



# Touch In Excess (The Carnal Tower #5)

**Author:** *E.M. Lindsey*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** "Remember tonight...for it is the beginning of always."

? Dante Alighieri

The one thing Skye knows better than anyone is excess. He is Gluttony, the Sin of indulgence, and he has mastered the art.

Except when it comes to himself.

Having spent most of his life living for others, Skye has no idea what to do when he tumbles—literally—into the arms of the most gorgeous man he's ever set his eyes on. A man that wants Skye for who he is and not what he does.

But Rami has secrets. Ones that Skye quickly uncovers.

None of them are dealbreakers, of course. Some of them are even deal makers, but the one person Skye isn't sure he can trust to handle the situation carefully is himself.

This love story has the potential to end in his happily ever after, and Skye is quickly starting to realize that not only will he do everything in his power to make sure that Rami is adored every second of every day, but maybe he deserves the kind of adoration Rami's offering him in return.

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# Page 1

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One

“Wanna see a guy with two dicks jerk off?” came a voice with the most barely there English accent.

It wasn't the first time that day Skye wasn't entirely sure he'd heard someone correctly. But that was typically his life as it was. His declining hearing came with the really fun side effect of his brain trying to fill in the staticky gaps of words he missed when people spoke in tones too low for his ears or his hearing aids to pick up.

And considering the work he did, he wouldn't be surprised if his brain decided to fill in “two dicks” for some other phrase Avan was trying to use.

He dropped the weight he was using and turned his head to see Avan leaning over the arm of the treadmill, grinning at him.

“Did you say two dicks?”

‘Two dicks,’ Avan confirmed in sign.

Avan was the most proficient at ASL since he was the only one doing classes regularly, along with Skye. And it wasn't like Skye blamed the other Sins for not being consistent with it. Their lives were hectic at best and chaos at worst. It was a damn miracle he found the time in his schedule to attend his own class twice a week.

But it was nice to have someone who was at the same level as him on his journey.

He took a beat, then sighed. ‘Show me,’ he signed back. Standing up from the weight bench, he crossed over to the treadmill Avan had been running on and stood up on the belt that was no longer moving.

Avan brandished his phone, and on the screen was a naked torso, two arms, and, sure enough, two dicks—one in each hand. The person’s skin was rich olive-brown, arms muscular, and Skye could only just make out a tattoo on the guy’s hip of what he was pretty sure was Medusa’s head.

“Is the sound on?”

Avan shook his head. “Nah. He doesn’t speak in his videos, and I’m not a huge fan of that fapping noise.”

“Is it AI?”

Avan snorted. “I thought it might be, but no, it’s a real dude. Stone asked me to investigate after he got several calls from potential clients insisting that this guy works for us. He was worried the guy was advertising himself as a Sin, but there was nothing I could find. I think people were just assuming.”

Avan was the tech guy—he was the one Stone relied on to make sure no one was hacking into their system and that their online security was running smoothly. He was also the guy who was best at dark secrets in their clients’ backgrounds, which had come in handy over the years when people had tried to pull one over on the Sins.

It had saved the guys from potential violence and assault time and time again.

Skye turned his gaze back to the video. “Is this live?” he asked when he realized the guy was following instructions from the chat.

“Yeah. It’s FanCore,” Avan said, fingerspelling the name as he said it so Skye didn’t miss it.

He was familiar with the site in a vague sense. Several of his clients over the years had asked him if he had his own, but that was one of the terms of their contracts. No outside livestreaming, not that any of the guys needed the extra cash, considering what they made working at the Tower.

But for all that Skye made a living off sex, he wasn’t an overtly sexual guy. He could get hard on command and perform when he needed to for any of his clients, but sex for him too often felt like a job. He hadn’t been excited about a partner since his ex years back—and that had burned bright and faded quickly.

He was fine with his life as it was, but if he was going to date again, he wanted that big, romantic spark. He wanted to feel something—not just get off. Porn just didn’t do it for him. Although watching a guy with two functioning dicks was definitely interesting.

“What’s his deal?” he asked after a beat.

Avan shrugged. “He jerks off, and people donate, and sometimes he puts sex acts on auction—like last week, he let someone pick a sleeve for him to fuck. His whole thing is that he’s a virgin.”

Skye scoffed. “Yeah, right.”

Avan laughed. “Hey, even if it’s bollocks, it sells. I’m not judging the guy for it, even though he’s probably full of shit. A virgin camboy is definitely a hook.”

Skye watched a few more seconds, then looked away before the guy came. “Is there a reason you’re showing me this?”

Avan sighed. “Nah, man. Just trying to cheer you up. You haven’t been yourself the last little while.”

Skye’s irritation immediately dissipated. He hadn’t meant to be an ass. He was just having an off day. Or an off month, really. Hell, an off year. He knew what the problem was, of course. He was thrilled for his friends who were finding the loves of their lives around every corner, but his own remained full of dark shadows.

He could be happy on his own, but he was starting to wonder if maybe there was something wrong with him. Something fundamentally unlovable.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Skye shook his head. “I think I’m gonna go for a run, actually.”

Avan eyed him carefully. “Alone?”

Skye didn’t want to be annoyed, but he couldn’t help it. Avan was right to be concerned. Skye’s Ménière’s disease had sent him toppling down the stairs from vertigo eight months before, and he’d suffered a pretty nasty concussion from it. He walked around with a goose egg for a week and then two delightful black eyes for a few weeks after that.

Only a few of his clients weren’t put off by the look, which meant postponing eighty percent of his schedule, and while money wasn’t tight, he was the kind of person who panicked when things weren’t going his way.

Luckily, one doctor’s appointment later, with a big needle and a medication injected directly into his eardrum, and the vertigo eased. It came at a cost, of course. He lost almost all of his hearing on the right side. His follow-up audiogram showed he’d gone from hard of hearing to medically deaf—moderate on his right side, profound

on his left.

But it was worth the price. It meant he could go running again. It meant he didn't have to walk with his cane everywhere. Vertigo still swept his legs out from under him from time to time, but the spells were fewer and further between. And they weren't as obnoxiously intense as they had been.

No more vomiting into his bedside wastebasket once a week and lying in bed for hours at a time with a warm cloth over his eyes to stop the spinning. It allowed him to feel more human again, and honestly, he'd come to terms with the fact that he was going to end up deaf at the end of his road anyway.

He'd sped up that timeline with his newest treatment, but he was fine with it.

He just wanted the people he loved—and really, he did love them—to quit being up his ass every time he wanted to be on his own.

“I'm going to be fine. I haven't had a spell in two months.”

Avan eyed him, but Skye took comfort in the fact that he didn't argue. He just shrugged and signed, ‘Text me if anything comes up.’

If you fall on your ass. Or if you fall on your head. Or if your legs go jelly and your eyes go wobbly and you can't get home.

It was an annoying request, but it was one he could live with, so he lifted his hands. ‘Sure. See you later.’

He made his way up the stairs and into the lobby, waving at Hen, who was fixated on his phone. Hen didn't notice him, and Skye wasn't in a hurry to change that. He didn't want to have another conversation filled with well-meaning warnings. He just

wanted some space.

No. He wanted to go for a run. A nice, long run without eagle eyes watching him so he could finally clear his head and feel like he was himself again.

Slipping out the side door, he darted across the lawn and made his way to his little cottage and grabbed his running shoes. He ordered a ride on his app to take him to the beach because running on the coastal highway brought him a lot more peace than running through their uptight, boujee neighborhood where all the residents looked at him like he was the Devil incarnate.

Which wasn't far off the mark, considering what he did. At least in their eyes.

But by the ocean, he had peace. He couldn't really hear the waves anymore, not without his hearing aids and only when he was right at the shore, but the ocean spray and the gentle breeze were enough for him.

His life was lonely. And it was quiet in more ways than one. It wasn't the worst way he'd ever lived, but he was starting to wonder if maybe this was all he was going to get. He wasn't sure how to make peace with that yet, but he'd be damned if he didn't try.

The spot Skye liked to run most was called Artist's Hill. Back in the fifties and sixties, a bunch of artists owned vacation homes on the coastal road, and they'd show up for the summer to get inspiration from the ocean. He wasn't really sure what became of the artists, but he knew young money and coastal real estate clout were responsible for internet celebrities buying up the spaces.

It was a relic of what it once was, but one of the homes still bore the mark of the previous owner. The architecture was unique, and it had a bunch of sculptures behind the wrought iron gates. He liked to stop and imagine what it was like inside whenever

he passed by, and something about the place gave him a swooping sensation in his gut.

Maybe he'd retire on a street like this someday—a far cry from the life he was living now and a far cry from the life he might have lived if he'd never met the Sins. He didn't like to think about that though. Even if he and the Sins stayed close, retirement sounded...lonely. And he was tired of being lonely.

His feet hit the pavement, and the thud of his shoes on the jogging path rippled up his spine. He kept his feet moving in an almost melodic rhythm, music playing in his hearing aids—instrumental cello renditions of heavy metal songs because he'd long since lost the ability to understand lyrics. He had a playlist of his favorite songs that his brain could connect to and fill in the gaps where his failing ears lost the words, but he got tired of it pretty quickly.

And besides, he did enjoy being able to picture the cellist who was absurdly good-looking with his black-framed glasses and his nerdy bow tie. It was nice mental eye candy for his run when he lost sight of the ocean.

He was halfway through a rendition of “Fade to Black” when suddenly, the world turned upside down. Or, more importantly, he turned upside down. He felt the pain a good ten seconds after he hit the ground, and it took him even longer than that to realize that he'd damn near somersaulted into the grassy front yard of the very home he'd been thinking about.

He'd squeezed his eyes as he tried to catch his breath, and when he opened them, the sky was spinning in sharp circles, and his ears were ringing so loudly he couldn't hear anything else.

“Fuck,” he gasped. His voice was barely audible over the raging tinnitus.



“...okay? You...the...almost...someone.”

Skye took a deep breath as the sharp ringing started to fade, and then he opened one eye and turned his head to see a man kneeling in the grass beside him. He was very, very pale—no, wait. He wasn't pale. His arms were covered in some sort of paint or plaster.

Skye blinked as the world began to right itself and his vertigo took a step back. His eyes stopped shaking as he breathed deeply. The man was still crouched beside him, hands hovering in the air like he was afraid to touch.

“Okay, I'm gonna call 9-1—” Skye could only just hear him over the sound of his tinnitus.

“No,” Skye managed. He unstuck his tongue from the roof of his mouth and did a quick mental assessment. His head didn't hurt, but his elbow was stinging, and he was pretty sure he could feel blood dripping down the outside of his knee.

There was also definitely some road rash, and maybe a bruised shoulder, but nothing that needed a hospital.

“I really don't want the ambulance bill.” He blinked both eyes open and studied the man beside him. He looked young, with thick, very dark black curls in tight ringlets tied at the nape of his neck in a messy bun, amber-brown eyes, olive-brown skin beneath the thick layer of plaster-paint, and full lips that stretched into a nervous smile.

He was wearing a tattered T-shirt and grey sweats, and he was kneeling beside Skye, which stretched the fabric and showed off a sizable bulge.

Fuck, why was he noticing that?

