in-the-alley or just-around-the-building walks, but the shaggy rascal deserved more than that. When Ben and I got off work, we were beat.

I knew one person who would accept him with open arms, aside from Chip, and that was my ma. She was retired, she would fuss over Ziggy all day long, and he'd have a big backyard to chase lizards in.

It might also distract her from obsessively checking the Citizen app to see if there'd been another shooting in Chicago. Which, more often than not, was a car backfiring. Just last night, she'd texted me to stay away from Near North Side because of an

explosion that turned out to be fireworks.

Taking a step back from the counter, I inspected my handiwork. Three wrapped gifts. I mean, they were wrapped. That was all that mattered. No ribbon needed, 'cause the tape went all the way around in every direction.

The fourth present didn't need wrapping paper because it was my mouth.

If he wanted it.

All right, breakfast. This was the easy part. I put two waffles in the toaster and hauled out the can of whipped cream and the fancy brand of strawberry preserves I'd bought.

I couldn't wait to see his reaction. I'd snooped again. I'd texted his cousin the other day to ask if she knew his favorite breakfast.

While I waited for the waffles, I made quick work of very silently leaving the gifts on the coffee table in the front room. I poured us coffee, I brought out two plates, and I discarded the packaging from the birthday candles.

Forty-nine years.

I wanted the next forty-nine. Then we could die together and be buried at Wrigley so I could haunt our enemies.

That wasn't too much to ask.

The waffles finally popped up, perfectly golden brown, and I dropped them on the plates. Ouch, that was hot. Whipped cream, spoon for the preserves, two mugs of coffee, candles, let's go.

The rule to wake up Ben slowly still applied; otherwise, he'd get startled and brace himself for a fight. So I put down the food on the coffee table, no longer trying to be as quiet as possible.

"Is the birthday boy ready to wake up?" I sprayed whipped cream over the waffles—then obviously sprayed some in my mouth too. It was practically the law. "Ben?"

"You kiddin' me," he grumbled into his pillow.

"I'll fucking sing," I warned him.

I added strawberry preserves too, then stuck the 4 and the 9 candles into his waffle. My trusty Dearborn Clover matchbook got the job done.

"Happy birthday to Ben," I sang. "Happy birthday to Ben. Happy birthday, silver Sox fox, happy birthday to?—"

"Trace," he groaned through a drowsy chuckle.

I grinned and turned on the TV, then promptly muted the sound.

"Come on, I got stuff here for you." I sat down on the foot of the bed and squeezed his calf through the covers. "I know you don't gotta take a leak first, 'cause you do that around three every morning?—"

"Christ," he grated out. He pushed back the covers, and I looked over my shoulder as he sat up, half disoriented, and squinted at me. Then at the setup on the table, then back at me. "Boy, what did you do?"

I smiled.

He scooted lower till he was right next to me, and he didn't say anything at first. He just looped an arm around my neck and pressed his lips to my temple.

Keep going.

"You can't be real," he murmured.

Except, I was. And my whole fucking being screamed for more of his warmth. My hand was on his thigh before I could stop myself, and then I just left it there.

These days, I couldn't even imagine going to bed without knowing he'd either join me soon or he was already there. Because of his job, and mine, we rarely crashed at the same time, and maybe that was for the best. I'd probably throw myself at him after a round of lazy pillow talk about the latest game or...fucking anything.

"Have you been going through my phone, bright spot?"

Oh shit.

I cleared my throat, and he eased back. Thank fuck, no hostility in his gaze. More of a cocked brow daring me to lie to him—and some wry amusement.

"What gave you that idea?" I asked innocently.

He huffed and flicked a glance at the food. "Three people close to me know I love toaster waffles with whipped cream and strawberry preserves, and one of them asked me just yesterday if I had something going on with you."

Goddammit, Angie.

Was nothing sacred anymore?

“If it makes you feel any better, I only checked your contacts,” I said. “And just your old burner, not the work phone where you might actually keep dating apps. I think I deserve some praise for not going through that.”

At least he cracked a grin and not my skull.

“You think stroking my ego with made-up jealousy is going to derail me?”

“I’m certainly going to try,” I replied.

He shook his head in amusement and grabbed his coffee. “You’re the one with dating apps, kid. Not me.”

Whew. It was nice to have that confirmed.

“Not anymore.” I’d deleted them all. “I haven’t been with anyone since you fucked me six ways to Sunday in January.”

How was that for openness and honesty?

His coffee went down with an audible swallow, and he stared at the gifts. Kinda hard, too, like he was forcing himself to fix his attention there.

“I didn’t know birthdays involved torture in your family,” he said quietly. “Can we eat before I flip my shit?”

Oh, we were getting somewhere.

“Of course.” I stroked his thigh a little. “It’s your day. Open your gifts too. And don’t forget to make a wish when you blow out the candles.”

He released a breath and picked up his plate. Then he blew out the candles, and I could only wish his wish included me somehow. In a good way.

I had patience for the serious stuff, like our future together, but I absolutely hoped we could upgrade our dumbass friendship to include some benefits. Stat.

He couldn't pretend he wasn't affected. Tension rolled off him as he bit into his waffle, and he side-eyed me with a bit of whipped cream on his upper lip.

It would be so easy to lean in and lick?—

He cleared his throat and tipped his waffle at the gifts. “Which one do I start with, and why are there so many?”

Right. “Three isn't many, and start with the smallest.” I began brushing my fingers up and down his thigh.

Perfect moment to realize he wasn't wearing a tee. He usually slept in one, which was dumb. We should sleep naked and closer to the center of the bed.

He grabbed the smallest gift, and his mouth twitched with humor. Yeah, yeah, yuk it up. My gift-wrapping skills were flawless.

He had to tear it up a little, not unlike I wanted him to do with my ass.

Then he smiled when he saw it was a travel mug. He'd bitched at having to buy coffee when he was out working, and I was with him. Six or seven bucks for coffee? Fucking hell. It annoyed me every time, because you weren't always close to a McDonald's where you could get a decent cup at a more reasonable price. Dunkin' worked occasionally too.

“This is perfect, Trace. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I leaned closer and rested my chin on his shoulder. “Medium-sized next.”

He took another deep breath and reached for the gift.

I shifted my hand to his back instead, and I ran my fingertips along his spine.

That earned me a shiver.

He was going to like this present too. I knew he would. Because for every day that passed, shit just got clearer and clearer for me. We were so similar. We complained about the same things, had the same priorities, and shared the same interests.

It was a set with three types of lunch boxes, one small, one large, one for soup. Good brand too, that promised to keep shit warm for a few hours, at least.

He exhaled and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “You’re something else, you know that?”

So was he.

I kissed his shoulder.

We gotta happen, baby.

“Next present,” I murmured.

I peered down as goose bumps appeared along his bicep, and he went for the last gift. Well, second to last, but I wasn’t sure I needed to offer the last one. If I played my

cards right, he'd take it.

"This is a monster gift." His tone held curiosity, so I gave him a bit of space to focus on it. Because it was a good gift. The guy at the store said it was one of the best.

Ben placed it in his lap and tore at the wrapping, causing the tape to snap. And as soon as he realized it was a toolbox, he exhaled a chuckle and shook his head.

"Christ—I don't think you know how much this matters to me, Trace."

"What do you mean?" I tilted my head. "I understand a handy handyman slash contractor like yourself will eventually have a whole collection of these, but I figured it was a good start."

He smiled and ghosted his hands over the box. "More than a good start," he murmured. "But it's—" He sighed quietly and glanced at me. "I haven't owned things in years. I've had a box or two stashed away at Ma's, and I've had some tools at Garrett's place, but... Buying things just hasn't been on the radar for several reasons."

That made sense. You didn't need to be materialistic to find comfort in having some stuff to call your own. In a way, those things made up your home. They also signaled a next step for someone like Ben. His life was no longer about surviving the night.

I wanted him to set down roots here.

Fuck. I had to say this. It was going to be the least friendly shit I'd tell him today, but I needed him to know.

"You know what gave me the idea for the toolbox?" I pulled up a leg so I could face him fully, and I ignored the nerves tightening in my gut.

“I don’t know, me storing tools all over the stairs?” he joked.

I smiled. No. And this toolbox wasn’t meant for power tools.

“No, it was when you were talking about how you could make changes around here,” I answered. I nodded at my cheap entertainment unit that mostly held the TV and some old movies. A couple knickknacks from Chip. “You mentioned built-in shelves along that entire wall—and how you could build them without the landlord pitching a fit.”

“Well, you put up drywall in the back,” he replied frankly. “You make it so it can be dismantled easier.”

I nodded. “Things like that. And the kitchen table you’re working on. And the stuff about the fire escapes—you said I could grow vegetables there.”

“At least the one in the kitchen,” he confirmed. “That one gets sun.”

“Right. So you have all these ideas, and I want you to run with them.” I leaned forward and dropped my chin on his shoulder again. “I don’t know if you’re aware of all the things you mention in passing, but I listen. I’ve heard each one. You said something about shelves in the hallway too, and that it’s big enough to be more useful.”

He furrowed his brow. “And then you said you didn’t need storage space and more furniture.”

Maybe he shouldn’t listen to Past Trace so much? Did he ever consider that?

“That was the old me.” I smiled. “The new me has a roommate and plans for their future.”

Their future. Our future.

He raked his teeth over his bottom lip for a short second and dropped his gaze to my mouth.

“Sounds serious.”

“Very.” I mirrored his movement and dropped my gaze too, and he finally reached his limit.

He closed the last distance and covered my mouth with his, and desire and need exploded within me, sending sparks of heat through my bloodstream. A gasp got stuck in my throat. All I could do was throw myself into the kiss and climb him like a tree.

The toolbox landed on the floor with a clank, but neither of us cared. We deepened the kiss the moment I was on his lap, and he palmed my ass roughly and pulled me down on him.

Thank fuck, I’ve waited too long.

I cupped his face in my hands, feeling his stubble under my fingers, and tasted him on my tongue for the first time in months. It felt like the same shiver ran through both of us, and I couldn’t get close enough.

“Wait—”

“No!” My eyes flashed open, and panic bolted into my chest.

“I’m just gonna turn off my alarm, baby.” He rushed out the words.

Fuck. Holy fuck. My heart pounded, and I swallowed dryly. How much of a lost cause was I?

Functioning on autopilot as my ears began ringing, I got off his lap and planted my ass on the mattress.

Hold on. Had he called me baby?

He turned away from me to grab his phone off the armrest on his side. “Fuckin’ hell. The last thing I wanna do is rush this, but I gotta be out the door in half an hour.”

I could work with that. Fifteen minutes was enough to create a promise for later, and I could, uh, assist him in the shower.

“As long as you come back, I’m happy with a quickie,” I said.

He sighed and rolled back over, and he pushed himself up on his elbow. “I told you to aim higher—this is a great example.” He patted the spot next to him, and I was quick to get closer. “I don’t want you to be happy with a quickie if you’re scared I’m gonna leave, Trace.”

I leaned down and kissed him. “Yeah, okay. Can we fuck now?”

He narrowed his eyes and got pensive for a second, and just when I was about to remind him that the clock was ticking, he pounced and pinned me to the mattress.

Fuck. Was that a yes...?

He gathered my hands above my head and nuzzled my jaw. “No.”

Oh, for the love of?—

“The rest of the mornin’ will be about you,” he murmured. “You’ve already given me the best birthday a man could ask for.”

I was willing to hear him out.

He started kissing his way down my body, and he hooked his fingers into the waistband of my sweats.

I lifted up so he could yank them down.

“I have a suggestion,” I said. “Put your feet up here and lose the underwear.” In short, so we could sixty-nine each other.

He knitted his brows together. “You can’t just let someone give you pleasure?”

“You’re implying that me sucking you off wouldn’t give me pleasure,” I retorted. “That isn’t the case, genius.”

His mouth twitched with amusement. “Are you sure you’re real?”

Quite.

He didn’t need an answer, but I might circle back to this one day. He needed to know I actually loved to suck his cock, and I had a lot of catching up to do. ’Cause he’d deprived me for too long.

Once he was in position, I finally had his big cock in my face, and my mouth fucking watered.

“Hello, old friend,” I whispered. “I missed you.”

Ben chuckled silently and nipped at my thigh. "I fucking can't."

"Can't what?"

"Deal with you! Shut up for a second, and don't touch me yet." With that said, he repositioned himself so I couldn't even reach him, and then he sucked my cock into his mouth.

Fuuuck.

I bit down on my lip, and we locked eyes as he eased back and snaked his tongue around me.

I shuddered.

All traces of humor faded.

He got me from a semi to rock hard in seconds, and I pushed myself up on my elbows, needing to see properly. And also...I kinda wanted to convince him to give me that quickie after all.

Goddamn, that felt good. I blew out a breath, and he tongued the head of my cock before taking me in again. All the way, burying me in tight, wet heat.

"Only one thing would top this," I said quietly. "If we replaced my cock with yours, and your mouth with my ass."

He hummed around me.

"Without a rubber in the way," I added. "Unless something's changed since last time."

It better fucking not have. I'd throw the mother of jealousy fits.

He shook his head and pulled back once more. "Nothing's changed. Including my inability to say no to you."

That boded well for me.

I pointed toward the floor on my side of the bed. "I keep a bottle of oil on the floor for lonely nights."

"I've seen it," he muttered.

I smirked.

He'd probably seen it when he vacuumed.

He grabbed the bottle, then sat back on his heels, offering me a mouthwatering view of all his masculinity. He was so goddamn sexy that I didn't know what to do with myself.