Skye cut his gaze away as he pushed himself up to sit, rolling his shoulders. The pain was a lot, but it was already starting to ease up. The cuts were the worst, and he hissed as he tried to bend his knee.

“You’re bleeding,” the man said.

Skye wanted to snap at him, thank him for being fucking obvious, but that wasn’t fair. Instead, he nodded and stretched his leg out. Now that the pain was starting to recede, embarrassment was trickling in. The man was objectively and absurdly good-looking, and Skye had just eaten a massive pile of shit in front of him.

“I’ve had worse.”

“Do you fall a lot?”

Skye grimaced. “Why? Do I look like the kind of guy who does?”

The man cocked his head to the side, then said, “You look like you’ve done this before.”

Skye couldn’t help it. He burst into laughter, covering his face with both hands. “Yeah. That about sums it up.” He took a breath, then dropped his hands and said, “Hi. I’m Skye, and I get vertigo attacks, which is how I ended up covered in cuts and embarrassed as fuck on your really nice lawn.”

The man’s eyes brightened. “I’m Rami.” He rolled the R just slightly. Skye couldn’t hear it, but he caught a glimpse of Rami’s tongue touching his front teeth as he pronounced it.

“Rami,” Skye tried.

Rami's eyes crinkled in the corners. "You say that nice. Most white people make a mess of my name."

Skye had no idea how to answer that. He glanced around him, then realized his jog back to the parking lot where he was going to call his ride was a good mile, and there wasn't a chance in hell he was going to make it on foot.

"Do you mind if I sit here and wait for my ride?"

Rami's brow furrowed. "You don't have a car?"

Skye shook his head and tapped his temple. "Not safe."

Rami reared back a little. "My brother's Deaf, and he drives."

It was in that moment Skye realized one of his hearing aids was askew, and he'd tapped just above it. "No," he said, fixing it. "My vertigo, not my hearing loss."

"Oh. Sorry." Rami didn't actually look sorry, but Skye didn't mind. "You can wait with me out here if you want. I'm just working." He hopped up and offered a hand. They were calloused and felt strange with all the plaster stuck to them. It was thick on his skin, and Skye knew that sensation would have driven him up the wall. "Do you like sign language?"

"Like as a concept or a preference?" Skye asked.

Rami's smile got wider. "Both?"

Skye laughed. He wasn't expecting that. "Great concept, and it's great for communication on bad hearing days. But I'm still kind of a beginner."

“I learned with my brother when we were kids,” Rami said, jerking his head toward the driveway. There was a little path that curved around bushes and then an archway that opened up to a courtyard. Scattered across the grass were several sculptures that looked half-finished. “I’m not fluent, but I’m pretty good.”

“I’m in my fourth year,” Skye confessed, looking around in some wonder. The house was gorgeous but in need of some very obvious repair. There was wood rot and rust from being so close to the ocean, and it looked like the lawn hadn’t been maintained other than a very choppy mowing job where Rami was working.

He loved it immediately. It was old and wild and as far from modern as Skye had seen in a long while.

“That’s nice,” Rami said. He took a seat in one of the three chairs on the lawn. Two were sunning chairs that had seen better days, but since Skye didn’t have any other options, he dropped his ass to the edge, hoping the wood frame wouldn’t give him splinters. “Do you have a phone? You can borrow mine if you need to call for your car.”

Skye reached into his pocket and waved the device before pulling up his app and ordering the ride. His location pinged, and he glanced at the address before looking back over at Rami.

The man had immediately gotten back to work. He wasn’t actually working with plaster, Skye realized. It was clay. He was dipping both arms to the elbow in a bucket of cloudy water, then using the tips of his fingers to make dips and grooves in what he was working on.

“What is it?”

Rami looked at him with a frown.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt. I just?—”

“No,” Rami said quickly. “I like talking about it. I just don’t know yet. Usually I mess around with the clay until something pops out at me, but I haven’t been able to get this one to talk to me.”

Skye smiled. He liked the way Rami talked about the clay like it was sentient and he was just waiting for a story. “Is this what you do?”

“Do? I mean, I’m sculpting, so?—”

“I meant for work,” Skye clarified with a small grin.

Rami snorted. “Oh. Yeah, this is what I do for work. The great family disappointment.”

“Ah. One of those?”

Rami bit his lip and looked almost upset. Before Skye could retract the question, he answered, but Skye couldn’t catch any of the words. He had his face tipped down so he couldn’t see his lips, so he had no hope of understanding.

Part of him wasn’t sure if he should ask Rami to repeat himself. But he also wanted to know. “Sorry. I can’t hear you. Do you mind looking up at me when you speak?”

Rami looked up, his cheeks flushing. “Oh!” He lifted his hands, switching to ASL. ‘Sorry.’

“Hey, if it’s too much for you, you don’t have to tell me.”

Rami shook his head. “No, it was my fault. Sometimes I get really overwhelmed, but

it's not because you asked."

Skye's brow furrowed. "Listen, we're basically strangers. I'm sitting here bleeding on your lawn after?—"

"You're bleeding!" Rami jumped up like he just realized Skye was injured and turned on his heel, darting up the drive and disappearing through the front door.

Skye sat stunned, wondering what the fuck just happened. Was the guy scared of blood? Skye had a few clients with different phobias, but none of them had ever run out on him like that. His stomach sank in disappointment. He was enjoying Rami's company, and he hated that he'd sent him running.

His phone buzzed with a ride update. Twenty-five minutes. Fuck. Maybe he should go wait out on the curb. He wouldn't be comfortable there, but it wasn't like he was comfortable perched at the edge of a very old, sun-damaged lounge chair in the yard of a man who didn't want him there.

God, this day had gone from worse to weird as fuck.

Just as he was climbing to his feet, Rami was suddenly there again, hurrying back toward him. He motioned with his hands quickly for Skye to sit, and out of shock, he did. His ass hit the lounge just as Rami stepped within touching distance and dropped to his knees.

He couldn't hear a thud or anything, but from the way Rami winced, it had to have hurt.

"What," he started, but then Rami brandished a red bag with a white cross on it.

"First aid."

“Oh. No, it’s—” He couldn’t get the sentence out. Rami took him by the calf and stretched his leg out, frowning at the huge scrape across his knee.

“Did you know that you can get tetanus without rust? The rust thing is a myth. It’s actually a bacteria you can get in any open wound.” With surprisingly tender fingers, Rami began to clean the scrape with a wet gauze. It stung, but not as bad as Skye was expecting. “Also, you should never blow on open cuts. I don’t know why moms always do that. It’s a good way to get the cut dirty again.”

“So...was med school your thing?” Skye asked with a slight laugh.

Rami looked up, his face serious. “I have really terrible situational awareness. I had to learn first aid so I didn’t get infections. My sister went to med school. And my brother thought about it, but they gave him a lot of shit about being a Deaf doctor, so he ended up becoming an audiologist.”

“Is that what you meant about being the family disappointment? The artist amongst medical professionals?”

Rami swallowed heavily as he used a cotton swab to smear what Skye could only assume was antibacterial cream over the skin. “When you’re an artist that only sells three pieces a year, it doesn’t really hold up to doctors, does it?”

Something about the way he spoke made Skye want to pull him close and hold him. Which was a wild goddamn reaction, considering Rami was a total stranger. So he bit his tongue and said nothing as Rami finished dressing the two small wounds he had on his body.

Before his ride arrived, he was sporting two gauze patches and way too much medical tape. But Rami looked pleased with his work, which was enough for Skye.

“No one’s taken care of me like this in...” Skye hesitated. “Ever?” The Sins were there for him emotionally, and physically if he ever asked for it, but this felt different.

Rami ducked his head as he set the first aid kit aside and then stood up, offering Skye a hand. He took it, holding on a little too long as he climbed to his feet. His phone buzzed again, and he knew that was the five-minute warning.

“Do you like lunch?” Rami asked.

Skye blinked. “I don’t have strong feelings for or against lunch.”

“Is it hard for you to eat out? Because it’s hard to hear,” Rami clarified.

Skye felt a little off-kilter. For a second, he thought Rami was maybe asking him out. Now, he was starting to think the guy was just overly curious about everything. “Sometimes. There are a few restaurants in town that are decent and have quiet dining rooms.”

Rami nodded, then said, “Okay. You can take me out to lunch to say thank you.”

Skye burst into laughter. What the fuck ? Who even was this guy, and why was that so goddamn endearing? “Is that what I’m supposed to do?”

Rami shrugged. “No, not really. I don’t think there’s some social contract we entered because I helped keep you from dying of tetanus. Or getting lockjaw, which would also be pretty bad. Though you sign, so you’d just have to deal with the pain, I suppose.”

“Okay,” Skye said slowly. He took a breath, then took a leap. “I’d really like to take you to lunch to say thanks.”



“I was hoping you’d say that. Let me give you my number.” He snatched the phone from Skye before he could offer it out, and Skye watched as his fingers flew over the pad, typing in his name and then his number. “You can text me whenever.”

“I will,” Skye said. There was movement to his right, and he glanced over to see a car approaching. “My ride.”

“Make plans soon?” Rami pressed.

“Tonight,” Skye said. He didn’t have clients. He wanted a meal, a hot shower, and comfy clothes. And then maybe to spend the evening texting with this oddly charming man. “Thank you for preventing an untimely death. Or lockjaw.”

“You’re welcome. You’re very pretty—sorry, is pretty bad for a man?”

Skye stopped midway through his turn toward the car. “Maybe for some. I like it.”

“Okay. Because you are,” Rami said.

Skye looked at him, and his grin widened. “So are you?”

Rami laughed softly and shook his head. “I like that. Tell your driver to be safe.”

Skye nodded, knowing damn well he wasn’t going to speak more than a few words to the driver, but it didn’t feel quite like a lie, so guilt didn’t chase him.

He took one lingering, gluttonous look at Rami before getting in the car, and he kept his gaze on him until they were well on the road. When he was out of sight, Skye felt a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach. It was new and alien and a little terrifying.

But it was also so good he couldn't wait to text the man and see if the feeling lasted. He wanted to hold it close, hoard it for himself, and share it with no one at all. And in spite of loving his friends and not wanting to ever keep secrets, this one felt important.

This one felt like life or death.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am*

Two

Picking at his nails, Rami stared at his bank account. The numbers were high but not high enough. He hadn't realized inheriting a house would come with such severe complications—like an unpaid tax bill and a threat to foreclose and throw the place on the market for auction.

In all honesty, Rami might have let them too. He wasn't really a sentimental sort of guy. Objects didn't hold value in his head the way they did for other people. But he'd grown up in this house. He'd learned every skill in art he possessed under that roof. He sat at the knee of his grandfather and absorbed everything he possibly could, and it was a place that allowed him to be himself.

And for that reason alone, it was impossible to let go.

His parents loved him, but they expected more out of him. It wasn't just a cultural thing, though that played a large part in it. It was also the fact that his parents' only exposure to the idea of Autism came from media that insisted all Autistic kids were geniuses with talents that could lead to big money counting cards in Vegas—or whatever.

They didn't expect their son to be mediocre and disinterested in anything that could lead him to a lucrative career. Of course, Rami also grew up a nervous mess because one kid had pantsed him in the seventh-grade locker room and learned the secret his parents demanded he guard with his life.

The whole school knew by sixth period, and the bullying was so bad within two days

that he'd been put in the in-school suspension room for his own safety.

They'd moved after the incident, and his mother had planned to fight for an exception for PE so he wouldn't risk changing in front of the other kids and his secret would be safe again. But the only school that could take him and offer him possible protection was the Catholic private school up the hill from where his grandfather lived. It might not have been so bad, but his parents, being devout Muslims, had struggled with the decision until the deadline to enroll him again.

He didn't fully understand what the problem was. He'd never really believed Allah was real, whether it was the Christian version, or the Jewish one, or the imam who spoke to them every other Saturday when his parents dragged him and his siblings to mosque.

But Allah was just another figure, for the most part. Just another parental set of eyes watching him for the sins he might want to commit, and being as hyperobservant as he was—and eventually as obsessed with history as he became—he quickly realized that there were actions and consequences, and no amount of prayer or faith saved anyone.

So stepping foot in a Catholic school so he could finish his education around a bunch of kids who would never know the truth about his body wasn't the worst punishment. Even if it was an exhausting one. The kids were cruel for other reasons—the curls in his hair, the shade of his skin, the fact that he stimmed openly in class when he was thinking and that his social awareness never extended to knowing when to stop info-dumping when someone tried to make polite conversation. It was hell, just like all middle schools were hell.

What made the whole thing bearable was sitting at his grandfather's feet every afternoon and losing himself and all of his anxiety to the stroke of a paintbrush on canvas. That eventually led to carving marble—something he lacked the fine motor

skills for. He eventually found his passion in clay sculptures, and it was the only thing currently keeping him from losing his mind as he struggled to handle the financial mess of the house.

His grandfather was gone now, but the memories remained, and he was resolved to do everything in his power to preserve this one lasting memory.

Which meant making choices his family could never know about because they were unhappy enough when he announced he was an Atheist on Eid al-Fitr the year he turned seventeen. He didn't think they'd forgive him if he told them he was selling his body on a website in order to pay off his grandfather's debt and have money left over so he could comfortably enjoy his life and be an artist without the starving part.

Or...maybe they would. But he wasn't willing to risk it. He loved his parents and his siblings, and he didn't want to make it weird.

His biggest problem was he was severely lacking in brain-to-mouth filter, and he tended to say whatever popped into his head without worrying about potential consequences. The only way for him to stop that was to lean hard on his hypervigilance, which tended to lead to frequent meltdowns and fatigue so severe he couldn't work.

And that was something he couldn't afford to do right now.

So he was planning for a very lonely year where he made excuses as to why he couldn't go visit for holidays or his nieces' birthdays, and he'd resume life as normal once he made the final payment and the house was secure.

But he missed them all.

A lot.

Making friends at his age was hard enough as it was. Making friends as a thirty-two-year-old Autistic artist was harder. Making friends as all of those things, plus having a secret FanCore account, was even worse. He'd actually met a guy at his gym, and they'd become workout buddies until the guy recognized his tattoo—something he struggled to hide when he was filming. Things got awkward as hell, and it took him a long time to realize why.

He changed gyms after that. It wasn't worth the pain and suffering of listening to the guy make excuses why he was too busy to work out with Rami anymore.

Luckily, neither his parents nor his siblings knew he had a tattoo either, so that part wouldn't give him away if they ever decided to venture into that side of the internet. He was safe there. He was just...very, very alone with this secret.

And he kind of thought that was how the rest of his life was going to go, except a hard-of-hearing man toppled into his driveway one afternoon and turned everything upside down. Rami had been certain his atrophied social skills would have sent the guy running—if he could run, though with his knee torn to shreds from the pavement, he wasn't going anywhere fast.

Instead, the man—Skye—had asked for his number.

Which okay, no. That wasn't true. With his rambling, Rami had been the one to ask for his number. And to suggest lunch. But instead of looking at him like he was a freak, Skye had just laughed softly and then let Rami put his number in his phone.

He'd promised to text that night, but instead of leaving Rami pacing and worried that the text would never come, one had popped through five minutes after his ride had pulled away from the house.

Unknown: This is Skye. Here's my number so you have it.

Rami liked the way his name was spelled. He couldn't help but pronounce the E in his head when he said his name. Sky-ee. It felt funny on his tongue but in a good way. Sky-ee. It fit him for some reason.

He was probably one of the most unique men Rami had ever set his eyes on, and he had an immediate urge to sketch him. He was tall and thin, but he was deceptively strong. He was denser than Rami was expecting him to be when he helped lift him off the lawn.

He had very European features—a sort of pinched, thin nose, barely there lips, rounded fingernails, and tattoos all over his pale skin. His hair was cut short—very trendy and sculpted in ways that Rami's curls would never be.

Rami had fought the urge to ask to touch it so he could see if the product he used made it crunchy. But he also hated it when random strangers touched his hair, so he wasn't about to be like them. He kept his fingers curled into his palm unless he was signing with Skye, and he'd resisted the desire to give in to his intrusive thought.

But Rami liked him immediately. If he wasn't hoarding his virginity like a dragon hoarded gold—almost literally in this case since he'd planned to use that as his big climactic event on his channel—he probably would be making plans with how he was going to flirt his way into Skye's bed.

Not that he'd ever accomplished that before, but also, no one had ever responded to Rami the way Skye did. And no one had ever been as tempting as him either. There was something about him, and Rami wanted more.

He just had to tread carefully because whatever this could be between them, he had a job to do, and he planned on doing it right. He could lie for his channel, but he didn't want to invite the negative backlash when something so important was on the line.

Pulling a shower cap over his head, he grimaced at the sensation. He hated the way elastic felt along his scalp line, but it was worth it to avoid his hair getting wet. He never washed his own. He hated dealing with it, so he budgeted a salon trip three times a month to have it washed, conditioned, and detangled.

His curls were doing fine for now. And Skye didn't seem to mind them when he was staring Rami up and down. His chest puffed out a little as he stepped under the lukewarm water and began to wash himself down with his thick, pearly, unscented soap.

The bits of clay clinging to his arm hair and the cracks and creases of his skin were stubborn. He used his nails to scrape as many as he could off, but he supposed that Skye had also seen him elbows-deep in wet clay, literally, and he didn't mind that either.

The thought made him smile. The idea that someone might like him for him—someone could appreciate who he was without expecting him to mask just to fit in—was his greatest fantasy. And for a long time, he thought it was an unattainable one.

It was easier to stay a virgin and be true to himself than twist himself into shapes that left him raw and aching at the end of each day. That didn't stop him from hoping that wouldn't last forever, but he'd long since come to accept that might be his lot in life.

He sighed, pressing one hand to the wall as he took his other, covered in bubbles, and began to clean between his legs. His penis on the right was the longer one—the one with more sensation, though they both functioned perfectly fine. The one on the left was shorter and fatter and tended to get harder first but wasn't as sensitive as the other.

These were things he'd never paid attention to before his channel. Before faceless



strangers with bizarre screen names started pointing them out in the chat window. For a while, he hadn't bothered reading what his audience had to say. He knew they were getting off on the fact that his body was different, and he assumed that was all that would matter.

But eventually, his donations began to drop, and he realized he had to do more. He had to be more. So he started taking requests. And then he started doing auctions.

The last one had been allowing the winner to buy him a sex toy that he could fuck, and he'd say their screen name on camera as he came. He used a voice modulator for his own protection, but no one seemed to care. He raised enough for one whole tax payment and enough to see an extra zero in his savings account.

He understood now why people liked this life. He'd never really considered how much less stress came from being able to keep the lights on and food in his stomach. But he also understood how exhausting working like this could get.

He didn't want to be famous. He ignored every email he got from porn studios offering him ridiculous money to appear in a film because they all wanted his face, and that wasn't something he was willing to do.

In a world where privacy rarely existed, he wanted to cling to his own for as long as he could. He wanted moments where he could meet a random, adorable man with bright blue hearing aids and a sunny smile, and that man would have no idea who he was.

That felt important in a world of the superficial.

Rinsing off, Rami quickly stepped out and dried his body. He grabbed his lotion off the counter, then sat at the edge of his bed and rubbed it into his skin. He wasn't a big fan of scents, but this one had just a touch of jasmine mixed in, and it reminded him

of his grandmother. She'd died when he was six, but for him, his scent memory was the strongest, so with the little bottle of lotion, it was like she was with him for that moment.

He liked feeling connected to her and his grandfather. They knew about his differences—all of his differences—and they'd loved him exactly as he was. Just like they'd loved each other through all the stuff they'd been through, moving countries and trying to raise a family in a place they were never allowed to feel fully welcome.

He wanted to honor that memory by never giving up on himself or his dreams.

Digging his toes into the carpet, Rami shuffled to the pile of clothes he'd picked out and tried not to feel overwhelmed by choice. Most of his stuff was the same in varying colors. The same T-shirt, the same Henley, the same jeans. But he wanted to do something nice for his lunch date with Skye.

He knew this date couldn't go anywhere—not really. Most men would not be willing to wait several weeks to get in his pants without a real explanation as to why he couldn't have sex, so he didn't have high expectations.

But there was still a tiny spark of hope in his gut.

He went with a soft button-up and a pair of tight, stretchy, acid-washed jeans. They were technically for women, but he didn't care. Wearing them felt like a tight hug, and it kept him grounded when the anxiety of being in public was too much.

He turned right and left in front of the mirror and wished he was a better judge of himself. Was he hot? Did that matter?

His phone started buzzing, and he nearly tripped over himself getting to the nightstand.

Unknown: Are we going dressy or casual?

Ah, he really needed to update Skye's name in his contacts. He did that first, then stared at the message again. Was he supposed to know this? He went casual every chance he got. He'd worn a suit once and swore it had become sentient and attempted to choke him to death for the afternoon he was forced to wear it. But he hadn't ever really gone on dates. He didn't know if there was some sort of protocol he was missing.

Rami: Casual? I put jeans on, but I can change. I don't know where we're going.

Skye: It's a bar, but it's quiet.

Rami: Oh. I don't drink.

Skye: You don't have to drink sweetheart. I don't plan to. They have really good appetizers. If you're having second thoughts, though, I understand. Just let me know.

Rami: I want to go. I just don't like being embarrassed when I get stuff wrong.

Skye: Neither do I. I'm going to put on my favorite sweatpants and I'll see you in half an hour. Oh, my friend is going to be driving since I can't right now. I hope that's okay. I have a bike, and I could put you on the handlebars, but I thought that wasn't a good idea for a first date.

The image immediately burned itself into Rami's brain, and he burst into laughter. No one had ever made him feel like this before. No one. Skye wasn't making fun of him. He was the one worried that Rami might change his mind, which was...weird.

But in the best way.

Rami: Is your friend nice?

Skye: Very.

Rami: Then I'm okay with it.

Skye: Wonderful. See you soon.

See him soon. Skye would see him soon, and they'd go have lunch, and maybe—if he was very, very lucky—they'd hold hands. Kissing him was technically on the table since Rami had kissed before, but he didn't know if he should. He didn't know if that would be unfair or not.

All he knew was what he wanted. That wasn't the complicated part. The worst of it was knowing he couldn't have it, while Skye seemed to offer it with open hands and a willing smile. How was he supposed to say no?