He cleared his throat and drizzled oil into his hand. "Should we talk?"

"Fuck no," I replied on reflex. Shit, bad move. "I mean, we definitely should—just not right now. I've missed you too much."

There. More honesty.

Something softened in his expression. "Have you really?"

"Yeah. You kiddin' me? I've grown allergic to the word friend."

He chuckled under his breath and dropped his gaze to his cock as he slicked it up.

“Me too,” he admitted. Whether it was to the word friend or if he’d missed me too, I didn’t know. Maybe it was both. But we were done talking, and he showed me instead.

The moment he covered my body with his, he brought forth all the memories from last time, how he’d held me so tightly and communicated with affection.

Like a flip of a switch, everything was right in the world.

We fused ourselves together; my legs went around his hips, he kissed me deeply, I locked my arms around his neck, and he pushed inside me in one fluid motion that punched the air out of my lungs.

Mother of fucking cocks.

“Fuck,” he exhaled.

I clenched my jaw as the fire spread through me, and I spoke against his lips. “Tell me you missed me too.”

I cupped his face in my hands, and he rested our foreheads together.

“Every goddamn day.” He brushed his lips to mine and pulled out slowly, only to push in again, and I groaned. “I think about you all the time,” he murmured. “I always wanna get closer.”

I sucked in a breath, a storm of emotions unfurling within me. Overwhelming relief, determination, unbridled fucking happiness. He made me smile like an idiot.

“Good. Same here.” I kissed him again, and this time, we didn’t stop.

He fucked me in long, measured thrusts, his mouth and one hand never leaving my skin. It was a steady race, and he wouldn’t let me rush him. He just shook his head and told me to calm down. Let me savor this, he whispered.

A shudder ripped through me. How he could seduce me so thoroughly, I’d never fucking get. It was one thing to get me going physically, but to kidnap my mind? Whole other game.

I couldn’t look away from him.

He didn’t look away from me either.

The pressure built up inside me, only increasing when he started stroking my cock. I moaned and clenched down around him, spurring him on. Not the pace, just the force. He fucked me harder, not faster. The rest of the world didn’t exist. All I saw was this man and how I wanted to spend the rest of my life getting fucked like this by him.

I clung to him. Fuck breathing. I couldn’t stop kissing him. My fingers dug into his flesh—and my heels into his ass cheeks. It was as if I couldn’t get close enough.

It had to be us.

A heavy breath gusted out of me, and I started panting. And at fucking last, he sped up. He pounded into me and buried his face against my neck. I could tell he was almost there—and that he couldn’t multitask any longer, so I took over. I batted away his hand and stroked myself faster, to which he slipped a hand up my body and grabbed me in a light choke hold.

Fuck me.

He groaned against my neck. “You gotta come, baby.”

“Almost,” I gasped. Oh fuck, almost, almost, almost. Just like that—he hit the right angle, and I almost lost it. “Fill me.”

He cursed and redoubled his efforts, and all I heard was our heavy breathing and skin slapping against skin.

I was done for.

“Now...” I whimpered and screwed my eyes shut, and the pleasure took over. It crashed down on me in heavy waves and stabbed at—actually, the stabbing part was his cock. He slammed into me until he lost the fight too, and then he was coming deep inside me.

Ropes of come splashed against my stomach and chest, and I stroked myself through the climax.

We met in a messy kiss of tongues and teeth and moans until, one heartbeat after another, we lost steam. Lips touching, breaths mingling. I swallowed dryly and felt sore all fucking over. And happy. So goddamn happy. He couldn’t deny what we had going anymore. He fucking couldn’t. We were perfect together.

I kissed him slowly, coaxing his tongue out with my own.

He drew in a deep breath through his nose. “I wish I could stay here all day.”

“Me too.”

Hopefully another time. Soon.

* * *

We didn't have any leftovers I could heat up for him, so I prepared two sandwiches for his lunch box, and I emptied the coffeepot into his travel mug.

By the time Ben emerged in the doorway, tucking his tee into his utility pants, I'd inhaled a waffle and made one for him too, since we hadn't finished the ones from before.

"I hope two turkey sandwiches will work," I said. "We should buy groceries tomorrow."

"I can go by Aldi's tomorrow after work." He came over and hugged me from behind, and he buried his face against my neck. "Fuck, you smell like us."

He smelled like our body wash.

I shivered and tilted my head back, and he took the hint and kissed me.

Wasn't this much better? Kissing and fucking and touching instead of...pretending we were just friends?

"I'm losing my mind over you, Trace." He tightened his hold on me, and I let the relief and joy roll over me. "You didn't have to make me lunch."

"I wanted to." I turned around in his embrace and locked my arms around his neck. "I want you to keep losing your mind over me too, so we can quit acting like this is casual."

He took a deep breath and rested his forehead to mine, and he closed his eyes.

I felt the need to continue before he could let his fears do the talking.

I scratched the back of his head lightly. “Every time you share a glimpse of your creativity—what you could do with this place—you add stuff like, if that’s your thing, or, if you’d like... Or like the other day, when I was bitching about the coffee table being too far away. You said you could build me one of those tables you roll over the bed. Build me one of those tables.” I kissed his nose. “The problem is, all these ideas—I mean, I get it. I know you’re worried and just wanna make sure you’re useful. Which is something we should talk about later, ’cause it’s dumb.”

He exhaled a laugh through his nose.

“But I don’t want that table for me, Ben,” I continued. “I don’t care about the stupid built-in shelves or the fire escape green bean plants—if they’re just for me. I want them for us, ’cause...you make this place feel more like a home. But it means you gotta share it with me.”

Knowing he had to get to work, I had to wrap things up. This hadn’t been my plan anyway; I was supposed to reel him in slowly until he had no other option but to succumb to my charms. But here we were. He’d made me fucking talk.

“Look. Go to work,” I murmured. “I don’t wanna freak you out further by throwing details into the mix, but trust me—I got them. I’m not taking any of this lightly, and I know your situation. I know your priorities.”

He cupped my face and kissed me hard. “Trace, the only thing that freaks me out is losing this. Nothing I feel about you is casual or temporary, okay?”

I smiled into the kiss, but my stomach was a fucking mess of frazzled nerves. ’Cause now I had to go all day wondering if he was going to talk himself into this rocky start of what I hoped was the rest of our lives.

“We’ll talk more tonight?” he asked.

I nodded and kissed him again.

“For the record,” he said. “In the time I’ve known you, I’ve set up countless boundaries to protect myself from getting sucked into your world, and I failed each time. I’m not going anywhere because I can’t go a day without seeing you.”

Well, fuck me over, that worked. I let out an unsteady breath, and I mustered a shaky grin. Was this really happening? He was on board? He couldn’t go a day without seeing me?

We stood a chance.

* * *

Just parked.

Now I was nervous again.

I pocketed my phone and removed my apron, then signaled to Jamaal. “You ready to take over for a bit?”

He smirked and jerked his chin at his old man and Jerry. “Yeah, I think I can handle this crowd.”

Fair, fair. It was pretty slow at this early-bird hour. About a dozen tables were full, and Jamaal would have one more by his side soon enough. This early in the service, there was no need to make a reservation.

I thanked him and ignored Malcolm’s catcalling. That was what I got for having half

jokingly said I was meeting my future man's family today.

It was important to be confident, right?

Running a hand through my hair, I headed back out into the kitchen, and I made a beeline for the office. I just had to reapply some deodorant. We might have a lull in the service now, but it'd been a busy lunch rush.

I put on a new Clover tee while I was at it too, and then I had to read through our very brief chain of messages from today. To comfort myself—and to overanalyze.

He'd started it.

Cant stop thinking about a fucking Cubs fan.

He'd kept it light and funny, and I'd stupidly gone straight for matters of the heart.

That Cubs fan really liked it when u called him baby.

Luckily, his lunchtime response had unfrazzled most of my nerves.

Ill see you at five, baby.

“See? You got nothing to be nervous about,” I told myself. Except for the part where I really wanted Alvin and Elsie to like me.

Let's charm the O'Clearys.

I left the office again and stopped by the kitchen. “Petey! We good on my Sox burn?”

He grinned. “Oh, absolutely. Everything will be ready in ten.”

Perfect. We couldn't celebrate Ben's birthday without taking a shot at the Sox.

I pushed the door open and spotted Ben next to the host's desk right away. Since he'd picked up his family immediately after work, I didn't have to feel bad about being in my work clothes too. And next to him, his mother and Alvin. The guy really took after his old man, only he was much shorter. He did look younger than his eighteen years; his features were still boyish but not overly so. He wore glasses too, and a curious expression.

I grabbed three menus from under the bar, then headed their way.

Don't be nervous, don't be nervous.

I was nervous.

As if on cue, I heard my sister making chicken noises in my head, and that actually helped. I'd never struggled to make friends. I was well-liked. Why wouldn't Elsie like me? She looked like a sweet old lady. She kind of reminded me of my grandmother on Ma's side. In appearance, at least. My grandma was a real introvert, and she only left her house in damn Milwaukee for Thanksgiving. But she was nice and looked the way a grandma should look, with the white hair, the big glasses, the glossy "but ergonomic" shoes, and the purse. Just like Elsie. She might even be shorter than Alvin.

Ben spotted me and fired off a sexy smirk, though I detected a hint of nerves too.

We were in this together, but I was going to let him lead the way. We'd barely talked, so I doubted he'd say anything about us to Elsie and Alvin.

That would be weird.

“Hey, guys,” I greeted with what I hoped was a charming smile. “Welcome to the Clover.”

“Alvin, Ma, I want you to meet Trace.” Ben took over the introductions. “Trace, this is my mother Elsie and my son Alvin.”

“It’s great to meet you both. Ben talks about you all the time.” I didn’t have to worry about social customs with Alvin; he stuck out his hand in a swift, almost militant move, and I shook his hand.

“Hi. You’re Dad’s friend,” he said. “He gets annoyed when Grandma asks questions about you.”

Oh really? I flicked a glance at Ben, who chuckled.

“And now I know why,” Elsie said with a quirk of her lips. “Nice to meet you, Trace.”

I shook her hand too. “You too, Mrs. O’Cleary?—”

“Oh, none of that. It’s Elsie. The Mrs. scares off potential suitors.”

All right, then! I grinned, liking her already.

“Ma, what the fuck.” Ben frowned.

Elsie looked up at her son. “What?”

“Come on,” I chuckled. “I have our table ready. Just follow me.” I turned around and headed for the main dining area, aiming for the booths in the back.

“Dad?” I heard Alvin ask quietly. “I understand it’s your birthday, but can I choose the dessert if we’re gonna share? You know how I get with cake.”

I was ready to make mental notes for future use.

“You can choose whatever you want for dessert, small fry,” Ben murmured. “I don’t think they have sponge cake on the menu anyway. You know what they do have? A hot fudge brownie with vanilla ice cream.”

“Oh. That’s one of my favorites,” Alvin whispered.

Score one for the Clover.

When I arrived at our corner, I gestured at the booth and offered to take Elsie’s jacket.

“I hope you don’t mind, I took the liberty of preparing some appetizers while we wait for our food,” I said. “Alvin, your old man told me you like mozzarella sticks...?”

“I do. Thank you very much.”

“No problem. Do you know what you’d like to drink, or would you like to browse the menu first?” I waited till they were all seated before I handed them the menus.

“Can I get a Fanta? With lots of ice?” Alvin glanced between Ben and me.

“Of course,” we said at the same time.

Elsie smiled and opened her menu. “Sparkling water for me, thank you.”

I turned to Ben. “Beer, hon?” Shit. That’d just slipped out. My bad.

He nodded and smirked a little. “You know what I like—but do you need a hand?”

“On your birthday? Hell no. I’ll be right back.” I made a quick escape just in case Elsie had picked up on my slip, though it didn’t seem like it. When I looked back over my shoulder, she was engrossed in the menu.

I ducked into the kitchen and let out a breath, hoping I could relax a bit now. So far, so good.

“Snacks comin’ up, boss.” Tonya had evidently already prepared the tray. “How’s it going so far?”

“I accidentally called Ben hon, but I don’t think anyone noticed.” I grabbed the tray. “Thank you—this is great.” Mozzarella sticks for Alvin, a salad bowl for the table, cheesy bread, Ben’s snack basket filled with deep-fried goodies, and some extra boneless chicken tenders.

“Looking forward to the next update!”

I chuckled and headed out once more, only stopping at the bar to get the drinks. Beer for Ben and me, sparkling water for Elsie, and Fanta with extra ice for Alvin.

Before I returned to the booth, I took a few photos of the tray so I could send them to Adam later. Our followers on Instagram would get a kick out of the joke.

I smirked and headed off, and I eyed the snack basket. One Snickers, two buffalo wings, a Twinkie, and a leftover mix of beef toppings frozen into a bar before it was dropped into the fryer. All deep-fried, all unrecognizable.

“Okay, here we go.” I set the tray on the table. “Salad, bread, and boneless chicken tenders for the table, mozzarella sticks for Alvin, and a birthday surprise for our

White Sox fan.”

Ben hitched a brow. “For the record, we’re all Sox fans here.”

That was a shame, but I’d obviously assumed as much.

“I can only troll so many people at once,” I answered. “Behold, the Southpaw basket. Because like your mascot, you can’t tell what the fuck it is.”

Ben blinked.

Elsie started laughing merrily, which I took as a huge win.

Alvin scrunched his nose, then took on a curious expression. “Southpaw is a fuzzy frogillator.”

Yeah. Uh-huh. And that wasn’t a thing.