How was he supposed to risk losing what might be the best thing that ever happened to him in order to save his very quiet, very lonely life?

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am*

Three

“Stop smiling at your phone, it’s disgusting. I wanted you to cheer up, not meet a man and turn into all the other obnoxious saps living at the Tower.”

Skye rolled his eyes and glanced over at Avan. “Sorry, what was that?”

“I know you heard me. I’m sitting directly next to you. What’s the deal with you and this guy, anyway? Why are you acting like you’ve never been on a date?”

Biting his lip, Skye glanced up the road. They were on Artist’s Hill now, several houses away from Skye’s but close enough that his heart started doing high kicks in his chest. “Because I haven’t been on a date in so long it’s starting to feel like never.”

“You know how to seduce a guy,” Avan said flatly.

“Yes, thank you. But I’d really like this to be about anything other than sex for a while, and there’s a ninety-eight percent chance this dude is going to throw his drink in my face when he finds out what I do for a living.”

Avan said nothing. There was nothing to say, and they both knew it. The lovers that their brothers had all found were the exceptions to the rule. Most of the Sins had tried to date in the past, after taking their job, and it always blew up in their faces.

He hadn’t lost hope he’d find his unicorn in the herd of wild horses, but he knew that statistically—being that he, Avan, and Mauro were the last of the bunch to find someone—the pool of people willing to put up with the fact that they fucked for a

living and not consider it cheating was a little too small.

“Maybe don’t tell him,” Avan suggested as the GPS told him the house was coming up.

Skye closed his eyes. “That would be the safest bet for me, but it would be a lie, and I hate the idea of not telling him the truth.”

“You’re way too good to be a fucking Sin, man.”

Skye laughed, but the sound of it died in the back of his throat as Avan pulled into the driveway and saw Rami waiting out front. He was pacing back and forth in a small line in front of the stoop, his hands twitching at his sides, his eyes wide and a little panicked.

He went still when Avan put the car in park, and he looked like he didn’t know what to do.

“Fuck. He is hot.”

“Eyes to yourself, dickhead,” Skye muttered, and then he opened the door and stepped out. When it shut, Rami startled, then walked up to him. He raised his arms, then dropped them, then stuck out his hand like he was going in for a shake.

Skye did everything he could not to laugh. He was officially obsessed with his adorably awkward uncertainty. “How about a hug?” he offered.

Rami’s shoulders sagged. “That’s what I wanted, but I didn’t know if it was appropriate.”

“Fuck appropriate.” Skye settled his arms around Rami’s waist and tugged him close.

His body was warm—Christ, it was so warm. And he smelled like jasmine. Not the actual flower, but the kind that came in lotion bottles.

For some reason, the thought of Rami putting on jasmine lotion made Skye grin.

“That was nice,” Rami said after pulling back. He was hunched in on himself, and his body was tense, but he was smiling. It only lasted a second though. His gaze cut to the car, and his face fell at the sight of Avan.

He wasn’t an intimidating guy. Not like Stone or King. He had tattoos, but they were always covered by his long-sleeve shirts. He had short, shaggy hair and wore black-framed glasses and had a sort of nerd vibe to him.

But there was also something imposing about him. His expression was always stoic, his eyes deep-set and piercing. He embodied his sin in ways that Skye never quite felt like he did, and he radiated pride.

It tended to affect the people around him, and Skye felt a sudden urge to wrap himself around Rami to keep him from feeling nervous.

“His name is Avan. He’s one of my best friends. We work together,” Skye said carefully, hoping Rami wouldn’t ask just yet. He would tell him the truth when he did. He hated liars, and he wasn’t about to become one of them.

Rami turned to face him. ‘I’ve seen his picture before.’

Skye bit his lip to keep back his huge grin. “Honey, not to disappoint you, but Avan knows ASL.”

Rami blinked in surprise, then rolled his eyes. “I should have assumed if he’s your best friend.”

“It’s okay.” Skye could see Avan’s head turned to hide his laugh. “But we’ll have to give up secret conversations until we get to the restaurant.” He extended his hand and threaded their fingers together when Rami took it.

Pulling him to the car, he opened the back door and climbed in. Rami stood awkwardly, then dipped his head low. “You don’t want to sit in the front seat?”

“He’d rather sit with you. He’s tired of looking at my face,” Avan chimed in.

Rami slid in and frowned. “That’s weird. You have a really nice face.”

Skye held his breath to hold back a bubble of laughter, though he couldn’t keep himself from taking Rami’s hand again. He homed in on him, feeling for any kind of tension, but Rami seemed happy with the contact.

“Driver, to the restaurant,” Skye ordered.

“Fuck off,” Avan said with a laugh, but he put the car in reverse and backed out into the street.

Rami was quiet for the first couple of minutes, and then he turned to Skye and asked, “So, are you a prostitute too?”

It took Avan a second to right the car from his swerve after Rami asked the question. Skye’s ears were ringing, and his head was spinning from the shock, but it settled after a beat and didn’t turn into a whole vertigo spell. His throat felt thick, and he wondered for a second if this was a trap.

His friends had suffered from attacks in the past—Jet taking the worst of it from his client who turned into a violent stalker. But when he looked at Rami—really looked at him—his eyes were wide and curious.



He cleared his throat and managed to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth.  
“Um.”

“I’m sorry. Was that the wrong thing to say? I’m not sure what the appropriate title for your job is.”

Skye took a beat, then said, “I guess that works. Technically. But our jobs are a little more complicated than prostitution implies.”

Rami’s face did something complicated, like he was processing Skye’s words, and then he nodded. “Okay. What do you call yourselves?”

“Sins,” Skye said.

Rami’s lips twitched, and then he laughed. “Because the seven deadly sins. I get it.”

“Are you a client?” Avan asked sharply.

Rami’s brows flew up. “Oh. No . No, I’m not...” His voice dropped to a whisper, and Skye had to read his words off his lips. “I don’t have that kind of money.” He looked ashamed, and Skye suddenly felt a rush of guilt.

“Avan’s only asking because we’re not used to people who aren’t clients knowing us. At least not the people who live outside of our neighborhood. And some of the guys have had stalkers, so we have to be cautious.”

“Oh. I understand that. People can be really invasive. They think if you work in the sex industry, they have a right to your body and you can’t have a say in what they take.”

He sounded like he knew what he was talking about, which was a surprise. He didn’t

seem like the kind of guy who did sex work, though maybe that was an unfair assumption. He was absurdly good-looking, after all, and he was living on one of the most expensive streets in Norwich. If he was the family disappointment when it came to his art, maybe he was paying his bills another way.

But Skye realized he didn't want to ask because he didn't want to know. He didn't want to make that the tone of their date. He wanted to know Rami. To see what made him smile and what made him cry. To see if he was a dog or a cat person. To see what he liked on his burgers and how he took his coffee.

The rest could wait.

He took a breath, then said, "Does it bother you?"

Rami blinked. "That's a strange question."

Skye's eyebrow lifted. "Is it?"

Rami didn't answer him, and Skye wondered if maybe he'd overstepped somehow. But then Rami squeezed his hand and shifted closer, his eyes fixed on the horizon. The moment suddenly felt still. Quiet. Good.

Skye found himself breathing a little deeper and a little easier. He'd never felt like this before. It had to mean something, didn't it?

"How about a subject change?" Avan suggested after a long beat.

Rami nodded. "I like talking about history."

Avan met Skye's eyes in the rearview mirror, and he winked. "Wonderful. Tell me your favorite historical fact."

Rami looked like Christmas had come early. He took a deep breath, glanced at Skye, then said, “Well. Did you know that there’s a theory the Ancient Greeks were genetically colorblind, and that’s why their art—I mean, before the British came and removed all the paint from their artifacts—was so garishly painted?”

“I don’t get it. It has to make sense. You can’t just deep-fry something and call it a UFO because it’s round-shaped.”

Skye was grinning so hard his cheeks hurt. He picked up one of the deep-fried, cheese-stuffed artichoke hearts and zoomed it in the space between him and Rami before shoving it in his mouth. The appetizer had been sitting for nearly ten minutes, but the cheese was still hot enough to sear the roof of his mouth.

“See,” he attempted to say.

Rami rolled his eyes. “Yes. But also no. They should just call things what they are .”

He took a more delicate bite of his own, then blew on the molten insides. He seemed to not enjoy extreme temperatures of anything, Skye noticed. He ordered his drink with no ice, and he was only eating the outside of the artichoke while the cheese cooled.

“I have a good friend who’d agree with you. He’s a very literal kind of guy.”

“Is he Autistic too?”

“No, I—well. He might be. I don’t armchair diagnose anyone though,” Skye said. He was noticing strong similarities between August and Rami, but far be it from him to make any kind of assumption.

Rami cocked his head to the side, then set down the artichoke heart and raised his

hands. 'Is he a Sin too?'

Skye smiled and didn't bother pointing out that there was a chance—even if it was a tiny one—that someone in the bar understood ASL. He swiped his hands off on his jeans, then answered back, 'No. He's an artist. But he's in a relationship with one. Lust,' he spelled. 'He's our boss. Owns the Tower.'

Rami looked startled. 'Can you have a boyfriend?'

'I can have a boyfriend who doesn't mind...' He didn't have the lexicon for what he wanted to say. 'My job,' he eventually signed.

Rami nodded. His face wasn't very expressive at all for someone as fluent in ASL as he was, but he was starting to notice little subtle twitches, eyebrows barely up, barely down as he signed. He wondered how many people paid Rami close attention. He had a feeling not many.

'Do you have a boyfriend?'

Skye shook his head. 'No. I've been single for a long time.'

Rami bit his lip, and for a second, Skye thought he might offer to change that. It would have been his move if he'd been set up that way. Rami's cheeks darkened with a blush, and a smile played at the corners of his mouth, but after a long beat, he dropped his hands and picked up his fork, spearing the artichoke heart and taking a bigger bite.

Skye's stomach sank down to his feet. He must have been doing something wrong. They'd been at the table for nearly half an hour, and he'd been laying it on thick, but Rami wasn't taking the bait. He knew he hadn't misinterpreted what this was. They both knew it was a date, but Skye realized maybe his expectations were skewed

because unless he was interacting with the Sins, most of his contact with people ended in sex.

And he had to remind himself that while sex was great—and he would not say no to a night with Rami—it wasn't his endgame. He didn't even have one of those in mind yet. The thought of not knowing where something was going was suddenly thrilling.

“I—” His words were cut off when both of his hearing aids suddenly gave their loud, obnoxious four chimes in his ears. They were dying. “Shit.”

Rami sat up straight. “What’s wrong?”

“Hearing aids are dying.” Beep-beep beep-beep . He pulled them out and slipped them into his pocket. He hated waiting for them to fully die. It made him anxious sitting there in anticipation of the world going muffled and thick. ‘Sorry,’ he signed.

Rami looked confused. ‘Batteries?’

‘They charge in their case, and I left that at home.’ And, of course, in his fixation on the date, he’d forgotten to charge them the night before. He’d stayed up late watching YouTube videos of people making clay sculptures.

‘We can sign. I like ASL. It’s easier than speaking.’