The look Ben gave his ma made it clear he couldn’t believe she was laughing at this. And then he’d slid me a look that said, “Listen here, you little shit.”

It was a good look on him.

I smiled.

I saw the amusement he was struggling to hide.

“This is banter, right, Dad?” Alvin asked to make sure.

At that, Ben turned to his boy and cracked a soft grin. “Yeah, that’s how Trace and I roll, it seems.” He glanced at me as I sat down next to Elsie. “After today, I’ll deny

this for the rest of my life, but that was a good dig. Jackass.”

“As if I’ll let you,” I laughed.

He grinned and shook his head, then turned his focus on the snack basket. “Okay, so what am I looking at here?” He picked up one of the fried treats, and I was fairly certain it was the Snickers bar.

“Who knows?” I shrugged and smirked.

“If it’s fried, we like it,” Alvin stated frankly. “We even tried deep-fried strawberries once, and they were delicious. Remember, Grandma?”

“Of course, love. With the ice cream.” Elsie nodded. “They were tasty.”

I could fucking imagine. I had to try that.

“Damn.” Ben chewed and inspected the snack. “I’m evidently getting dessert first. Try this, bud.” He handed it to Alvin. “It’s Snickers.”

Alvin lit up and didn’t hesitate.

We kinda lost the O’Cleary boys to the snack basket for a while, but I didn’t mind. Elsie complimented me on our wit when it came to naming items on the menu, and I was a fan of compliments. I could actually take some credit too, ’cause I’d come up with at least half the names.

“I’m not sure I understand the Double Trouble reference, though,” Elsie noted. “Is that a sports term?”

“No, it’s the nickname for my friend’s daughter Bella,” I replied, peering closer at her

menu. “There should be three items not named after sports or athletes. The Double Trouble burger, the beef—because it’s sacred—and the cheesy bread. It’s named after my nephew.”

“Ah, I see.” She smiled and perused some more. “I notice there’s no poking fun at the Packers. Ben hates the Packers.”

“As any self-respecting person would,” I said with a nod. “We don’t talk about the Packers. We named our garbage bins in the kitchen after them, but they don’t exist out here.”

She laughed softly and shook her head. “You sound like him too, dearie.” She tapped a finger against the T-bone steak. “Ben, sweetie, you should order the Bear Down, T-Formation.” She turned to me. “He loves a good steak.”

Who didn’t?

“It’s a solid choice.” I smiled.

In the end, Ben did choose the T-bone—with a baked potato—claiming he’d been eyeing it on the menu for a while, another thing I filed away in my O’Cleary folder. Elsie opted for the turkey with steamed vegetables, and Alvin wanted the crispy chicken sandwich with extra fries. To which I felt the need to warn him that the portions were pretty big, but Ben assured me Alvin would eat it all—and then whatever the rest of us might not finish.

Alvin grinned sheepishly. “I eat a lot.”

You couldn’t tell, but fair enough. Extra fries, it was.

* * *

Unlike his dad, Alvin was not a man of few words. He was making it much easier for me to form my plans. Halfway through dinner, he'd rambled excitedly and frankly about his obsession with water, with side tracks covering fish tanks, colored shrimp, pH, the biodiversity of Lake Michigan, and his dream to one day visit the Emerald Coast.

And wasn't that just convenient? My folks lived near there. Their house was just south of Tallahassee.

Alvin was very proud of his seashell collection too.

"You remember when your ma and I gave you that coral for your birthday?" Ben grinned around a mouthful of food.

Alvin scowled at him. "We agreed not to talk about that. I forgave you."

"We wore you down," Ben argued, chuckling. He looked over at me. "When Alvin turned seven, Lindsey ordered a pink coral as an extra gift for him, and we thought it was gonna be a hit." He nodded at Alvin. "Kid didn't speak to us for two months after."

I lifted my brows.

"Coral should never be harvested from the ocean," Alvin responded vehemently. "It's one thing if a piece gets washed up on a beach, but I think we both know the ones idiots make money off aren't random bits they found onshore." He flicked me a glance. "For the record, I only collect seashells found on the beach. I make that very clear on eBay, and I contact every seller who isn't clear about the origin."

The guy was passionate.

“Good to know.” I stifled my grin by taking another bite of my cheeseburger, but I chewed quickly to circle back to the Emerald Coast. “By the way, my parents live outside Tallahassee. That’s pretty close to the Redneck Riviera, innit? Last time I was down there, my old man and I drove over to Destin.”

Alvin stiffened in his seat. “They have some of the most beautiful waters. I want to see that entire coastline so badly.”

I shrugged. “You’re very welcome to visit. I road-trip down there once a year.”

Was I crossing a line? Fuck it. Elsie didn’t look bothered one bit, and Ben was just watching us in silence as he ate.

Alvin chewed on his lip and glanced at his dad.

“Don’t look at me, small fry,” Ben chuckled. “That’s kind of Trace to offer, but you might wanna discuss this with Rose. Florida is far away, and you’d need to spend several nights away from your own bed.”

Alvin grew pensive, suddenly looking way more like Ben, and he turned back to me. “Could my dad come too?”

“Of course,” I said. “And your grandma if she wants. My folks love visitors.” Only half a lie. Ma would be over the moon for these specific visitors if it meant her son was finally in a relationship.

Ben and my dad had only met in passing, but I knew they’d get along great.

“I’m gonna talk to Rose,” Alvin decided.

At that, Ben reacted. He furrowed his brow. Confusion, surprise, and wariness flitted

by in one swoop. And I could, for once in my fucking life, practically read his mind. Maybe the option of seeing the ocean hadn't existed before, so he wasn't sure how to deal with the situation. Maybe he was surprised Alvin would even consider it; he'd told me about his son's inability to even go through with a sleepover at a friend's house, and that was in Elmwood Park. And last but not least, I bet he was thinking ahead. It was another thing he'd shared. Ben had to be two steps ahead to consider ramifications and things that could go wrong.

But I was a man of my word, and if Alvin wanted to see Florida, I'd make sure it happened. I wasn't just talking out of my ass.

Unbeknownst to Ben, I'd talked to Scottie and Tina. I mean, I'd kept shit casual and hypothetical, but yeah, I'd asked about the hardships of having a kid with special needs. And I didn't have to worry as much about the jargon with them. They knew I meant well.

I was ready to show Ben I was in it for the long haul—and that I knew it wasn't always gonna be sunshine and roses.

* * *

True to his word, Alvin ate his entire meal, plus the leftovers of our appetizers. I didn't fucking know where he put it all. He just grinned and said he took advantage every time they were in a restaurant. Apparently, he loved steakhouse food, bar food, all things fried, so...he'd come to the right place.

While Alvin and Ben whispered something to each other, Elsie filled me in about their birthday traditions. That was when they ate out, though they'd "missed" Ben's last three birthdays. In other words, Ben had come up with an excuse to get out of it, presumably because he hadn't been able to afford restaurant dining.

I felt for him. He'd fought for so fucking long. Was it wrong that I wanted to take care of him? More than that, I just...wanted to share everything with him. He'd made me crave something that wasn't the Clover.

"Excuse us for one moment," Ben said with a smirk. "Alvin wants to check out the arcade games."

Yeah, no problem. "If you beat Adam's top score, I'll give you free desserts for a year," I told the kid.

Alvin beamed. "I will give it a go!"

Ben chuckled and slid out of the booth after his boy. "I should warn you, he's got a competitive streak."

"Which he got from you," Elsie pointed out.

"Even better," I replied. "There are tokens under the register behind the bar. Grab at least ten of them and consider that my investment toward Adam's downfall. He's infuriatingly good at pinball." We only had four games, and pinball was the one that annoyed me the most.

"We'll see if it's necessary," Ben decided. "Son, you want your headphones?"

Alvin hesitated. "Maybe that's best. I want to concentrate."

Definitely a competitive streak. I liked that.

Ben grabbed the headphones, and I watched them head toward the other end of the bar, Alvin remaining close to his old man the whole way.

“I’m surprised he didn’t tell me to behave,” Elsie noted.

I cracked a grin. “Would you have listened?”

“Of course not,” she laughed. “My son’s in love for the first time, and it appears to be reciprocated.” She eyed me over the rims of her glasses, and my stomach tightened with nerves. Holy fuck, she just put that out there like we were discussing the damn weather. “I have questions.”

Yeah, so did I, Mama O’Cleary.

“Uh, is he?” I had to ask first.

She lifted a brow. “Is that not clear? And before you answer, it’s a genuine question because he can be so dim-witted. Talking isn’t his favorite, especially when it comes to feelings.”

I scratched my jaw and glanced over at the arcade corner. “We’re both pretty bad at that, but I think I’ve gotten better at reading him. He shows me more than he tells.”

She nodded in understanding. “Then I have faith in you. He speaks in his own language, much like Alvin.”

That felt absurdly good to hear. Like, butterflies-in-my-stomach kind of good. Holy shit.

“So how do I give off the reciprocating vibe?” I wondered.

She laugh-snorted and promptly covered her mouth with a hand. “Sorry.”

What the hell?

I grinned, half confused. Was my question that weird?

Amusement lingered in her gaze. “I should clarify that Ben’s been acting strangely about today’s dinner for almost two weeks. First, it was ‘The dinner’s at my friend’s sports bar. I think you’ll like him.’ Then it was Trace this, Trace that, and he got all cranky when I asked if you were more than a friend. And today, on the way over here, he snapped at me—said he didn’t wanna jinx anything.”

Aw, my big oaf. How fucking cute was that. And hilarious.

“So I had my suspicions about him, but I wasn’t sure about you,” she said. “Until you invited his son to your parents’ house in Florida five minutes into dinner.”

Oh. Well...five minutes was a stretch. Fifteen minutes, at least!

“I’m going to tell you a story about my son,” Elsie told me. “Growing up, he was quite popular. He played football—he was good at it—and he had many friends. One in particular. Sheila. A very sweet girl. We always assumed they’d become an item eventually because of how they acted together. Always joking, always laughing, always walking to school together. He even carried her books.”

I had no reason to feel jealous, but I couldn’t help the small spark that shot through me. It was dumb and so uncalled for.

“But as his friends around him started dating, he just...didn’t,” Elsie said. “Sheila confessed her feelings for him sophomore year, and he was devastated because he lost his best friend. He didn’t feel that way about her. About anyone.”

Yup, totally uncalled for. Sorry, Sheila.

“I started worrying that he was homosexual,” Elsie admitted. The tension shifted, and

I could tell she felt bad about something. “I’m sure you can imagine how I grew up.”

I nodded with a dip of my chin. The Catholic working class of the fifties and thereabouts? Come on.

“When he met Lindsey, I was so relieved that I missed out on the complete personality change he’d gone through,” she went on. “Looking back on those years now, I am ashamed of how I let that play out. How I allowed my own son to conform to whatever he thought was acceptable to society—by me, by his father, his whole family. He stopped making jokes. He stopped laughing.” She sighed and shook her head, and she refolded the napkin on her lap. “I’m glad he could forgive me, but I don’t intend to make the same mistake twice.” She lifted her gaze to meet mine, and I saw a sense of conviction. “Ben has been different lately, and it’s not only his new job’s doing. It’s you.”

I sat a little straighter, and I clamped my mouth shut to keep from asking what she was probably about to elaborate. I didn’t wanna miss a single word.

“You see, Ben needs someone he has great chemistry with,” she said. “Someone who shares his sense of humor, and someone who enjoys the back-and-forth ribbing you two seem to have going on already. That’s when I see the boy I raised. He’s more energetic now. He cracks jokes when he stops by, and he finds joy in the most mundane tasks. Like grocery shopping.” She smiled. “He mentioned you two went to the store the other day and found something for your soup kitchen. And the way he told me—it was as if it’d been the funniest field trip in school.”

I grinned. We did have a good time together, whether we were watching a game or walking the aisles at Aldi.

“You’re not another Sheila, dearie,” Elsie said. “You’re the one he probably didn’t believe existed.”

My pulse drummed faster, and I looked over at Ben and Alvin. The kid was engrossed in the game, but Ben was glancing my way.

You in love with me too, hon?

I bet he was suspicious, wondering what his ma was saying to me.

I cleared my throat and faced Elsie again. “In the spirit of communicating better, I wanna spend the rest of my life with him.”

She smiled and patted my hand. “I’m glad to hear it. He’s worth it. You’ll never find someone more loyal—and thickheaded. He doesn’t always give himself the credit he deserves.”

Yeah, no shit. I chuckled. “I’ve learned that much about him.”

* * *

No top score for Alvin yet, but Ben had struck a deal with him I was ridiculously happy about. They were gonna come here for dinner a few times a month, which worked great for my plan. Because maybe next time or the one after that, it’d feel like a good move to show Elsie and Alvin the upstairs.

Maybe I’d ask for Alvin’s advice on what kind of fish I should get. How to set up a tank and such. And if he started finding gym chalk or bath bombs up there, he might wanna stick around for a movie night or, in the future, a sleepover.

He wouldn’t have to move abruptly and drown in panic. We had time. It could take months—hell, years. Whatever. Slowly but surely, Ben and I could turn our home into his too.

I had a feeling Elsie would be easier to get on board, because it was clear she liked being close to her son and grandson. Furthermore, Ben was protective of her—and judging by the stories he'd shared, he wanted to look out for her since she'd given up the rest of the family to be there for him.

I got it.

I also got that I was thinking so far into the future that I should be terrified, but this was what Ben had been talking about. He always needed to think ahead for Alvin's sake. So I was gonna do the same thing.

"Are you gonna finish that, Dad?" Alvin pointed his fork to Ben's leftover hot fudge brownie.

Ben rumbled a laugh and looped an arm around Alvin's neck. "No, you go ahead. I'm full." He kissed the side of his boy's head before sliding the plate closer to him.

I'd done that for Chip too, pretending I was full so a happy kid could increase his sugar intake. 'Cause kids could never get enough sugar or something.

It was sort of doing it for me, to be honest. Watching Ben be a dad was not only hot as fuck, but heartwarming. And that was so unlike me to even notice. I mean, kids...? I hadn't bothered getting to know Bella until she could form words. Babies were fucking useless—and way too fragile. I always worried I'd drop them. We had a few parents working here, and every now and then, they brought their newborn in...

I suspected Sandy was next. His wife was about to pop.

"I should be getting you home soon," Ben said. "I've received my gifts, so you're no good to me anymore."

Alvin laughed. “You’re joking, I can tell!”

I grinned.

Elsie shook her head in amusement, though I could spot something that ran way deeper. She was happy to see her son happy.

He was happy about those gifts too. He had a gift card from Elsie, along with stern instructions to buy a new trimmer, which he’d apparently mentioned thinking about buying. And from Alvin, a key ring that said Best Dad in the World and a bag of salty licorice imported from Denmark.

Every person had their flaws. Ben had two. The Sox and his love for salty licorice.

“He used to buy a bag every Friday after work when I was little,” Alvin had told me.

It’d prompted Ben to rank Northern European countries according to their licorice skills. His favorite kind came from Denmark, then Sweden followed, and Norway, Germany... I forgot the rest.

My old man liked that shit too. It was foul. And Armas, our weekend security guard, had inherited that like from his Finnish family or whatever. There was something seriously wrong with people from Northern Europe.

What kind of words were Heksehyl Haxvral anyway? It sounded like something you choked out before you barfed.

The second or third time Elsie yawned—all subtle behind her hand—Ben quirked a smile and asked, “You ready to go, Ma?”

She smiled back. “It’s all this food. I feel like I need a nap.”

“Yeah, me too.” Ben flicked me a quick glance as he finished his coffee.

Oh, I wouldn’t turn down a nap with him. I’d even keep my hands over the covers, figuratively speaking.

Unfortunately... “Some of us gotta get back to work.” I yawned too, triggered by Elsie.

“But you’re not working too late, are you?” Ben asked.

I shook my head. “Just a couple more hours.”

He inclined his head. “That’ll give me time to bring these two home and then take Pippin out.”

It was a plan.

He nodded back toward the bar next. “Mind getting me the check?”

Was he serious? “On your birthday?”

He gave me a look. “I invited yous here, genius. I’m fuckin’ payin’.”

Jesus Christ. I slid out of the booth. “Fine, but we’re gonna fight about this later. There are limits, man.”

He winked. “Can’t wait.”

Jagoff.

* * *

Trace followed us outside the bar, and I didn't give a fuck anymore. I dipped down and kissed him as my ma put on her scarf.

Who had I been kidding anyway? She already knew. Hell, even Alvin had asked if Trace was my boyfriend.

Now, that was a weird fucking word.

Boyfriend.

He was much more than that.

"I'll see you later." I cupped his cheek and kissed him once more.

He smiled and slid his fingers underneath one of my suspenders. "This is good progress. So open and official."

"Right?" I matched his grin, one part relieved, one part fucking dazed.

This kind of happiness didn't exist in my world.

"Dad? I thought you said you didn't know if he was your boyfriend."

Thanks, son.

Trace laughed under his breath and eased back. "I'll let you deal with that. Drive safe." He offered a two-finger salute to Ma and Alvin. "Looking forward to the next dinner, you two."

"It was wonderful meeting you, Trace," Ma said.

“Bye!” Alvin waved.

I chuckled and draped an arm around Alvin’s shoulders, steering him down the sidewalk. “Let’s get you home to your fish and videos, small fry.”

“I’m actually gonna listen to a podcast when I get home,” he replied matter-of-factly. “I’ll probably need to go to the bathroom soon too. I ate so much.”

Yeah, legit. He never ceased to amaze me on that front. Granted, he could eat a lot at Ma’s too, but this was next level.

“All right, Ma. We’re alone,” I said. “Fire away.”

She pushed up her glasses and linked her arm with mine. “Sorry, sweetie, I don’t have anything to say. I already talked to Trace.”

That wasn’t reassuring one fucking bit.

She patted my arm. “I like him, son. Just...make sure you take care of yourself. You’re not a spring chicken anymore, and he’s very young.”

And the hits kept coming.

“It wouldn’t kill you to pick a salad every now and then,” she finished.

I frowned. “It might.” I was messing with her.

She sucked her teeth and shook her head. “I’m telling you. Those steaks go straight to your heart.”

What the fuck.

Why would she remind me of that shit on my birthday? Especially when I indulged once a fucking week. For living above a sports bar, my diet was incredible. Unlike Trace, I didn't have to force myself to eat vegetables with my protein, and unlike Alvin, I wasn't obsessed with deep-fried food.

Trace Kalecki

I was ready to collapse. It wasn't that late, around ten PM, but the birthday dinner and the busy service that had followed had drained me of energy. Tension too, in the birthday dinner's case. I'd had these pent-up worries, and now they were just gone.

I yawned and walked out of the bathroom with my towel wrapped around my hips.

Ben was still busy sorting through gas receipts in the front room, so I made a beeline for the kitchen to put together a snack. I was still full-ish from his dinner, but I wanted a little something.

"You snackish, hon?" I hollered, opening the fridge.

"Always, but Ma gave me a spiel about how I gotta take care of myself since I'm so fucking old."

I chuckled and hauled out fixings for more waffles. One toaster waffle wasn't going to kill him. But Elsie probably had a point. We should both eat better.

"Pick me up after work tomorrow, and we'll go by Aldi's together," I said.

"Speaking of, work approved a garage space closer to here," he mentioned. "Now I don't have to walk seven fucking blocks."

"That's good news."

He was a stickler for doing shit right with the company vehicle, which I obviously understood. The garage space in question had to be covered by their insurance, seeing as cars like those often got broken in to for the tools.

After preparing two waffles, smothering them in whipped cream and strawberry preserves, I headed for the front room and sat down next to him.

He had an old Sox game running in the background, and Ziggy was dozing off between his feet.

“Not too shabby,” he said, adding the last receipt to the smallest pile. “Forty-six bucks in personal gas expenses.”

I bit into my waffle and bobbed my head, agreeing that was low. I mean, we used the car quite a bit. Especially him when he went out to Elsie and Alvin.

“That’s cheaper than the CTA,” I said.

He bit into his waffle, too, and hummed appreciatively.

I side-eyed him and smiled faintly.

This was gonna be our new normal. He and I together, doing our thing as a team. But it would be nice to have it confirmed verbally, as awesome as the kiss had been outside the bar earlier.

He got whipped cream on his upper lip, and my smile widened.

“It’s you and me now, right?” I asked. “We’re together and shit?”

He coughed around a mouthful of waffle, grinned, and reached for a paper towel on

the table.

He wiped his mouth and chewed faster. “I was tryna pace myself till you got outta the shower, and then you pounce when I’ve stuffed my face?”

My bad?

He swallowed the last of it and gave my thigh a squeeze. “I want nothing more, Trace. Just be patient. I’m...I’m struggling to accept that this can happen to me. A few months ago, I was out on the streets, hoping the next snowstorm was gonna kill me, and now I have a steady job, a home, and...you. You’re...” He let out a breath and shook his head.

I set aside my plate and scooted closer, and I grabbed his hand in both mine.

“I’m your bright spot?” I tried to keep it light.

The corners of his mouth twisted up. “You’re a bit more than that. You’re my jackass too.”

Very funny.

Then he got serious. “You make me wanna live for myself, not just to be there for my boy.” He leaned in and rested his forehead to mine, and I let the blanket of peacefulness fall over us. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how to describe what I feel because I’ve never experienced anything like this before.”

Neither had I, and I was pretty sure I knew what he meant. It could be overwhelming. Several times a day, I found myself having a knee-jerk, violent reaction to a random thought, only because he made me feel so fucking much.

I knew what Dad meant back in the day now. How crushes made you wanna keep that person to yourself so you could overdose on them, all while...love... Love made you wanna shout from the rooftops.

“That makes two of us,” I murmured. And now I had to show him. “Come on. I wanna show you something.” I rose to my feet and held on to his hand. “I understand about the patience. You’ve been through a lot—you gotta let things settle. But you also once told me that you have to be quick on your feet and think about the consequences of every step Alvin takes. So this is me trying to do the same thing.”

He followed me out of the room, and I threaded our fingers together.

“My plans will probably scream impatience,” I admitted. “But I hope you’ll see it another way. I have all the patience for how these plans will be executed—I just want you to know I have the future on my mind, and that I’m not taking any of this lightly.”

We came to a stop outside the bedroom farthest down the hall.

I spotted Ziggy in the doorway to the front room. The lazy little shit wasn’t curious enough to tag along.

“This can be Alvin’s room.” I leaned against the doorframe and scanned the empty walls.

“Trace, you?—”

“No, please lemme do this.” I cleared my throat and swallowed a flurry of unease. He had to hear what I had to say. “We have a home, Ben. He wouldn’t have to go from one place to the next in a single day. He can come here, spend as much time as he wants—hell, we’ll put in a fish tank or whatever. Give him something that makes him

wanna come back over and over until he's ready for a sleepover, then two and three. I don't care how slow the transition is. We have all this space—we should put it to use?—”

“Please stop.” Ben withdrew from me and scrubbed his hands over his face.

Fuck. My stomach became a knotted mess, and my eyes burned. Like, what the fuck? All of a sudden, I was terrified? And mortified. I coughed and folded my arms over my chest, and my ears started ringing. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I'd missed something. This wasn't what he wanted. I was a fucking idiot?—

“Christ.” The word left him in an exhale, and he let his hands fall to his sides as he peered up at the ceiling. Then he dropped his gaze to mine again, and for a moment, he looked so raw. Older, tired, vulnerable, scared, and frustrated. “Trace, I... You're telling me everything I wanna hear, at the same time as those exact things scare the fuck outta me, 'cause...what happens if you change your mind? What if all this becomes too much for you? You call this our home—and I can't describe what that does to me—but it's still yours. In the event we break up, it goes without saying that I'm the one moving out, and then I gotta pack up my autistic son too. I already did that once.” He swallowed, and his eyes turned a little glassy. “When Lindsey died, we couldn't afford a slow transition. I had to immediately drive him to my folks, and that was that. He had to go through an incredibly traumatic year because of that move alone. He didn't even grieve his mother's death until months after the funeral, because he was balls deep in chaos that pushed him in and out of panic and apathetic periods.”

“In the event we break up, I'm the one moving out, and then I gotta pack up my autistic son too.”

Those words went on a loop in my brain, and as much as they stung, I couldn't fault him for being cautious. A good dad functioned that way. I understood his fears. I

understood he wouldn't risk his son's mental health. But he didn't understand what I was getting at.

He'd said I was telling him everything he wanted to hear, right? I clung to that—desperately. Because it meant I only had to work against his fears, not what he wanted.

I closed the distance between us and cupped his face in my hands. “Baby, the patience part will make you trust me. I'm not moving him in here tomorrow. I'm talking about a space he'd like to visit.”

He swallowed hard and closed his eyes.

“A year from now, I think you'll know I'm serious,” I continued quietly. “Maybe even in six months. I don't know. All I wanted to show you was my vision. That I'm in this for the long haul and that you're part of a package deal—and I'm ready to prove it. With time.”

When he opened his eyes again, he almost looked broken. As if I was fighting the last piece of resistance.

“Why are you doing this?”

Wasn't that obvious at this point?

I smiled. “Because I love you, you fucking dingbat.”

“But—” He exhaled an emotional chuckle, as if the words just now settled, and he rested his forehead to mine. “It's a big sacrifice.”

“No.” I touched his cheek. “You're not the only one who's found something new

worth living for. I love the Clover, but I don't want it to define who I am or take up every weekend." I inched back so I could look at him properly. "I didn't meet your family today for your sake, Ben. I scoped them out to see if they would fit in my family one day, and shit's looking promising."

He broke out in a tearful smile and hugged me to him. "You little fucker."

I grinned and?—

"I love you too, by the way." It was his turn to cup my face in his hands, and he kissed me quickly. "Fuck, do I love you. It feels good to say that."

It felt damn good to hear it.

A brand-new sensation seeped into me, slowly filling me up, and I could only describe it as a combination of elation and calmness. Fucking harmony. My frazzled nerves healed themselves as we met in another kiss, and this one was slow, deep, and perfect.

"You cut me off earlier," I mumbled between kisses. "The other room's for your ma."

He sighed through a shudder and backed me up against the wall. "You wanna be stuck with me in the front room?"

I shrugged and kissed his jaw, locking my arms around his neck. "It's big enough, and you can install doors or something."

Because we needed our privacy too.

He gave me a swift, drugging kiss. "That's a lot of changes for a young bachelor."

I hummed. I wasn't a bachelor anymore, and neither was he. Bring on the crazy. All the changes, new furniture, shit on the walls, life everywhere, complications, beauty, two families merging. I was game.

"Start building," was all I said.

We were done talking after that.

Ben was...in a hurry. At long fucking last. He kissed me brutally hard and ripped off my towel, and I got with the program and yanked up his tee. He broke away to haul it over his head, and desire bolted through me at the sight of the hunger in his gaze.