Skye could not relate. He was pretty sure he’d never default to his hands before his mouth. One of the classes he’d taken was for adults losing their hearing, and so many people took to the language like it had been lying dormant, waiting to be activated.

He was not one of that crowd. He struggled to remember sentence structure, non-manual markers, mouth shapes, and if his eyebrows went up or down during questions, and his hand placements were often so wrong. There was terminology and

slang that he'd been taught that had slipped his mind.

He still didn't know what Deaf Bing meant or the appropriate time to sign Champ, and at this point, he was too afraid to ask his teacher.

He felt lost and foolish.

But Rami hadn't once complained about how slow he was or the fact that he was somewhere between ASL and signed English, even when he was trying. He just rolled with Skye's pace and looked perfectly happy to do it.

God, he wanted to get this right. He wanted to end this date with the promise they could do it again. That Skye could have another chance and not fuck it up.

'Are you okay?' Rami asked.

Shit. Busted. 'Sorry. I have a lot on my mind, and I...' His hand hovered, pointing at his chest. He took a breath. 'Am I doing something wrong?'

'Wrong?' Rami echoed the sign, tapping his Y hand on his chin, then used his finger to indicate he was asking a question.

'I like you,' Skye told him. 'You're funny and hot and nice.'

Rami's cheeks darkened again, and his shoulders hunched slightly. 'Thank you.'

Skye laughed. 'I wasn't trying to flatter you. I'm being honest. But I get the feeling you're not as interested in me, and I want to know what I'm doing wrong. Or is it just me?'

Rami looked panicked, glancing from left to right, and then he stood up. 'Can we go

for a walk?’

Skye was not expecting that, but he knew the neighborhood well, and a walk sounded really nice. He hadn’t come with a big appetite, and he was glad they weren’t waiting on huge entrees. ‘Let me pay. Want to wait for me outside?’

Rami nodded, looking relieved, and he darted away. Skye was terrified suddenly that if he took longer than a second to get the bill squared, he’d go out and Rami would be gone and Skye’s number would be blocked. He’d been on better dates than this and had been ghosted.

So why would this go differently?

He approached the bar, and the bartender began to talk quickly. Skye held up his hand and put his finger to his ear. “Sorry, I’m deaf, and I can’t understand you. I just want to settle my bill.”

Her eyes widened, but she nodded and swiped his card after he handed it over. She motioned for him to sign, and he only just managed to roll his eyes because he was deaf, not a child. He knew how to close a bar tab.

His heart was tripping in his chest as he tucked the crumpled receipt in his pocket next to his hearing aids, and he held his breath as he walked out through the front doors.

Fuck. He was right. Rami was nowhere to be found.

God, seriously, what had he done? How was he so much of a disaster that he couldn’t manage a single dinner and?—

A hand touched his shoulder, and he spun, almost toppling over. Rami caught him

with his strong arms. His fingers dug into Skye's biceps, and then he slowly dragged them down until he was holding both of his hands.

He was standing close. Not close enough to kiss, but almost.

Rami licked his lips, then said in a voice pitched just loud enough for Skye to hear, "You didn't do anything wrong. It was me. I really like you, but I'm also a virgin, and it has to stay that way for a long, long time."



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am*

Four

For a moment, he thought he was going to be sick. Rami knew that he'd been playing with fire—so to speak. He'd been flirting and pushing the boundaries he'd set for himself because it was almost impossible not to. He liked Skye more than he'd expected to, and the more he tried to pull away, the more his instincts told him to lean in closer.

He'd seen it in the car when Rami had recognized Skye's friend. He was waiting on edge for Rami to find out what he did and reject him. It must have happened to him dozens of times, if not more, and his heart hurt for him because he knew that exact same fear. Granted, Rami had never tried to date since starting his channel, but he knew if anyone ever realized who he was and what he did, he was screwed.

He had no idea how to put Skye at ease other than dropping the subject entirely and moving on to other things. Which he had. He'd been perched on his own knife's edge for Skye to think he was a weirdo and bail on the date, but everything that sent other people running in the opposite direction seemed to have Skye enjoying his company more.

Of course, he was also terrible at showing that, so it was no surprise that Skye was in a panic about Rami not liking him back. Rami's move would have been to lean in and kiss him. And he nearly had. But he remembered his promise to himself and what kissing could—and would—lead to if he let it.

And he couldn't let it.

Not until his grandfather's house was taken care of.

His only choice was to confess. He hadn't meant to blurt it out the way he did, but like always, the words tumbled from his lips without any preamble, and now, he and Skye were sitting on the grass at the park across the street from the bar in awkward silence.

Skye hadn't said anything other than to ask, 'Can I hold your hand?' after Rami's confession.

Rami let him, of course. It meant they also couldn't talk since Skye's hearing aids were dead, but Rami didn't mind the silence. It allowed him to better collect his thoughts as they made their way to a spot under a gas lamp-style post so they could see each other's hands.

He knew Skye was waiting for him to elaborate, but Rami had no idea how to go on if Skye didn't ask him something. He couldn't read his face very well. Was he angry? Sad? Against all odds, was he fine with it?

'How did you recognize Avan?'

Rami was not expecting that to be the first question Skye asked, and it took him a moment to remember who Avan was. He'd only seen his photo a few times. A former client of the Tower had posted shots of the guys in a Discord server Rami had been part of right after he'd started his channel, and Rami never forgot faces, even if he'd only seen the person for half a second.

'Someone posted him online two years ago,' he answered. He kept his signs slow after remembering that Skye's ASL skills were still beginner.

Skye pulled a face. "Right," he said aloud. "I forgot about that leak. Stone went to

court over that one.”

‘Sorry,’ Rami told him.

Skye shook his head and reached for Rami’s hand, squeezing his fingers and stroking a thumb over the inside of his wrist. The touch was so nice Rami wanted to crawl onto his lap, straddle him, and just bask in his warmth.

Letting him go, Skye shook out his hands, then asked, ‘Why do you have to stay a virgin?’

And there it was.

‘Is it your religion? Is it a marriage thing?’

Rami laughed. He didn’t mean to. It was actually a very fair question. But the reality of the answer made it so much funnier than it should have been. ‘Sorry,’ he signed quickly as he got control of himself. ‘Sorry, sorry.’

Skye didn’t seem offended. He chuckled along and shook his head. “It’s fine,” he said aloud. “It was a silly question.”

‘No,’ Rami answered back. ‘I promise. But...’ His fingers hovered in the air. The truth was, he didn’t want to tell him. Not yet. He knew that Skye wouldn’t judge him. Not with what he did for a living. But he wanted time to get to know Skye before opening himself up and bleeding all of his problems on the man’s lap.

He wanted to have something that felt a little...normal, even if nothing about either of them was what everyone else might consider normal.

He swallowed heavily, then said, ‘I don’t want to tell you.’

Skye flinched like he'd been slapped. 'Okay, I understand?—'

'No,' Rami signed quickly. He let out a frustrated sigh. 'Sorry, this is hard. I want to make sure you understand, but I don't know if your signing is good enough.'

Skye blinked, then laughed loudly. "You really don't pull punches, do you?"

It took Rami a second of processing to understand what that phrase meant, and then his cheeks went hot. 'Sorry. I'm not trying to insult you.'

Skye leaned in and grabbed his hands, holding them tightly in his own. "Stop apologizing for what comes naturally to you. I like it. And maybe your truth is a little sharp, but I like that it's genuine. And you're right. I'm following the conversation, but it's not as easy as speaking."

Rami nodded and leaned forward until his forehead dropped to Skye's shoulder. His hands were released, and then a hesitant, gentle touch started at the base of his spine. The touch got harder and more confident as Skye's palms traveled up toward his neck. It was so good he groaned softly, and Skye laughed again.

"You do like me."

Rami nodded against his shoulder. He really, really did.

After a beat, Skye gently eased Rami back and touched his chin, drawing his gaze up. He didn't seem to mind that Rami didn't meet his eyes directly. His gaze was restless, taking in the shape of Skye's chin, and his nose, and the very small cupid's bow on his lips. He counted every freckle he could in the dim light as they sat there in a lingering silence.

Then, Skye lifted his hand and used two fingers to draw a touch down Rami's jaw. "If

you keep close to my right side, I'll be able to hear you. I'm not totally deaf, and that's my better side. I'm not asking you to tell me every single thing about you, but I like you a lot, and I'd like to know if this can go somewhere."

Rami felt panic in his gut because he didn't know if this could go somewhere. He wanted it to, but with the rules he'd have to set down... well .

He licked his lips. "I will tell you, but not yet. I want us to get to know each other first. If I didn't know about the Tower, I'd expect you to keep that a secret too. For a little while."

Skye's lips moved into an almost sad smile. "Okay. Are you worried I'll judge you?"

Partly, he supposed. Partly that Skye would think it was an absurd idea and not want to be with him because he couldn't come up with anything better than selling himself off to a bunch of strangers. And partly that Rami was being reckless because for now, his channel was safe, but the moment he invited one of those faceless screen names into his bedroom, all bets were off.

If he hadn't been so desperate, that part would have scared the piss out of him.

"I don't know," he eventually answered. It was the most honest thing he could come up with without giving himself away.

Skye took a deep breath, then eased back from him and squared his shoulders. "To be honest, I didn't expect to be on this side of the conversation tonight."

Rami glanced around before realizing that Skye didn't mean physically. "Oh. Because of the...the Tower thing?"

Skye laughed. "I expected that to be a much bigger, much more stressful issue. But

you...don't seem to mind?" His voice rose at the end, like he was still unsure.

"I don't mind," Rami said quickly.

Skye's mouth softened into a grin. "So that's throwing me a bit. I don't care that you're a virgin, and if that's the only issue holding you back..."

"It matters," Rami said. "I can't give you an answer on how long it'll be for you to wait, and it didn't seem fair to start something with you if we can't go further than what I've already done."

Skye said nothing for a beat. His brow was furrowed in thought, and Rami appreciated that he wasn't jumping into what would be empty promises that this would all be okay. "Can I ask you to define what you consider a virgin? It means very different things to a lot of people."

Rami frowned. Did it? He hadn't really thought about it, but he supposed that made sense. To him, his virginity was not being penetrated or penetrating someone else. But he supposed he couldn't apply that definition to everyone. Maybe to someone else, virginity was being touched sexually at all.

"Sorry if that's too much?—"

'No,' Rami signed, then remembered Skye needed spoken language to make sure his brain was understanding all the nuances of their conversation. "No. It's not too much. I just never thought about it for other people. I don't think about other people very often, which I know isn't good."

Skye snorted and reached out, briefly cupping his cheek. "It's fine. You're fine. Just be yourself, okay?"

Well. Rami wasn't used to hearing that. He managed a smile—at least, it felt like a smile, though he knew he had resting murder face. But Skye still seemed entirely unbothered, if not happy with Rami's reactions.

"I've never put my penis inside someone," he said. Skye's expression twitched, like an electronic glitch, but it didn't last long. "And I've never had someone's penis inside me. Or a toy," he added thoughtfully. "Or fingers."

Skye cleared his throat, and for a moment, Rami thought maybe he was making the man uncomfortable. Then he saw Skye adjust himself, and he realized he was, but not for the reason he was afraid of. "Has anyone ever touched your...your penis?" Skye clearly struggled with the technical word, and Rami wondered if it had to do with the amount of dirty talk the man must do for his job.

Rami laughed. "You can say cock if you want to. It doesn't bother me."

Skye all but tackled him, bursting into a fit of giggles. "I'm sorry. It's just...at work, I have to get really creative to keep it sexy. This is probably the weirdest sex conversation I've ever had, and I fucking love it."

The honesty was heavy in his voice, and it settled something in Rami's chest. He waited for Skye to look back up at his lips before he answered. "Yes, I've had someone stroke my...um...penis." It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth. He hated that he wasn't telling Skye everything, but he wasn't ready for the risk that came with letting someone he liked know how different he was. "I've had someone lick me on it too, but they've never put me in their mouth for a blowjob." He worried his bottom lip between his teeth. "Does that make me less of a virgin?"

"No. Only you can decide that," Skye said firmly. "The only reason I'm asking is to see where the boundaries are for your body."

Oh ! “Oh.” He hadn’t considered that maybe doing some things would be better than doing nothing at all. That maybe Skye—for a little while—could be satisfied with the smaller parts of a physical relationship.

But he was getting ahead of himself.

“You could kiss me,” he blurted.

Skye blinked. “Right now?”

“If you want, but I meant after the date. That happens, right? On dates? People hold hands, and they get kissed, and then the other stuff comes later. On date three. Or two, if it goes really well.”

Skye’s grin was so wide it made his eyes crinkle. “I really like you.”

Rami’s face heated again. He was unused to not only being told that but also believing it.

“I want to get to know you. I definitely want to kiss you, and if you need to put a wall in front of sex for a while, that doesn’t bother me,” Skye went on. “I wasn’t out here looking for a hookup, you know?”

Rami snorted a laugh. “Yeah, I guess you get enough of that at work.”

Skye rolled his eyes up toward the sky even as he laughed. “You’re really okay with that part of who I am? The fact that I like you and want to take you on more dates, but tomorrow, I might have to tie someone up and fuck them in the ass.”

Rami’s cocks jumped in his jeans, thickening to halfway hard. He adjusted himself and shook his head. The truth was, imagining Skye doing that to someone else



was...tantalizing. Enthralling. And sexy as anything had ever been. "No. That doesn't bother me."

Skye touched Rami's chin, lifting his gaze as high as he could. Rami took a breath and met Skye's eyes for as long as he could stand it. They were so...green. Like the Atlantic midsummer.

"You like it, don't you?" Skye murmured.

Rami licked his lips and nodded.

"I know this won't follow the date pattern. We aren't at your place yet. But we did hold hands."

Rami waited, but when Skye didn't go on, he replayed his words and realized what he was asking for. "You want a kiss."

Skye's lips stretched into a smile, showing a little bit of teeth. "I'd really like a kiss."

"Okay. Yes. I want you to kiss me."

Skye didn't hesitate. He didn't draw out the moment. He didn't force Rami to sit in awkward anticipation, second- and third-guessing whether or not he should do more or do less. He cradled Rami's face and drew him in slow and steady until their lips met.

He smelled really good—a light scent of cologne and a stronger scent of soap. His palms were smooth and soft, and his fingers were strong. He let out a chest-deep hum as Rami relaxed against him, and then he pushed his tongue between Rami's lips.

He tasted like lemon-lime from his soda and like oregano from the artichoke hearts.

His tongue was wet and maybe not the most pleasant thing at the start, but as Rami began to meet his thrusts in kind, it got better.

He felt heat pooling at the base of his spine, rushing into his dicks, flooding into the tips of his fingers and toes, making them feel tingly and fat. He reached for Skye, gripping the front of his shirt because he had no idea what to do with his hands, and he felt the curve of Skye's smile before he deepened the kiss.

Ya yimma , it was good. It was so good. He wanted more. He felt a soul-deep craving to be stripped down and consumed by everything Skye was.

And then the kiss ended. Skye didn't pull away as abruptly as he'd leaned in. He softened their connection with careful pecks across Rami's chin and jaw. He held him, his lingering touch helping bring Rami back down to earth. When they parted, Skye stayed in close, breathing deeply like he was trying to take the last bit of Rami inside his lungs.

Rami felt a sudden urge to create that in clay.

"That was very nice."

"I want to do that again," Rami answered.

Skye pulled back, looking ashamed. "Sorry. I missed that."

"I want to do that again," Rami repeated, not missing a beat. "But maybe not tonight. I'm very hard now, and I don't want to embarrass you in front of your friend when he comes to pick you up."

Skye burst into laughter and swayed in, smudging a kiss against the side of Rami's neck. "I'm taking you home in an Uber, honey."

Honey. He shivered. No one had ever, not once, not even slightly called him something like that.

“If that’s okay with you, I mean,” he added.

Rami cocked his head to the side. “Will it be too much money for you?”

Skye chuckled like Rami had told a joke he wasn’t in on. “It won’t break my bank. I promise.”

“Then okay,” Rami said. “But I don’t want to get harder. If I do, I’ll want to invite you in, and I’m not ready for that.”

Skye stroked his jaw before taking a very deep breath. “Can I see you again?”

“When?”

“Soon,” Skye said. “As soon as I can manage.”

“Yes,” Rami told him instantly. He wanted nothing more. Or, more honestly, he wanted this night to never end. But the promise that he could have Skye again—that this might be able to work until Rami was free to give himself to Skye—was enough for him.

For now.

He didn’t trust it would stay that way, but for the first time, maybe ever, he had a little hope.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am*

Five

Sinking into the hot tub, Skye tipped his head back and sighed. His muscles were on fire. He'd just come off the third to last appointment with a very athletic client. The man was an MMA fighter—amateur, but he was strong as hell. The only problem was he wanted to be the one manhandled. In Skye's way, of course. It was slow—agonizingly slow—and maybe even a little gentle. But it was long, drawn out, and took all of Skye's strength to reach the end of the night.

His biceps were still twitching every couple of minutes, and he made himself a mental note to book a massage because he couldn't afford to be out of commission for too long. He'd already missed enough work from his fall, and he was determined to make this year better.

“So.”

With the bubbles off, Skye could hear Jet just fine. He didn't open his eyes, but he felt the water surge when Jet slid into the warm water. The Tower now had a communal hot tub, which was big enough to seat eight, but Jet, Skye, and Flint were the three who used it regularly. There was a no sex in the water rule, and since Flint only ever messed around with his boyfriends at their house, and Taylor had an aversion to what he called “stewing in his own juices,” they were the three least likely to be tempted to break it.

“So,” Jet said again. “Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you. I'm just waiting for you to say something else,” Skye grumbled.

Jet laughed and began to shift his feet through the water until he found Skye's legs. He wrapped his ankles around Skye's—a sort of blind man's eye contact. "Heard you got lucky."

Skye groaned. It had been two weeks since he'd seen Rami and two weeks of pointed silence from the Sins. He had just been waiting for someone to crack and bring him up.

"Y'all are worse than old ladies at a knitting circle."

"We're not, trust me," Jet said. "I actually joined a knitting club, and the shit they say..." He trailed off and whistled. "But yes, you can't go out on a date with a hot guy and expect that to stay a secret."

Skye finally opened his eyes and looked at his friend. Jet was lounged back against the molded seat, his head resting on a bath cushion, eyes closed. "How long did Avan wait before telling everyone?"

"Ten seconds?" Jet grinned. "Maybe twenty." He sat up a little, and his eyes opened, gaze fixed out on the horizon he couldn't see. "He didn't seem to think it was a big deal, but I know better."

Jet did know better. Skye and Avan did a lot together. Their childhoods were similar, and he was one of the few Sins who didn't hate running with a passion. But Jet had been Skye's closest confidant for a long, long time. Jet had trained him. Jet had taught him that a life in the Tower could be more freeing than the one he was leading before.

Jet taught him that he didn't need some tragic past full of anguish to be okay with making money with his body. He was allowed to just...like it. To embrace it. To let it be a part of him. Jet taught him there was no shame in loving himself or in the art of

indulgence.

Gluttony and Sloth were closely related, after all. They often shared clients who found what they were looking for in both of them.

It had been easy to open up to Jet. Sometimes he found it hilarious that the deaf man and the blind man were best friends, but it worked for them. Jet understood his struggle in ways few of the other Sins did.

“He’s nice,” Skye eventually said. He couldn’t help his smile as he thought about the kiss. It had been slow and careful, then deep and needy. Rami’s hands had been warm and searching once he’d found the courage to touch, and when Skye kissed him good night at his door, Rami hadn’t let go for a long, long time.

“I’m gonna need more than that, bud,” Jet prodded.

Skye sighed and rolled his shoulders back before hunching low in the water. Down, down, until the warmth touched his chin. His hearing became more muffled, but he kept his hearing aids from getting wet while also almost immersing himself completely.

“Look, if you don’t want to talk about it?—”

“I’m scared to jinx it,” Skye admitted, watching Jet’s face carefully. He was one of the easier ones to read. “He was...unexpected. If I would have fallen on my face like that in front of anyone else, they would have gotten weird. But he didn’t make it a thing. He got a first aid kit and then just...talked to me. Like we’d known each other forever.”

“Maybe because he knows who we are,” Jet said. His face was a little stiff when he said it. His hands searched through the water, so Skye met him halfway and let their

fingers tangle together. “Did you ask him about that? Avan said he found us on a Discord server.”

“He did. It was during the big leak,” Skye told him. “He didn’t go into detail, but I think because he didn’t really care.”

“That’s...different.”

“Taylor didn’t care,” Skye pointed out, feeling suddenly defensive.

Jet sighed and yanked Skye until he floated away from the bench and closer to him. “I’m not judging you or him, but it’s rare. August makes sense. He was Stone’s client. And Hen, well...”

Hen was all of theirs before he became King’s. He’d been with them since the beginning.

“I get it,” Skye said, still a little sour.

“I want you to find someone like Taylor,” Jet told him, pulling him close so he could keep his voice pitched quietly. “I want someone who might not be part of this life but accepts it as part of you without reservation.”

Skye knew Taylor had some reservations at the start. But they’d been quickly dashed because he’d fallen head over heels with Jet, and in the end, it didn’t matter. Not everyone would be okay with that, but apart from the fact that Rami was a virgin and planned to stay that way for a while, he seemed to enjoy the fact that Skye was a Sin.

“Does it help that he asked me almost no questions about what I do?”

Jet bit his lip. “Maybe. That’s...I don’t know. Weird? Most people are curious.

Unless he—oh. Is he in the industry?”

“No,” Skye said immediately, then froze. He wasn’t...right? He was an artist. He lived in his grandfather’s old house, which explained why he could afford it, but there were questions Skye hadn’t gotten answered. Like why he was holding on to his virginity. He’d said it wasn’t religion, but he also said he hadn’t wanted to tell him.

“Skye?” Jet asked.

“I think I realized Rami and I need to get to know each other a little more before I can keep answering questions,” he confessed.

Jet laughed and yanked him against his chest, wrapping his arms around him. It felt nice to be embraced that way. It didn’t happen as often anymore. Most of Jet’s free hours were spent on Taylor, which was exactly the way it should be. But Skye was feeling the pressing physical distance between them growing.