Without a word, he spun me around to face the wall, and he sank to his knees and grabbed two fistfuls of my ass. I sucked in a sharp breath and rested my forearm against the wall. The heat from his exhale so close to me made me shiver, and thank fuck he didn't keep me waiting. He buried his face in my ass and pushed his tongue inside me.

Holy fuck.

I moaned, an onslaught of sensations buzzing through me. Pleasure from the contrast of his soft, wet tongue and his stubble... Honestly, a bit of shock too. I clenched my jaw. So the man could eat ass well. Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, the way he slid his tongue in and out and around and so fucking shamelessly was gonna make me lose my mind.

"Just like that," I groaned. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you?"

"Shut the fuck up, baby. I'm busy."

Hnnngh.

Yes, he was. Yes, yes, yes, he was.

I fisted my cock and rested my forehead against my arm, and he went to fucking town on me.

He kneaded my ass cheeks roughly and soaked me in saliva. “You have the tightest, most perfect little ass.” He flicked his tongue against my hole. “Now that you’re mine, you’re gonna have to put up with me spending a lotta time down here.”

Yeah, okay.

“Fuck...” I exhaled and stroked myself faster. “What if I need your big cock?”

“Do you?”

“Yeah. I’m ready to beg.” I threw that out there. “Lemme suck you till you’re coated.”

He cursed and teased my opening with the tip of his tongue.

“Please, Ben,” I moaned. “If we’re gonna fill this place with family members, I want you to rail me in every square inch before we gotta stick to our room and the bathroom.”

He chuckled huskily and didn’t respond.

For a while anyway. Maybe it was coming later.

A violent shudder pushed through me, like thunder rolling in from the lake in the summer, and he kept tongue-fucking me. But slower now. More sensually. He was back to being too patient.

“Ben...” I may or may not have whined.

“Mmhmm...?”

“Fuck me, please,” I begged. “I need it.”

“What exactly do you need?”

“You. Your cock.”

“Only me? Only my cock?”

God yes. Was he getting possessive? Because I could get on board with that. Holy shit, every day of the week.

“Only you, only your cock.” I couldn’t help it; I arched my back and pushed out my ass, needing more. “Please, baby. I need you.”

In a heartbeat, the heat disappeared behind me, and then I heard and felt him near my ear. I fucking shook.

“Get on your knees for me,” he whispered.

I couldn’t obey fast enough. I spun around and sank to my knees, and I peered up at him as I pulled out his cock from his sweats. Fuck yes, rock hard and ready.

“Only me,” he murmured.

I nodded and sucked him into my mouth, immediately hollowing out my cheeks and easing him down my throat.

He drew in a sharp breath, muscles tensing, and wove his fingers through my hair.

“Nice and wet,” he whispered.

I hummed and swirled my tongue around him, making sure to get him properly coated. And that was evidently all he allowed. Within seconds, he wanted me to face the wall again, so I sucked him real quick, just needing a taste?—

“Now, Trace.”

Fine, if he was gonna bring out the bossy tone...

I stood up again, and I popped a kiss to his lips before I turned around, and I caught a brief glimpse of his smile. Then he was behind me, rubbing his cock between my ass cheeks, and I knew this would go fast. I braced myself—oh, fucking hell, there we go.

I screwed my eyes shut and slammed my fist against the wall. Not for the first time, I cursed myself for getting so fucking turned on by that initial fireball of pain as he buried himself all the way in. The hurt blazed through me with such intensity that I couldn't draw breath.

“That what you wanted, bright spot?” he whispered in my ear. His voice was strained and rough, and I whimpered in response. And to his question. I nodded a little too, and my whole body broke out in a fever.

He owned my body with that cock of his.

While I recovered, he started fucking me in deep, unhurried thrusts, and he brought my free hand down to my cock. A silent request.

I finally managed to draw a ragged breath.

He fucked me.

I stroked myself.

He sucked on my neck.

I moaned embarrassingly loudly and began meeting every push.

With a tight grip on my hips, he yanked me out from the wall a bit, and then he picked up the pace.

“Jesus fuck,” he bit out.

Yeah. That. Holy fucking something—we were done with lube. The added friction when we just used spit intensified the burn, and I was rendered useless. It felt like the entire fuck was a long orgasm, or at least a wild buildup I couldn’t get enough of.

“Harder,” I moaned. “Fuck, I love that—just like that. Oh God.”

He groaned, fingertips digging painfully into my hips, and he drilled into me as if he couldn’t stop, as if there was no tomorrow. And then he hit another angle, and I cried out before I pressed my mouth against my arm.

“This is all mine, Trace.” He gave my ass a solid thwack and squeezed the flesh.

I couldn’t keep up with what was happening inside me. The storm surged too quickly and pushed me to the brink long before I was ready, but I couldn’t help it.

“I’m fucking coming,” I gritted out.

He grunted and slammed into me. “Let it all go.”

I was already there. I flipped my lid, and I had just enough wits about me to rub my cock through the orgasm. Fuck, rope after rope splattered against the wall, and I couldn’t breathe. My lungs were burning—my ass was burning. And the sensations grew hotter when he got off a beat or two later.

He slid his cock in and out of his release, fucking his climax deeper into me.

Why couldn’t I hear anyth—never mind. There was this rushing noise, but it faded slowly, until I heard our panting. Christ, I hadn’t even noticed I was breathing again.

Ben plastered himself to me, still buried deep, and pressed his face against my neck.

His chest heaved.

I swallowed dryly and let go of my cock.

Fuck, I had come everywhere.

“Ow,” I whispered as I tried to relax. My legs were cramping up.

“Want me to carry you to bed?” He smiled into the kiss he pressed below my ear.

I chuckled, out of breath. “How about a shower first? I feel like I’m covered in sweat and come.”

He rumbled a warm chuckle and cupped my cock. “Mm, perfectly sticky.”

I grinned to myself and inspected the wall.

What a way to christen the hallway.

* * *

One sacred Monday in the beginning of June, Sarah nearly ruined my date night by asking if I could watch Chip for a couple hours. She had a work event at some hospital association on North Wacker or thereabouts, and her man was at home with his flued-up kid.

Luckily for Sarah, Ben and I could switch from one beef joint to another, because a new place had opened up across the Franklin-Orleans bridge, and it was possible we'd already been there twice.

While we waited for Sarah and Chip, we walked along the bridge, surrounded by skyscrapers and city lights, and I did my best to cheer up my man.

He was a little down because it was Ziggy's last week with us. He'd made the decision that Zig would be better off with my folks in Florida, though it still stung. More so for Ben than me. But yeah. We'd gotten attached; there was no denying that.

"On the flipside, it won't be a permanent goodbye," I said. "We'll see him every time we head down there and whenever they visit us. Ma won't be able to leave him with a dog sitter, I know that much."

Ma was over the fucking moon.

Ben smiled faintly and threaded our fingers together. "Do you see us visiting a lot?"

I blew out a breath, thinking about it. And I came to a stop at the center of the bridge, where I leaned back against the railing.

“I usually drive down there every August,” I replied. “It’s the only time I can take a couple weeks off—and then I’m home again before football season starts.”

This year was out. In no way was I ready to leave Ben behind for two weeks, and it was way too early for Alvin to consider that journey.

He nodded with a dip of his chin and planted his hands on each side of me, caging me in. “What car do you use?”

“Dad’s old truck,” I said. “He left it at Sarah’s. He won’t set foot on a train.”

He chuckled.

I pressed a kiss to his jaw. “Maybe our visits will be shorter for a few years. I don’t know. But once Alvin gets used to the traveling, I think I’ll have him on my team. We’ll vote for a two-week vacation there every summer, and you’ll have no choice but to tag along.”

He smirked. “I thought you hated Florida.”

I widened my eyes. “I do. Don’t get it twisted, man. It’s stupid hot. But it’s nice when you have someone to share that beach with. It’s a nice beach. And you’ll look sexy as fuck in trunks.”

He dipped down and kissed me, and I slipped my fingers underneath his suspenders. It’d become my thing. When he was in his work clothes, I held him close. Literally.

“I don’t dislike the idea of two weeks in the sun one bit,” he murmured in between pecks.

It was settled, then.

“Good.”

He brushed a finger along my jawline. “Will you wear somethin’ skimpy on the beach?”

I laughed, and he grinned.

“Sorry, you won’t catch me alive in a fucking Speedo,” I said.

“Pity.” The amusement lingered in his gaze, and we just watched each other for a while.

It was insane how happy he made me. Even all the changes. Maybe especially them. Or some of them. Like Sundays and Mondays, when I was off now. That was right. I had two days off. And Ben had most weekends off, and when I worked late on Saturdays, he hung out with me downstairs anyway. Unless he was filling in for Armas at the door. Turned out, Ben made one sexy security guard.

“Say something,” I said.

“What do you want me to say?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Something cute.”

He flashed one of his “I can’t deal with you, baby” grins and smooched me. “All right, uh...you, uh... You make me feel like I’m starring in a fucking rom-com.”

I let out a laugh and nuzzled our noses together. “That’s a good one. But if this was a rom-com, we’d have a drone circling over our heads to catch us making out.”

“And all the skyscrapers. With an appropriate song blaring,” he added.

He got it.

We mirrored each other's smiles and met in an unhurried kiss that only the Spawn of Satan had the balls to interrupt.

By fucking catcalling. "That's what I'm talking about, big brother!"

Ben laughed through his nose and dropped his forehead to my shoulder, and I looked over to where she was walking closer with a skipping chipster.

"Hi, Uncle Trace!" he yelled.

"Hey, buddy." I gave him a genuine smile before I turned to my sister and scratched my eyebrow with my middle finger.

She just smirked and rolled her eyes, her ponytail flinging from one side to the other. The rest of her was dolled up in a dress.

"Hi, Ben!"

Ben straightened and held out a fist for Chip. "How are ya, champ?"

"I'm awesome!" Chip bumped his fist to Ben's, and they both made an explosive sound. 'Cause they had their own thing now.

It was cute as shit.

"What's this event you were talking about?" I asked Sarah.

"Oh, I'm just there for my boss." Sarah thought that was eye-roll-worthy too. "He can make his case better if someone working the floor is with him. Enter the nurse."

Ah.

“He better not make a move,” I told her. “I actually like the dude you’re with now.”

I even remembered his name. I was fairly sure it was Chris.

“I assure you, my baby-maker is reserved for one man only,” she commented dryly.

“My boss is also hella married.”

I snorted. “Yeah, ’cause that never stopped people from crossing the line before.”

“I think Sarah can handle her own,” Ben noted.

Sarah beamed.

I furrowed my brow. “Is this how it’s gonna be? You automatically side with her?”

He cocked a brow. “Didn’t you just say you were gonna make sure Alvin’s on your team?”

“How the fuck is that relevant? Don’t change the topic. We’re talking about you.”

His response? He shared a look with my sister, like they had some inside joke going on. With a side of, “You see what I have to deal with?”

Troublesome development.

“Okay, can we eat now?” Chip asked. “I want beef, beef, beef!”

“Yes, we can,” I said. Since I was clearly not getting any support here. I turned to Sarah, setting our sibling bickering aside. “Text me when you’re done. I’m not sure

where we'll be. Ben and I have turned into hand-in-hand, lose-track-of-time walkers lately. Yesterday, we walked like twenty blocks for no reason at all."

She snickered and reached up to kiss my cheek. "That's sweet. I'll text you." She turned back to her boy and bent down. "I'll see you in about two hours, baby. Be good to your uncles, okay?"

Uncles.

I shot Ben a smile, and he squeezed my hand.

"I promise to try," Chip said firmly. "Bye, Mommy."

Sarah straightened. "I feel so dismissed."

"I think that was the point," I supplied helpfully. "Bye, Sarah."

Sarah looked up at Ben. "Remember, no returns on this one." She jerked her thumb at me.

Ben exhaled a laugh and draped an arm around my shoulders. "Unfortunately, he's reeled me in for life, but I'll do my best to tame him."

He'd do no such thing. He didn't want me tame.

I liked the "for life" part, though.

* * *

Half an hour later—'cause fuck, the place had a line—we finally had our beefs and managed to snag a table in the window just as a couple left. So hard work was already

paying off.

Chip was clearly in a chanting mood, and as I unwrapped his food, he shook his butt in his seat and went, “Wet beef, wet beef, wet beef for the win!”

“You can barely tell he spent his first few years in Boston now.” I was proud.

Ben grinned and bit into his own beef. He and I wanted ours dipped, though.

“Okay, remember to hold with both hands.” I carefully handed Chip his beef, and he grabbed on, sending some meat flying.

It happened to the best of us.

Before long, all our focus was aimed at the food, and we only took breaks to get more napkins and drink our pop. And discuss next weekend a little.

Alvin was visiting for the second time, and Ben had worked on his future room all week. Officially, it was a guest room, of course. A place Alvin was going to help us decorate. There was no bed yet—because Ben knew Alvin would want as much of his old furniture as possible—but we’d found two small fish tanks for cheap. Ben had also fixed up an old desk, and he’d bought a desk chair. Same kind Alvin already had.

Ben’s hope was to ask for Alvin’s advice on a color for the walls, because the kid loved blue, but they weren’t allowed to paint the walls at Elsie’s place. So maybe that would sway Alvin just a bit.

“Can I meet Alvin?” Chip asked. He’d given up on holding his beef and was now dipping his face into it, taking bites from it. “How old is he?”

“He’s eighteen, and one day, yeah,” I replied with my mouth full. Fuck, this was

good. Some of the best giardiniera I'd had. "You know how I don't like people very much?"

"Ya, except for me and some people," Chip said.

I nodded. "Alvin's like that. He likes people, but too much noise is painful for him. He gets tired and worried."

"Oh." Chip probably didn't get it, but I didn't wanna tiptoe around the topic either. Bit by bit, he'd understand eventually. "I thought he was little like me, but he's old like you. Eighteen is big. Mommy's almost a hundred."

Ben and I did our best to stifle our amusement.

"I see where he gets his math skills from," he said under his breath.

"Hey, fuck you," I laughed.

Chip gasped. "You said fu?—"

"Don't even think about it," I replied quickly.

This wasn't my first rodeo.

"But if you can say it, then I can?—"

I shook my head. "No. You said it yourself, I'm eighteen—I'm a grown man. And your ma's a hundred. When you turn eighteen, you can swear all you want."

He scowled at me.

I mock-scowled right back.

“I’m gonna say a bad word,” he whispered. “Jagoff.”

Oh, but... “That’s fine.” I shrugged. “Jagoff ain’t really a bad word. Mommy just says so, and she’s a hundred years old.”

“You’re gonna milk this too much,” Ben chuckled. “Meanwhile, I’m gonna go find someone who’s at least in his thirties.”

The fuck he would. He earned the next scowl, and there was no mocking about it.

He puckered his lips at me.

Jagoff.

* * *

“Dad, I’m only gonna have five more,” Alvin said. “Stop me if I try to take extra.”

In other therapy news, Rose was teaching Alvin to set boundaries for himself, and it was affecting his intake of pretzel sticks and Nutella.

“I’ll stop you,” I promised. “In fact, return the bag to the kitchen.”

He nodded and rose from the desk chair. “That’s clever.” He took the Nutella with him too.

I wiped some sweat off my forehead and then bent down to drag the roller through the paint. A beat later, Trace was back with our water.

“Why was Alvin muttering to himself that he should’ve said ten instead of five?”

I grinned and accepted the glass. “He limited his pretzel obsession.”

“Unwise. It never works.” He shook his head and picked up his own roller.

I watched for a few seconds, because Trace Kalecki doing handyman work was my new fantasy come true. He had some blue paint on his jaw, his hands might as well belong to a Smurf, but he got the job done without streaks on the walls. That was all that mattered.

I chugged my water as he bent over again to get more paint.

“Enjoy the view while it lasts, hon. I gotta get to work in half an hour,” he said.

“Oh, I’m enjoying it.”

I was gonna spend the rest of my life with that ass.

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Trace Kalecki

“That’s it for the bread!” I hollered.

“I’ll go see if we have something else.” Tonya hurried out of the Green, while Marisol and I poured extra soup into the cups.

Julie stood in the doorway, and we exchanged a look.

“About twenty more,” she said.

I nodded in confirmation. Twenty more heads wasn’t a huge miscalculation on our part. We’d find something.

It was dicey before payday. Twice a month, we had services where more visitors showed up at the soup kitchen because money just didn’t stretch the whole way till the next check arrived.

Julie went to give Tonya the estimate, and as she left, Ben entered. He’d just woken up by the looks of him.

I smiled politely at the guy I offered a cup to, then turned to Ben. “Mornin’, sunshine.”

He yawned and pressed a quick kiss to my temple. “Need a hand?”

“No, we’re almost done.”

He'd pitched in plenty this morning, after he'd gotten off his night shift. Tonight was his last shift for this round, meaning he was off tomorrow. When we were heading to the lake with Alvin, Elsie, and Angie.

Alvin wanted to take water samples and test the pH.

I was gonna buy the biggest slushie I could find on the way and then sit my fine ass down in the shade with Elsie.

We'd been threatened with summer heat all week.

It was good for Alvin, though. We were taking him out on more frequent day-trips, and he was slowly finding enjoyment in a bit more variety in his daily routine. As long as we could protect him from too much commotion, I thought it was going great. And Ben was overwhelmingly relieved, which also helped him get over Ziggy being gone.

That dog had his own Instagram account now, but even Ben had his limits.

"I'm not joining social media to see the same shaggy mug every day. I'll see him when your folks come back for Thanksgiving."

Tonya and Julie returned with a crate a couple minutes later, and it was filled with a mix of cheesy bread and hot dog buns.

"We checked with Petey first," Tonya added.

"That's great. Thank you." I took a step back to have a swig of water.

I turned to my man and touched his scruffy cheek. "I think I should drive tomorrow. At least on the way up."

After all, even though he'd be off tomorrow, he'd be on call all night.

Someone always called.

"We'll see how it goes." He yawned again and smiled sleepily. "It's gonna be fun. Ma's excited—she's doin' it up big with a picnic."

"Score." I loved her cooking.

It was good for her to get out more too.

"Angie better like me," I said. "Shit's going so well, it'd be my luck if she hated my guts."

He chuckled and shook his head. "You got nothing to worry about."

I hoped not.

* * *

Friday morning, I was up at the crack of dawn, before Ben even came home from work.

They'd been on his ass all fucking night, so I was definitely driving.

I'd checked with my dad last week to make sure I could borrow his truck, so it was already parked outside.

I packed a bag for us. Towels, trunks—brand-new pair for Ben—a power bank, and a thermos filled with a fresh pot of coffee. Ben was gonna need it.

He walked through the door at a little past seven and couldn't stop yawning.

"You'll sleep in the car, baby," I told him.

He grumbled something and crushed me in a hug.

I smiled and squeezed him back. "How about a back rub later?"

He groaned. "Fuck, I love you."

I grinned and kissed his neck. "Let's go pick up the others."

"Oh, right—" He straightened and absently scratched his bicep. "Angie's driving her own car. She had some work to finish up, so she'll join us later."

"Okay, cool. And in case she hates me, she can flee the scene."

He rolled his eyes, amused. "You're cute, but she already knows the worst part about you."

I frowned. "Which is?"

"That you're a Cubs fan, fucking obviously."

That motherf?—

I couldn't wait for my family to descend on his Soxy ass.

* * *

So the trick to get Alvin to enjoy a whole day out was to drive two goddamn

hours—because we avoided the tolls, of course—up to fucking Kenosha, where we could find solitude along Kennedy Drive.

We were literally entering Wisconsin.

The best view was in the rearview, and I was referring both to Chicago and the O’Cleary boys. Ben and Alvin were fast asleep, Alvin with his noise-canceling headphones and Ben with his shades. Both of them had their arms folded too, but only the elder was snoring.

I smiled to myself and drummed my fingers along the wheel as a new song came on. Fucking perfect. Def Leppard. Best summer music if anyone asked us. Ben’s only objection was when I called the music old.

“Are you working tonight, dearie?” Elsie asked.

“I’ll pitch in if it gets busy after nine,” I replied.

We’d be home by then.

“What’cha knitting?” I asked.

“A new beanie for Alvin,” she answered. “He’s very fussy about the material, you see. If it’s remotely scratchy, he’ll get enraged.”

Oh yeah, I’d heard about that. Not specifically about Alvin, but I’d been doing some reading when I was in the bathroom lately.

“Feel this.” She held up the bundle of yarn, and I touched it and lifted my brows. Damn, it was really soft.

“You could have lettering across it,” I said. “I didn’t choose the rage. The rage chose me.”

Elsie side-eyed me over her glasses. “Sometimes you say things, and I have to make sure it’s not Ben speaking.”

I grinned.

She smiled softly, a bit wryly, and turned back to her knitting. “Unfortunately, Alvin takes after his father’s crass humor, so I might as well. He’d find that funny.”

Yeah? Another point for me.

I jumped slightly when I felt a hand on my shoulder, and then the arm followed.

I checked the rearview and threaded our fingers together, and I saw Ben leaning against the back of my headrest.

I kissed his hand.

“Where are we?” he asked through a yawn.

“We can start lookin’ in ten minutes,” I said. We had the lake to our right, gorgeous as hell, but we were about to circle a country club. And find a slushie for me. The GPS promised I wouldn’t have to wait long.

“Did you have a good nap, sweetie?” Elsie asked.

“Yeah, till Alvin knocked his headphones in my face.”

I laughed.

“I like that beanie idea, by the way,” Ben told his ma. “He’ll love that.”

Elsie sighed. “Almost fifty years old, and my son is still a hell-raiser.”

She didn’t know what hell-raising was.

* * *

We found a good spot near a beach just south of Kenosha, where the closest people around were trapped in the cars driving by up on Kennedy.

The shoreline right here was one-part beach sand and one-part big rocks, and then we had some trees shielding us from most of the traffic. It was definitely worth the drive, even more so when I walked closer to the water’s edge. The water was clear and almost turquoise, but most importantly, I could see the bottom for at least forty or so feet.

“It looks great, but it gets deep fast,” I said, returning to the others.

Ben was helping Elsie with a big blanket in the shade of the trees.

I didn’t foresee anyone intruding. The parking spot we’d found was nearby, but so was a public beach. People were bound to pick that over the narrow strip we’d found just off the side of the road.

“Are you gonna swim, Dad?” Alvin asked.

“Of course I am, and so is Trace,” Ben replied.

I scrunched my nose. I mean, I hadn’t decided yet...

This wasn't Florida.

I needed my air cold and my water warm. In other words, I was fucked either way.

Alvin brought out a notepad from his backpack and had another question for his old man. "Have you ever been to Lake Superior?"

"Uhh...yeah, a few times as a kid." Ben nodded. "What're you writing?"

"Water-related stuff," he responded. "Is the water in Lake Superior warm in the summer?"

Ben and I exchanged a smirk, and I sat down on a rock to kick off my shoes. My blue and red slushie was waiting for me too.

"Lemme put it this way, son," Ben started. "If anyone ever tells you the water is nice in Lake Superior, you need to cross a bridge and head south because you've been talking to a Yooper."

I cracked up, wishing Armas were here. Every time I came across a U.P. joke, I went to him. He was from there.

"Okay." Alvin jotted that down.

"Enough joshing around, boys," Elsie said. "Come eat. What we had on the road doesn't deserve to be called breakfast."

What? We'd bought donuts.

"Did you ever hear that joke about two Yoopers walking out of a bar?" I asked Ben.

He laughed and nodded. “Classic.”

“I don’t get that one.” Alvin grasped Ben’s arm. “Explain it to me?”

Ben put his arm around his boy. “You know how a lot of those jokes start with someone going into a bar?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard many of those,” Alvin confirmed.

I grinned to myself and walked over to Elsie, and Ben handled the explanation like a champ until Alvin was laughing too. Or snickering, at least. Sometimes, I could tell he mostly wanted to mirror his dad, and it was sweet.

Eventually, Ben and Alvin sat on the blanket too, and our offers to help were turned down. Elsie looked to be happy about slinging food to us, so I had zero complaints. She’d made us sandwiches, cookies, and a pasta salad with kielbasa, feta, greens, and sun-dried tomatoes.

Ben brought out his phone to let me know Angie was on her way. Twenty minutes to go. He texted her back with our exact whereabouts, and I did my best to manage my nerves. I mean, I knew he was right. I had no reason to worry. Ben and Angie still met up for lunch at least once or twice a week, and he’d told her plenty about me. But still. For every day that passed, I felt even harder for what we had going on, and it’d destroy me if I lost it.

I’d been vocal about that too, which I was sure had helped Ben relax more. ’Cause it was still his default mode to take up less space, and I wanted the opposite.

We were getting there.

“I think you might be right,” Alvin said. “I’ll probably need to go to the truck after

we've eaten."

"You say the word, and I'll walk you back there," Ben assured.

"You feeling overwhelmed, Alvin?" I asked.

He nodded hesitantly. "I can feel it coming sometimes. Like a little headache."

I could relate to that, at least. I didn't get overwhelmed or anxious; I just got moody as fuck and suffered the occasional tension headache.

"When I was a kid, my ma would keep me close and put a towel or blanket over me," I mentioned, nodding in thanks as I got my sandwich. "It actually helped. Till it got too hot."

He quirked a curious smile. "I could maybe try that."

Either way, we were prepared. We'd parked in the shade for a reason, in case he needed breaks.

Ben gave my leg a squeeze and bit into his sandwich, and I followed suit.

Fuck, that was good. Couldn't go wrong with cold cuts and cheese.

"What kind of cookies did you make, Ma?" Ben was eyeing the container.

"Your favorite—chocolate with white chocolate chip," Elsie replied.

"Fuck yeah," he and I said in unison. I'd tried them once before, and they were out of this fucking world. Because she sprinkled some extra salt in there. They were just amazing.

As we ate and talked, it was easy to lose track of time. We made loose plans for Thanksgiving, mostly because my mom had asked me to put feelers out. They were hosting Thanksgiving at Sarah's house, and Ben and his family were obviously invited.

"That sounds lovely, dearie," Elsie said. "Give me your mother's number so I can call her. I will not show up empty-handed, and Ben needs his roasted green beans."

We all had our musts for Thanksgiving. I put up a fight if I didn't get Ma's garlic potatoes.

She'd forgotten one year. But we didn't discuss the Thanksgiving Debacle of 2016. No garlic potatoes and no potato rolls. It'd been horrible.

As I polished off my paper plate with pasta salad, I spotted a woman walking alongside the road with a big purse, a cooler, and an umbrella, the kind you stuck in the sand on the beach, so I nudged Ben.

"Is that Angie?"

He looked up and nodded, so when he rose to his feet, I did the same.

"I'll go help her," he said. "Aunt Angie's here, bud."

Alvin perked up.

I followed Ben up on the rocks and between the trees, ready to show I was the best boyfriend ever.