At some point, Jet would retire. He would quit the Tower, and he and Taylor would move on. They’d probably stay close, but he knew that just like Stone’s upcoming retirement, he’d have plans to do anything other than be on the property.

“Take your time,” Jet said after a long beat. He settled Skye against his side and held him the way Skye needed to be held right then. “Let it be a slow burn. I mean, you are good at that.”

“Not as good as you are,” Skye said with a laugh, leaning the back of his head against Jet’s massive shoulder. “But yeah. Rami doesn’t want to rush things.” He hesitated, but he decided if there was anyone he could spill his guts to, it was one of the Sins. “He’s a virgin.”

“Oh. Like August.”



“Not like August,” Skye said quickly. “Though they’re kind of similar in a lot of ways. Rami’s an artist, and he’s a little socially...”

“Awkward?”

“Blunt,” Skye said. “He’s Autistic, and I think that might be why he just says whatever he’s thinking. He’s not like me, where I worry myself practically mute.”

Jet sighed and stroked fingers through Skye’s hair. “How did he make you feel?”

“Good. Happy,” Skye told him. “Comfortable. Like I could say anything in the world and my words would be kept safe.”

“You need more of that in your life,” Jet murmured.

“He wants to take it slow. He doesn’t want to have sex for a while.” Or ever? He also realized they hadn’t established a timeline. “I’m going to ask him on another date soon.”

Jet hummed and squeezed him tighter. “Where?”

“No idea,” Skye confessed. “I’m seeing my doctor tomorrow and hoping to get clearance to drive again so I don’t have to ask Avan to cart us everywhere like a damn chauffeur.”

“You’re going to deprive us of firsthand gossip?” Jet asked, his tone offended.

Skye laughed and pushed away from him. “You’ll get plenty, and you know it. But, um...I want this, you know? For myself? Just for a little while.”

Jet’s face sobered, and he reached for Skye again. “Come back here. I need cuddles,

and Taylor has a migraine.”

Skye settled against him again and let out a happy sigh. “Does that make me wildly selfish?”

“Wildly? No. Normal levels of selfish, which you’re allowed to be. You do know that, right? That you’re allowed to be selfish?”

He did know. Of course he knew. Skye was hardly the most moral guy of the group. He had a bad temper and didn’t care much for strangers. He wasn’t ever going to be the first person to smile at someone in a grocery store line, and he only held the door open for people so he didn’t get dirty looks after he let it slam shut.

But he didn’t always feel right about focusing on himself. He knew it was likely because of his job. He spent so much time being paid to ensure that one person’s needs were being met far above his own that sometimes it bled into his life.

That was a hard line to draw in the sand, he realized. Especially because unlike the others, he hadn’t dated in so, so long. He’d almost forgotten what it was like to have a life outside of the Tower walls.

“You’re quiet again,” Jet said.

Skye took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, turning his head to the side to look at the stars through a gap in the tree line. “Sorry. I was just thinking about how easy it is to forget that I’m a whole person outside of work.”

Jet’s arms tightened around him. “I know how you feel.”

Of course he did. All the Sins did. Even the ones who’d fallen in love sometimes forgot they were allowed to take time for themselves. That was probably the hardest

part about the job. At least, for Skye, it was.

“How do you and Taylor do it when it gets all muddled for you?”

Jet hummed softly, stroking a touch up and down the top of Skye’s arm. “When I get lost, sometimes he has to come find me. But he’s been really good at navigating those moments. He’s also learned when to back off. When a client is too much, he used to get a little pushy and insert himself into my space. I think he thought that he could replace them with himself—with someone I loved. That was our biggest growing pain.”

Skye didn’t think that would be his issue with Rami—assuming it would get that far. He was jumping way ahead, considering they hadn’t had a second date yet.

“I just need to remind myself that this isn’t a race. I don’t need to catch up with all of you.”

Jet tipped his face down, smiling. “Is that what you’ve been thinking?”

“No. Not...not really. Well, maybe a little,” he amended. “But the truth is, I wasn’t expecting to meet anyone. I was on a run, and the next thing I knew, I was upside down in his front yard, and there he was.”

Jet laughed. “That’s how it seems to go. I was bored and decided to walk the mall, and the next thing I knew, I was posing as Daredevil for some kid I’d never met. I didn’t expect love to come on the heels of that little trip.”

“But here you are,” Skye said softly.

Jet leaned down and kissed his temple. “Whatever this ends up being, you’re going to be okay. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. Trust me,” Skye said, “I’m not worried about that. I’m happy here. But it would be nice if it turned into something. Even if that something isn’t a happily ever after.”

But he was lying. The words were acrid on the edges of his tongue. He really liked Rami. It felt special. He was feeling almost possessive, and he knew that if things fell apart after they really got started, he’d be entirely and completely crushed.

“So you met a guy,” Skye said to Hen, leaning over his desk.

Hen raised a brow at him, his head tilting, making the glitter on his eyelids sparkle in the light. “I met a guy?”

“Hypothetically,” Skye said. “Say you met some guy. A really hot guy?—”

“I have a guy,” Hen said.

Skye groaned. “Work with me here.”

Hen’s eyes widened, and then he laughed. “Sorry, honey. Go on. I met a guy.”

“A very hot guy,” Skye clarified again. “He’s not like most people you’ve been on dates with. You tried dinner once, but you ended up making out in the park instead because neither one of you wants to just sit at a table and eat.”

Hen was fighting off a huge grin. Skye could see it in the way his lips were twitching. “Go on.”

“Movies are out because if you wear your hearing aids, it hurts, but if you don’t, you can’t understand the dialogue, and none of the theaters around here have open-caption showings.”

“Yes, my hearing aids,” Hen said, rolling his eyes.

Skye ignored him. “You thought about an art museum, but that seems too on the nose because he’s an artist, and you don’t want him to think you’ve reduced his wants and likes down to his job.”

Hen collapsed forward on his desk. “Baby, you are too fucking cute, and you are overthinking this.”

Skye scrubbed his hands down his face with a loud groan. “I know . I need help. I don’t know what to do.”

“Have you two talked about this date?”

Skye shook his head miserably and lifted his hand to sign, ‘No.’

“Honey...”

“My schedule’s been packed, and he’s been a little unresponsive over text unless it’s three in the morning, and you know I’m not a night person.”

Hen gave him a look full of pity. “Yeah.”

“And also...I know this sounds cheesy as fuck, but I want to surprise him.”

Biting his lip, Hen tapped his bright purple nail on his chin, then straightened. “The aquatic rescue center.”

Skye was more than familiar. It was Avan’s favorite place to unwind. The place ran like a pseudo-aquarium in order to raise funds for their coral reef rehab efforts—something Avan was really, really into. He’d dragged the guys out there

more than once.

And it wasn't a bad idea. The place was decorated by local artists and had tons of sea life sculptures and interactive exhibits. The only person who hadn't enjoyed it was Jet because the place didn't have any accessible tours for him.

"If he's an artist, he's probably a really visual guy, right?" Hen asked.

Skye couldn't answer that honestly, but he felt like it was a safe bet. "Yeah. He also doesn't like places that are really loud and chaotic, so if we go on a weekday..."

"That could be very romantic."

"You think a midafternoon weekday date could be romantic?" Skye asked.

"Honey, I think anything is romantic if the two of you are interested in each other. Or, well, if I'm interested in someone. What's my boyfriend's name, by the way?"

Skye rolled his eyes and laughed. "Rami. And sorry for being a doofus. I'm just nervous, I guess. This is a first for me." Okay, not his first, but his first in a long, long while.

Hen stood up and walked around the desk, stopping in front of Skye. He was shorter than him, but he rose onto his toes and cradled Skye's face between his hands. "Take a deep breath, and every time you start to freak out or feel any kind of doubt, remember that you deserve to be happy."

"Hen—"

"No. You and the other guys went out of your way to make sure that I was allowed to be myself. That I have always been allowed to be myself. You made this a safe space

for me, and I will be damned if I don't return the favor."

Skye's insides went soft. "Okay."

Hen grinned and leaned in, kissing his cheek. "Now, go away, or I'm gonna give you work to do."

Skye held up his hands in surrender, then turned on his heel and hurried out of the lobby, making his way back toward his cottage. Halfway there, he took out his hearing aids and stood still while his equilibrium adjusted to the sudden dullness in sound. He still struggled with feeling off-balance since his left ear was now profoundly deaf, but after a beat, everything righted itself.

It was nice, sinking into a silence that was starting to feel as natural as hearing once had. It allowed him space to breathe at the end of a long day. Like taking off a pair of shoes that were half a size too small.

He made it to his fence when he heard a muffled shout, and he turned to see Stone leaning against his gate. Stone said something else, but Skye quickly shook his head and pointed to his ears.

'Sorry,' Stone signed. 'You okay?'

'I'm great,' Skye signed back. 'Going inside for a nap.'

'Come over for dinner Wednesday,' Stone said—on his hands, it looked like more of a demand than an invite, and it was a crapshoot with Stone because he could very well be insisting.

Not that Skye wanted to tell him no, except he was going to. 'Sorry, I have a date.'

‘D A T E?’ Stone spelled for clarification.

‘Yes.’

His eyes went bright. ‘Tell me?—’

‘Sorry, talk later,’ Skye signed hurriedly, then turned his back to shut him out. He went inside before his friend could chase him down, locking the door behind him, though Stone would never just let himself in. He’d only ever done that once to Jet, and he was quickly reminded that they had their private homes for a reason.

Nerves hit Skye the moment he was alone though, and he collapsed face-first on his couch. He rubbed his nose against the fabric, then turned his head to the side and wriggled until he could dig his phone out of his pocket.

His finger hovered over Rami’s name—text or call? Text or call?

Skye: Any chance you’re free for a FaceTime?

Rami: Right now?

Skye: Yes.

His phone immediately buzzed in his hand, and he answered. Rami began to speak immediately, but Skye’s better ear was too exhausted to process the sounds, so he held up his hands and shook his head.

‘No hearing aids.’

Rami quickly lifted his hand. ‘Sorry. Hi.’



Skye smiled widely, basking in the sight of the man he'd wanted to see for two weeks now. God, why hadn't he thought of this before when he was missing him? 'Hi. I have a quick question.'

'Tell me.'

'Are you free for a date on Thursday?'

'With me?'

Skye couldn't help a laugh. 'Yes, with you. Only you. A friend of mine gave me an idea.'

Rami's head cocked to the side. 'Tell me.'

'Aquarium,' Skye spelled out. 'Aquatic Rehab Center,' he added, his fingers a little stiff through the letters.

Rami's brows flew up. 'Yes!'

'You sure?'

Rami's head nodded so hard Skye wondered if his neck hurt. His enthusiasm was catching though. 'What time will your friend pick me up?'

He grinned. 'I think I can drive.'

Rami's brows furrowed. 'How?'

'I see my doctor tomorrow to get clearance. If he says yes, I'll pop by the DMV and get my restriction removed. Then I can pick you up.'

Rami's hand began to dance, and Skye followed it, thinking for a second he was signing, and then he realized he was stimming. Rami's cheeks darkened. 'Sorry. I do that when I get excited.'

'No sorry. I can't wait to see you.'

'Can we kiss?'

Skye barked out a laugh. 'Yes, please. As much as you want.'