Ben pulled me in quick and pressed a kiss to my temple. "Relax. She knows you're the love of my life. Okay?"

Whoosh. Shit like that worked!

I smiled and kissed his jaw. “Okay. Good. And ditto, FYI.”

He smiled back and grabbed my hand.

Seconds later, we met up with Angie, who instantly used Ben as a coat hanger.

“This is just too fucking hot for me,” she said, out of breath. “I mean, hi.”

Ben chuckled and shouldered both the bag and the cooler, and he grabbed the umbrella too. “Hey. This is Trace.”

I cranked up my politeness, and at the sight of Angie smiling and then—yeah, okay, we were hugging. I had nothing to worry about.

“It’s good to finally meet you, Trace.”

Relief hit me, and I let out a breath. “Great to meet you too.”

“I guess now’s a good time to tell you something about Angie,” Ben said. “She’s a Cubs fan.”

I widened my eyes at him and inched back from Angie. “You tell me that now? After everything—after what you said— You fucking asshole! I’ve been worried we wouldn’t have anything in common!”

Ben got jokingly defensive. “Why would I intentionally bring up something like that? She’s the black sheep of the family.”

Angie cracked up and smacked Ben’s arm. “Yeah, that sounds plausible. Black sheep

for having grown up on the North Side. Freakin' dumbass." She linked her arm with mine and ushered me away. "Lemme tell you something about my cousin, Trace..."

* * *

"Don't go any deeper than that, Alvin," I reminded him and threw a towel around my shoulders.

"I won't!" he promised. He was only six or so feet out, but it got deep so fast, and he couldn't swim very well.

Trace gestured and swam out a bit, silently letting me know he'd keep an eye on the boy. I nodded in thanks.

Alvin wasn't exactly reckless in the water; he literally just walked around in waist-deep water and tried to see if he could find fish and signs of life along the bottom, but it meant he was easily distracted. He didn't always notice his surroundings.

I tried to bring him up here at least twice every summer, and if that didn't work, we'd hit up one of the city beaches early in the morning or later toward the evening.

Angie passed me and draped her towel over a rock. "That was a quick dip."

"To cool down. I'm not done. I just want some coffee." I wasn't gonna let her insinuate the water was too cold. I fucking loved swimming. But I'd worked all night, and I was beat.

I returned to Ma and sat down on the blanket, making sure I could see Alvin.

Ma was one step ahead. She poured me a mug and handed me a cookie.

“Fuck yeah. Thanks.”

“I’m the one who owes you thanks, son,” she said, adjusting the umbrella a bit.

“Huh?”

“Both you and Trace,” she added.

Ah. She was talking about Trace’s plans for the future. Which...fine, I dared to call them my plans now too. Trace proved that every single day. He wanted this as much as I did.

“You didn’t think I’d stick you in a home, did you?” I furrowed my brow.

She chuckled softly and stirred creamer into her own coffee. “Well, no, but I can’t tell you how many of my girlfriends feel like a burden around their families. Did I tell you about Margaret’s sons? They made a schedule to determine who got stuck visiting her.”

She’d told me more than once.

“The younger generation tends to forget we can still be useful,” she said.

She wasn’t wrong there. Not that we wanted her around because of her cooking and whatever. She’d raised me up. She’d taken care of Alvin. She’d been there for me for far longer than any parent should.

I took a swig of my coffee. “You got Trace hooked on your cooking, so the expectations are high for the day you move in.”

She smiled. “I do like that boy very much. He’s so good for you too.” She nodded at

the water. “And for Alvin.”

I followed her gaze and saw the two together. I sat a little straighter in reflex. Alvin was out farther, the water reaching his chest, but he was holding both Trace’s hands, and they shared matching grins.

Ma was right, and I already knew that from before. Slowly getting Alvin’s room ready had proved that more than once. Trace was bolder. Careful but bolder.

He drew out the more...teenage aspects in Alvin. It was easy for me to treat my son like a kid, partly because I was a tad overprotective, partly because I’d spent years missing him when I couldn’t be there every day. So whenever I got my opportunity, I coddled him.

I went out and bought baking soda for him. Trace was the one who said, “Okay, let’s go, bud!”

We’d discovered that Alvin could handle going to our two nearest convenience stores without problems. They were just a few blocks away. Then, once there, he’d hit a wall and screwed his eyes shut. The first time, Trace hadn’t batted an eye. He’d called an Uber to take them home. Three blocks. Now, we timed it so I could pick them up after work.

I was probably always going to hate myself on some level for holding Alvin back. Not necessarily with my fussing, but with my inability to be there for him as much as he needed. If I’d just had a steady job the whole time, we would’ve had more stability. More security. And I would’ve been able to push him the way he needed to be pushed.

Maybe I was sleepy enough that my internal defenses were down, ’cause I admitted these thoughts to my ma, and she just shook her head at me.

“What?” I got a little testy. Maybe. “You know it’s true. He’s had too much instability in his life. Too many worries. You can’t push yourself to go to the store when you’re suffering from anxiety because you don’t know when Dad will come around again.”

At that, she scoffed. “Are you hearing yourself, boy? Please apply that same logic to your own situation. Or are you blaming your rough years on yourself? Because that would be seriously stupid.”

I scowled.

“You got dealt a crappy hand, son,” she said. “You didn’t have enough family around you. Lindsey passed away—God rest her soul. Your industry all but collapsed. How many smaller businesses did you see go down the past ten or fifteen years?”

I lowered my gaze to my mug.

“And you have a son who needs extra help,” she went on. “You can’t be everywhere and do everything, Ben. You can’t be two parents and a full-time provider under those circumstances. You just can’t. But you never stopped trying, and that’s what matters. You sacrificed everything so that Alvin could be okay. You lived with friends, you gave up having your own home, and every penny you earned went to him.”

I let out a long breath and sipped from my coffee. It was fucking hard hearing this from her. Logically, I knew she was right. If this had happened to Garrett or Angie, I never would’ve blamed them like I blamed myself.

“Think about the future instead,” she advised. “You finally have a partner. Someone who’s as crazy as you are.”

I sent her a sideways smirk.

She smiled. “You’re not only sharing a workload, sweetie. You’re sharing your dreams. You’re making them come true together. Our family is growing for the first time. I, for one, can’t wait to meet Trace’s parents. Or his ma, at least. I hear his old man is much like you two.”

I chuckled and dipped my chin. I’d only spent approximately an hour or two with Kell and Teresa, but they were good people. They’d flown in over a weekend just to adopt Pippen. And the way things had gone down had left no room for me to be a nervous wreck. They’d been understaffed at the bar, so I had left one job to start another. But zero complaints from me. Now that I was contributing everywhere and pulling my weight, the overtime meant both Trace and I could start saving. Every dollar counted.

We wanted those two weeks in Florida every year.

We wanted presents under the tree every Christmas.

We wanted everyone to get food at the soup kitchen.

We wanted date nights with beefs, hot dogs, and steak.

We wanted Alvin to continue making progress.

As if sensing I was thinking about him, Trace glanced over at me and smiled.

Alvin was clinging to his back, testing the waters. Literally.

I smiled back.

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Ben O'Cleary

By the time we made it back to Ma's old place at four in the morning, Alvin was nonverbal and refused to let me go.

I held him to me as we walked up the stairs, and I dug my keys out.

"Don't feel bad even for a second, son." I pressed a kiss to the side of his head. "We'll get there. Remember what Rose said—baby steps. And you've taken so many baby steps this year."

He nodded jerkily but said nothing.

Honestly, at this point, I was sure he was mostly angry. He loved his room at our place, but his mind just wasn't ready to spend the whole night there.

Trace and I had learned his new signs. When he got huffy and frustrated around midnight, his determination to stay was battling against old fears and anxiety. He wanted to move now. He spent every day with us. He had new routines he loved. More fucking fish. More social interactions. Then when darkness fell...

I unlocked the door and let him enter first.

The apartment was almost empty. We kept the couch in the living room. Most of the time, Alvin didn't mind sleeping here alone. I'd hesitated about two months ago when Ma had moved permanently, and Alvin had been the one to remind me that he was actually nineteen. So fine. But when I worked nights and was on call anyway, I

didn't mind staying out here with him. Like tonight.

I'd cleared it with my boss, so it was all good.

Alvin wordlessly got ready for bed, and I promised I'd stay close.

Tonight wasn't one of those nights he could be alone. He'd had a pretty bad anxiety attack toward the end, though we suspected that had more to do with our upcoming road trip to Florida.

Too many new things at once naturally came with a setback or two. We were prepared for that.

While Alvin brushed his teeth, I texted Trace.

You're probably asleep but I wanted to say we made it. Ill see you in a few hours. Love you.

My shift was over in two hours, and I didn't foresee anyone calling. Most calls came in between midnight and three AM.

I yawned and went into Alvin's room. He didn't have much left here either, except his bed and his computer.

I flicked on the light on his nightstand and folded down the covers. Then I cracked open the window. It was hot in here.

To my surprise, my phone vibrated with a message. Trace wasn't asleep after all.

Good to hear. Make sure he doesn't feel bad! And maybe tell him I accidentally treated myself to retail therapy after u left. I ordered him another one of those notebooks he likes to log data in. He can bring it on the trip. Love you too!

Fucking hell, Ma was right. I had to ask him to marry me.

Trace and I had discussed it briefly, and neither of us cared much about the whole hoopla that came with it. Weddings and expensive shit like that. But if I'd read him correctly, he wouldn't mind the marriage part and wearing a ring.

I was exactly the same.

Alvin shuffled into his room, and he'd changed into sweats and a tee.

"Get some sleep, small fry," I murmured. "I'll stay on the couch, and then we can get breakfast on the way back home when you wake up."

He nodded once and snuck into bed. "It's just dumb," he croaked. "I hate this stupid room now."

I smiled sympathetically and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I wanna be with my aquariums and stuff." He fidgeted with the corner of his pillowcase. "Also, Trace is so funny in the mornings. I miss that when I'm out here."

I chuckled quietly and mustered a mock scowl. "You think he's funny because he's messing with me."

He snickered tiredly and shrugged. "He's right, though. You're very cranky when you wake up."

Whatever. I just needed coffee first. Nothing wrong with that.

"I'm sure he'll fuck with me other times too," I said. "Get some sleep. Only four more days, and then we're off to see the ocean. And Chip and CJ, you like them." Although, it might be more the other way around. Chip and CJ viewed Alvin as the

older, quirky cousin who knew a lot about chemistry and how to make firecrackers.

He grinned nervously. "I can't wait to bring my shell box."

Yeah, that'd been a great birthday present from Trace and me. We'd bought him one of those boxes for fishing lures. He was gonna use it to collect seashells.

"I'm sure you'll fill it in no time." I stood up and kissed his forehead quickly. "Love you, kid."

"Love you. Goodnight!"

"Night." I walked out and glanced over my shoulder before I closed the door.

No matter what, I counted my blessings. He might get overwhelmed easily, but this year had given him way more energy to bounce back. I had to focus on that.

* * *

"Ma, will you listen?" I asked, frustrated.

"Will you stop treating me like a child?" she retorted. "I know how the lift works, and I know who to call if it doesn't."

"That's the point," I replied. "I don't want you to call this building's maintenance service. I want you to call a coworker of mine." I handed her the business card.

Granted, our landlord had paid for the new lift for the stairs, since Ma couldn't walk up and down easily anymore, but I had been the one who'd installed it. I'd chosen the damn thing because it was the same model we installed in other buildings all over the city.

“If the lift doesn’t work, call that number,” I told her.

“Okay, okay, fine. May I go back to bed now?” Woman got snippy. “I don’t like standing out here naked!”

Naked? Christ. She was wearing a nightgown that fit a whole fucking family.

“And Alvin and Trace call me cranky in the morning,” I deadpanned.

She just shook her fist at me and headed back into the apartment.

Meanwhile, Trace and Alvin were standing in the doorway to the kitchen, failing not to laugh.

It’d been a long fucking night. First, I’d picked up Alvin in Elmwood Park at four in the morning. Then we’d come back here to fill up the truck for the road trip, and now I was getting shit for looking out for my ma while we were away. She claimed she was looking forward to some peace and quiet, but I knew deep down, she was going to miss me every damn second.

Or something.

“Didn’t we say goodbye to her yesterday?” Alvin chuckled.

“And leave her a note with everything she could possibly need,” Trace pointed out.

“Petey and Julie are ready to help out too, you know.”

Yeah, I knew. I was just...whatever.

“Fine. Are we good to go?” I asked stiffly.

Shit, I needed to calm my tits.

Perhaps I was nervous. To the point where I had sat in on Alvin's therapy session yesterday. It was just a lot. We had almost three weeks of vacation planned out, but not a damn thing would take place if Alvin decided he couldn't do it.

In addition, I had two gold rings burning a hole in my wallet and zero plans for how to actually pop the question. I mean, it wasn't just us visiting Trace's folks. Sarah and Chris were flying down with their two, and that was an explosive family gathering in the making. Primarily because of their kids. Chip was wild all on his own, but Chris's son, CJ, was much the same. And they were the same age. They liked to raise hell. Last but not least, Trace and Sarah. The way they were at each other sometimes...

"I think Dad needs coffee," Alvin whispered to Trace.

"I think he needs to sleep." Trace snorted softly. "Baby, go down to the truck. Alvin and I will bring the last of it. We're just waiting for the coffee and his cocoa."

"I'm getting my own thermos," Alvin said smugly.

I took a breath and did my best to unclench. Thermos, great. Rings, great. Family gathering, great.

* * *

To make the trip as short as possible, Trace and I had decided to drive in shifts.

Rose had given us a pro-tip that we applied to the journey as well. Her intention had been for us to use it at home; as in, encourage Alvin to take naps at home to get him used to waking up there. This time, we were using the advice so that Alvin could stay up all night. He was on board. Being awake helped him with new surroundings. So for the first eight hours of the drive, he tried to sleep as much as possible. He took a sleep aid and everything. We kept his anxiety meds close at all times.

Outside of Nashville, we stopped for dinner. Alvin was curious but wary, and we didn't wanna push it, so we didn't eat in the diner. Instead, we ordered takeout and parked at the far corner of a Target parking lot. That way, he could sit in the truck and eat in peace, and Trace and I could stretch our legs.

"It's already too hot," Trace said around a mouthful of burger. "The sticky South."

I grinned and threw a few fries into my mouth. He liked to bitch about the weather, something he had in common with his old man.

"And the fuckin' bugs!" He swatted away a fly.

He was so goddamn cute.

I picked up my own burger from the hood of the truck.

One of these days, I'd like for us to have our own car. Trace and I hadn't traveled much in our lives, and we both liked to drive. If this went well with Alvin, I could picture us driving all over the country.

The farthest Trace had traveled was South Florida, New York, and Vancouver. I'd been to Seattle, Denver, and Las Vegas. Other than that, we hadn't left the Midwest, not counting a few trips to Toronto.

"Oh shit, I forgot to tell you," Trace said. "I heard back from the landlord."

I raised a brow. He definitely had my attention.

He waved his burger at me. "He agrees to your proposal. He'll take two hundred bucks off our rent."

Fuck me, that was incredible. Win-win for all parties. We paid less rent, and I ran the

maintenance, including the bar and the attic space. It was mostly the bar that needed said maintenance, but it was nothing I couldn't handle.

"We'll set up a contract when we get home," he finished.

"That's great. Fuck, I'm relieved." Two hundred bucks every month? And once we finally gave up Ma's old place, we'd be downright comfortable.

Unbelievable.

"You got that dazed look on your face again." He grinned softly.

Yeah, well. Christ. Who could blame me?

He came over to me and kissed me. "I love you."

An overwhelming rush of peace and joy swept over me, and I squeezed him to me. "I love you too." More than I could ever put into words.

* * *

We had two hours left on our journey when Alvin agreed to take his medication. He was so anxious, not to mention torn, because he was far away from everything he knew so well...and only two hours away from the shoreline he'd dreamed of seeing since he was a kid.

We stopped at a gas station so he could get comfortable. We'd brought his comforter and pillows for this very reason. The stops were a good way to stall for time too, because at this point, we'd arrive when it was still dark.

"And here are your headphones, bud." I helped him put them on while Trace got gas.

Alvin handed me his glasses.

I fucking hated seeing my boy this way, even though I knew it would be worth it in the end.

He was trembling, unable to relax fully, which exhausted him and gave him headaches.

He shifted the headphones slightly so he could hear. “We’ll go s-straight to the beach?” he stammered.

I nodded. “I promise. Trace said that earlier too. We might even call Kell and Teresa and have them meet us by the water so we can stay there all day.”

Trace peered over the door. “When you wake up, you’ll see water everywhere.”

Alvin choked out a soft snicker and got tearful at the same time. “I want that.” Tears trickled down, and he grinned, despite the anxiety. “I’m gonna see the ocean, Dad.”

Christ, stab me in the fucking heart—if he got mushy, I got mushy.

“Damn right. We’re so close now.” I cupped his cheek and brushed away a tear. “Just try to get some rest first, okay?”

He whimpered and nodded. “I’m gonna see the ocean.”

Goddammit. Now I had to wipe my own fucking cheek.

Pull it together, man.

I leaned in farther and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Sleep first, then the ocean. I’ll see you on the other side, small fry.”

He sniffled and nodded again, then readjusted his headphones. I pulled the covers up to his chin, and he screwed his eyes shut. I knew he was going to do his exercises where he tensed up every muscle in his body, then slowly tried to relax. It was the best way for him to fight off the sharper edges of the anxiety.

I closed the door carefully, and I blew out a long breath.

Then I turned around and— “Trace?” Why was he heading into the store? We had everything. We’d bought coffee not too long ago, and we had Gatorade and chips.

“I’ll be right back!” he hollered. His voice sounded strange, a little thicker than normal. “I’m gonna buy more sunscreen ’cause we’re staying on that damn beach until he’s overdosed on water.”

I exhaled a laugh and scrubbed a hand over my face.

What the fuck had I done to deserve that man?

* * *

Trace and I both exhaled heavily when I killed the engine.

We’d made it.

He’d directed us to the most perfect beach, way off the beaten tourist path.

The sun was going to rise within the hour, and until then, I wanted Alvin to sleep.

Those meds knocked him out cold, which would’ve been great if that was all they did. But he was going to be drowsy most of today, and that was why he didn’t like taking them.

It was a tricky balance. Lower the dosage and sleep restlessly with chest pains zinging and zapping through him, or...keep it the way it was, get some proper rest, and be tired as fuck the following day.

And still, they beat all the other meds he'd tried over the years. Especially those that gave him stomach problems.

"Say I wanted half an hour with you," Trace said quietly. "You think he'll wake up?"

"Not a chance." A half hour sounded great to me, but we could do better. "Let's take a whole hour."

There wasn't much for Alvin to see now anyway. It was too dark.

"Good, 'cause I bought us something. Grab our coffee." Trace smirked a little and climbed out of the truck, so I followed suit, and we shut the doors as silently as we could.

The first thing that hit me wasn't the humidity, but the smell of the ocean.

I drew a deep breath and felt some tension leaving my shoulders.

We'd fucking made it. We were in Florida. Maybe some fifty feet from the ocean.

Trace motioned for me to follow him, and I noticed he had a semi-see-through plastic bag from the most recent stop at another gas station.

Glancing around us, I made the call it was safe to leave the truck—and Alvin—behind for a moment. I knew he wasn't going to wake up, and the area was dead. A single streetlamp illuminated half the gravel parking lot, and that was that.

We trailed over a sandbank, and then I saw the ocean for myself. The moon poked

out from the cloud cover, turning the beach sand a pale blue shade.

“I don’t know why I did it,” he said. “The mood struck, I guess.” He dug out a few items from the bag, and I chuckled. A pack of smokes, a lighter, and two Snickers bars. “A new tradition,” he decided. “Only when we’re on vacation, and we only buy one pack.”

I shifted our cups to one hand and put an arm around his shoulders. “That sounds like a great tradition.”

We didn’t walk much farther. I sat down right there in the sand, and I patted the spot between my legs.

He smiled and sat down where I wanted him, and then he lit up our cigarettes.

After he handed me one, he grabbed his coffee and held it up.

I thumped it with mine.

“To our first of many vacations,” he murmured.

“First of many.”

Fuck, I couldn’t have asked for a better moment to relax my brain.

I took a swig of my coffee. I took a slow drag from the smoke...

Trace coughed.

I grinned and dipped down to kiss his neck. “Okay, so tell me how these weeks are gonna play out. You and Sarah mentioned something about games, and that terrifies me a bit, knowing you two.”

He snorted softly. “You sound like Chris.”

Well, Chris and I had talked. He was a fair bit older than Sarah, he worked in construction, and we’d discovered we actually had some old friends in common. So we had to stick together. We needed a good, supportive, brothers-in-law type of relationship to put up with two competitive Kaleckis. And here I was, thinking I had been competitive—but those two? Fucking hell.

“We’re gonna play football and volleyball here on the beach,” Trace said. “There’s a barbecue area around here somewhere too.”

I hummed and exhaled some smoke.

Football, huh? That might pose a problem if I wanted to keep my own competitive streak on a leash.

“Honestly, I think we’ll be out here every day,” he went on. “Alvin’s obviously gonna need a daily dose, and Chip and CJ have been talking about Florida all fucking summer.”

True enough.

Trace took a drag and leaned back against my chest. “It’s gonna be a lot different from the trips I’ve taken down here so far. At most, I’ve had Chip to mess around with, but he was too young back then.”

That wasn’t the case anymore. It felt so motherfucking good to have a big family, and this one knocked my old one out of the park. That shit didn’t even compare. Angie and I had grown up with Catholic guilt and drama.

“I hope we can find a day to sneak out for a date too.” Trace glanced back at me. “A quick dinner, at least?”

“Of course we will. You promised the best shrimp po’ boys I’d ever have, so naturally, I have budgeted for that.” I furrowed my brow. “Alvin likes your family, and he has his new tablet. He’ll manage.” Much to our amusement, Alvin really fucking liked Trace’s dad. And it was mutual. The two played cards together, and it was a game for Alvin to see if he could catch Kell cheating.

“I know, but I don’t wanna assume,” Trace replied.

“Hm.”

“Oh, here we go. You’re gonna give me a spiel.”

I grinned. I couldn’t help it.

“Jackass,” I said instead.

“Jagoff.”

I kissed his temple. I was his jagoff.

And...now was the time. It was right now. I wasn’t sure I’d get a better occasion, and I wasn’t even nervous. This was happening.

I trapped my smoke at the corner of my mouth, set down my coffee in the sand, and dug out my wallet.

“What’re you doing? My backrest is moving too much.”

“I’m tryna propose to you. Be nice.”

“Huh?” He leaned forward and looked back at me, visibly confused.

I pinched the rings and held them up. “You wanna be my jackass for life and marry me, Trace?”

A breath gusted out of him, and he dropped the smoke in the sand. Then a big grin lit up his eyes. “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.” Okay, I could admit I felt my stomach tightening with unease now. He was gonna say yes, right?

“Fuck yeah, I’ll fucking marry you.”

He yanked the smoke from my lips, and I was lucky it hadn’t gotten stuck, ’cause that shit stung. Then he threw himself at me, and I let the relief crash down on me. Thank God. I hugged him to me tightly and closed my eyes.

“Now I can get Ma off my case too,” he groaned with his own relief. “She’s been hounding me to pop the question, but I wasn’t sure you were on board yet. I was gonna dig while we were down here.”

I chuckled and got the ring on his finger. He was quick to put the other on my finger too.

“Fucking perfect,” he whispered. He snuck in and kissed me quickly, too quickly. “I wanna get hitched at Wrigley.”

The fuck.

“Gimme my ring back,” I told him.

He shook his head, smiling like only my jackass could, and brushed our noses together. “It’s gonna be great.”

“Not even if we were billionaires would I get married there.”

He unleashed his humor, and we laughed into the next kiss that thankfully lasted much longer. God, how I fucking loved this man.

* * *

I didn't know who was more nervous, Ben or me.

I stayed back as he woke up Alvin, and I bit on my thumbnail. Only to catch a glimpse of my ring. Fuck me sideways. It was never coming off.

We'd have the best goddamn reception; I was sure of it. For the ceremony, I bet we'd hit the courthouse with a few witnesses, but the party afterward? It was gonna be lit.

“I'm tired, Dad,” I heard Alvin complain.

“I know, small fry, but I think you wanna see this. We're at the ocean, and the sun is coming up.”

That caused a reaction. Alvin stiffened a little and cracked his eyes open as much as he could. His eyelids looked heavy.

“We're here?”

I smiled.

“I can smell it!” The kid sat up straighter and blinked, as if trying to shake the cobwebs of sleep. “It smells so salty!” He accepted his glasses from Ben and put them on.

“Come see for yourself.” Ben eased out of the truck and extended a hand.

Alvin wasn't interested in the hand. He scrambled out on his own, eyes growing larger and larger.

"Morning, bud." I gestured at the path between two sandbanks. "Right this way."

"Oh my God," Alvin breathed. Then he took off in a sprint. "Is it deep?"

"No, it's very shallow in this area," I said, following.

Ben did the same, and we ran after.

Damn, the kid was fast. We only caught up because Alvin stopped to kick off his shoes before he was on the move again. Running, pulling up his sweats as he went, and tugging off his socks.

"Look at all those sandbanks and tide pools!" he called.

He slowed down as he reached the water's edge, and with the first baby wave rolling in over his feet, he grew confident enough to stride out there. And it was the most precious fucking sight. Ben and I came to a stop, and we just watched him.

Alvin turned out to be the sweetest giggler. He bent down and touched the water, and he kicked at it a little.

"It's so warm!"

Sure, compared to Lake Michigan.

I'd wait for the sun to heat up the depths before I joined him.

Ben threaded our fingers together, and I squeezed his hand, knowing I'd never been this happy before. I lost my fucking words, and a Kalecki never lost his words.

“I’m gonna explore every tide pool,” Alvin swore. “Dad, the sand is so soft.”

I grinned and glanced up at my man. “It’s gonna be hell to get him to leave every day.”

He chuckled wryly. “I was just thinking the same thing. Good thing we’re coming back.”

Yeah. At this rate, even I was going to be a Florida fan soon, and that was scary.

I inhaled deeply and looked out over the horizon as the sun climbed higher and higher, painting the sky in pinks, purples, and oranges.

“I’m in the ocean, I’m in the ocean,” Alvin snickered happily.

He was too damn sweet, literally trying to caress the water, his hand ghosting along the surface.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, so I pulled it out to see a response from Ma.

Okay, good! We will be there with breakfast at eight. Tell Ben we’ll bring Ziggy!
Can’t wait to see you, sweetie. Kisses!

I smiled and showed Ben the screen.

He smiled too, and he pulled me close and kissed the side of my head.

It was gonna be an awesome vacation.

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