'A lot,' Rami said seriously.

Skye felt warm from head to toe. 'Then it's a date with a lot of kissing.'

Rami bit his lip, then asked, 'What if you can't drive?'

'Then I'll still be there, just with an extra person to help us get back and forth.'

Rami looked torn, but after a long moment of stillness, he nodded. 'Okay. See you soon.' The call immediately cut, and Skye was left a little stunned, upside down, and full of a sudden need to get his hands on the other man.

He hadn't been lying at all. The next few days were going to crawl by, but he was pretty damn sure his patience would be rewarded with strong hands and the softest lips.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am*

Six

Ahmed: You can't ignore Mom and Dad forever.

Rami: I'm not ignoring anyone.

Ahmed: They're going to stage an intervention.

Rami: I'm not an addict. Those are for addicts.

Ahmed: You know what I mean.

Rami stared at his phone. He didn't know what his brother meant. He knew what the word "intervention" meant, and he'd seen them on TV shows a couple of times, but he didn't understand what, exactly, his parents would be intervening about.

He wasn't an addict. He didn't have any vices that were ruining his life. He wasn't part of an organization that made him a danger to himself or others. They didn't know what he was doing to earn money, so it couldn't have anything to do with his channel.

Therefore, his brother's words were confusing, and when he was confused, it was easier to put the subject away. He closed out the text thread and went back into the bathroom to stare at himself. Tugging on a couple of his curls, he debated whether or not it was time for a haircut. He had a routine with it—grow it until it was just past his shoulders, cut it until it sat just over his ears, and then grow it again.

Over and over, and he'd do it until he died. Or his hair fell out, though he had lucky

genetics that very rarely led to male-pattern baldness. But it was officially reaching the stage of too long, and he was going to have to worry about finding a place that would do the job right.

The last time he'd had it cut, he wasn't living in Norwich. He could head back to DC to have it done, but that was a long, long train ride. Although if Skye really was driving and they were something like friends, maybe he'd take him. It would be better if they were boyfriends, but Rami wasn't going to push that line. Skye seemed perfectly content to date him, even with sex off the table, but Rami was no fool.

He knew how long that usually lasted, and it would be a miracle if they made it a month.

As he began to scrunch product into his curls, he felt his phone buzz against his leg three times in quick succession. He ignored it and grabbed a coiled hair tie, wrapping his long locks around his fist and setting it into the bun he preferred.

He was on the third loop of the hair tie when his phone buzzed again—the secondary notification to let him know he hadn't read the messages. That was his trigger. He couldn't ignore the second alert.

Pulling the phone out of his pocket, he saw his brother's name on the screen. Then, there was a second little tab. He tapped it, and Skye's name appeared. Rami felt himself smiling wide enough to make his cheeks hurt as he opened it.

Skye: On my way. Fair warning, I plan to kiss you when I see you.

Rami: Yes.

He didn't really know what else to say to that. Sometimes he wished he could be suave and smooth instead of blunt and straightforward, but even when he was

younger and better at masking, he'd never been good at thinking on his feet. The thoughts in his head came out of his mouth or his hands exactly as they were, no matter how hard he tried to be like other people.

But for the first time in a long time, he wasn't worried how someone else was going to perceive him. He didn't feel that slight tug of anxiety or stress because so far—in the two weeks and three days since he'd known Skye—the man had never once minded who Rami was.

In fact, he seemed to like him for it.

Rami had no idea how far Skye was from him, so he gave himself one last cursory glance in the mirror, then turned and went to his bedroom. He was already dressed. All he had left were his shoes and socks, and he was going full comfort since they'd be at the aquarium center.

On the edge of the bed, he made sure his socks were perfectly aligned, the seam directly across the knuckles of his toes. He wriggled his feet to make sure the seams wouldn't shift, and then he shoved them into his slip-on sneakers and stood up.

He felt okay from head to toe. He'd managed to get most of the clay off his arms during his shower, and his long sleeves covered what was left, so he wouldn't look like a total mess, which was something. He'd never look like a model, but he didn't think that was the kind of man Skye was looking for.

Turning back and forth in the long mirror, he wasn't sure if he was happy with what he saw, but he wasn't unhappy. He was pretty sure Skye would enjoy him. Rami had looked a lot worse the day Skye had tumbled into his yard, though maybe that was just him being dazed.

Rami hadn't taken this much care for the bar date either though, so he didn't know

why today mattered so much.

He was overthinking. “Ya yimma,” he muttered at himself. “He’s going to be just fine with you. Stop panicking.”

The doorbell rang and he jumped half a foot from the startling sound of it. He’d contemplated having the thing removed when he first moved in, but he was too nervous to make too many big changes to the house. He’d hated the chime as a kid—a big, heavy bong that seemed to shake him down to his bones. But now, even with the discomfort, it brought a little surge of sense memory and the smile it always brought to his grandfather’s face.

Hurrying down the hall, Rami came to a halt in front of the door, took a fortifying breath, then opened it. Skye was standing there, looking as nervous as Rami felt. His hands were twisting in front of him—not in signs, just anxiety. He shook them out, then stepped forward on the edge of a heavy inhale and put his hands on Rami’s hips.

“This okay?”

Rami’s gaze flickered to Skye’s ears to look for his hearing aids. They were in. He nodded, licked his lips, then said, “Kissing now?”

Skye laughed and eased Rami against the door, moving one hand to his cheek. His palm was so, so soft. Rami fought the urge to turn his face and nuzzle against it. Instead, he closed his eyes, parted his lips, and waited.

Skye didn’t keep him hanging for too long. He pressed their lips together exactly like he had that first time. It was a gentle, careful invitation for Rami to take what he was offering. And he did. He grabbed Skye by the front of his shirt, feeling the jersey-like fabric against his fingertips. He made a claw with his hands in the fabric, then surged closer and parted his lips.

Skye hummed with pleasure, his tongue pushing into Rami's mouth. They went on and on, a careful dance of mouths and bodies until Rami realized he was very, very hard. He always wore pants that hid the fact that he had more than one bulge, but if both of his dicks got hard, Skye was going to notice.

And Rami was not ready to have that conversation with him yet. Soon, but not now.

"That's enough," Rami said, pulling back.

Skye nodded. He looked a little dazed, and his cheeks were flushed, but he didn't push. He didn't let go either. He stroked his thumb over Rami's cheek, then trailed a touch back down to his waist. "That was nice."

Rami's smile returned. "It was." Peering around Skye, his gaze fixed on the little sports car in the driveway. It was a convertible, but the top was up. "Is that your car?"

Skye nodded. "Yeah. I haven't been able to drive it for a while. Do you have a license?"

"Yes. I can drive, but I don't have a car right now, and I'm not always comfortable on the road. Are you asking because you might get dizzy?"

Skye chuckled. "Yes, sweetheart, I am."

"I can do it in an emergency, but you'll have to be very, very quiet if I have to get behind the wheel, okay?"

"Of course. I don't think it'll be a problem though. My new meds are working really well, and I'm having a really good ear day." Skye took his hands before Rami could ask what an ear day was, and he pulled him over the threshold.

Rami stopped only to lock up, and then he followed Skye to the car and got in. The seats were very low to the ground, which Rami hated, but they were comfortable, which he liked. He wriggled until he was settled, then put his seat belt on as Skye turned the engine on.

It was a soft purr instead of a loud roar, which Rami very much appreciated.

“Please don’t put the top down,” Rami said.

Skye blinked, then quickly shook his head. “Oh, no, don’t worry. I never do that. I can’t hear at all if the wind is blowing like that.”

Rami’s brows furrowed, and he waited until they were on the main road to ask, “Why did you get a convertible, then?” He froze, wondering if his question was rude, but Skye just grinned.

“I got it before I learned I was going deaf. I’d already been diagnosed with Ménière’s, but that doesn’t always lead to hearing loss the way mine has. I always wanted to drive something cool.”

Rami wrinkled his nose. “Bugs in your face are cool?”

Skye laughed loudly. “Honey, that’s what the windshield is for.”

Rami wasn’t convinced, but it also wasn’t a hill he was willing to die on, so he let it go. Settling back against the seat, he let himself bask in how comfortable he was. Normally, car rides stressed him out. He’d spend the entire time worried about how safe it was, how aware the other driver was, and whether or not he’d survive depending on the place the car was hit.

But he didn’t want to be that way. Not right now. Not with how much he was



enjoying Skye's presence. Reaching over, Rami allowed himself to touch. He dragged a finger from Skye's wrist to his elbow, feeling the soft fabric of his shirt.

"You like that?" Skye asked.

Rami jumped, startled by his date's voice. "Oh. Um..."

"I don't mind if you do. I picked this shirt out for you."

Rami's core heated. "Why?"

"Because on our date, I noticed you gravitated toward soft textures. You hated the bar napkins, but you really liked the ones the server brought over with the food. You touched my sweats, then my T-shirt, but you liked my pullover best. And you really liked the vinyl in Avan's car."

Rami knew that about himself, but most people never noticed, and when they did, they usually gave him a weird look and walked away. When he was little, his mother would allow him to run his hands all over clothing racks, and he never hesitated to crawl into someone's lap when they had people over and play with the hems of shirts, and sweaters, and hijabs.

But the older he got, the more he was scolded for it. It took him a long, long while to understand why he wasn't allowed to touch things as much as he wanted to, and restraining himself was like a physical discomfort. Eventually, his mom gave him her softest, light blue jersey hijab to keep with him. He could hold it against him and roll the ends in his fingers to soothe himself. He kept it until he was seventeen, like a security blanket.

People thought he was weird for it, but he didn't mind that as much as he minded masking the stim, so he lived with the odd looks and rolled eyes.

“Did I say something wrong? Is that one of those things I wasn’t supposed to mention out loud?” Skye asked.

Rami shook his head and leaned his cheek against the side of the seat, allowing himself to fully indulge in touching Skye. He used the pads of all five fingers and ran them along his arm, over his shoulder, down his ribs, and across his stomach.

Skye let out a trembling breath and shifted in his seat. Rami knew what he was doing to Skye, and he felt a little bad for it, knowing that this date wouldn’t go beyond kissing, but Skye didn’t ask him to stop, so he didn’t.

“I did good, then?” Skye asked after another long pulse of silence.

Rami realized that Skye actually needed the confirmation that he was getting this right. It almost made him laugh. He was a man who was paid absurd amounts of money to seduce and fulfill the fantasies of rich strangers. The idea that he’d be not just coy but insecure and uncertain was like an oxymoron.

But Rami also understood that someone could play a role very well that didn’t come naturally to them.

“This is very nice. I like it a lot.”

Skye’s whole body relaxed. “Cool. And if there’s anything I ever do that you don’t like?—”

“I’d have a hard time keeping myself from letting you know. Usually, I just say whatever’s on my mind,” Rami told him.

“I’ll brace myself,” Skye answered with a grin.

“Oh. I won’t be mean.” Rami stopped and shook his head. “I’ll try really hard not to be mean. It’s not my intention. I just?—”

“I was joking,” Skye said with a wink. “Just be yourself.”

People said that a lot—just be yourself. They rarely meant it. They said it when they wanted to disarm someone, but Rami had only met a handful of people over the course of his life who said it and meant it without conditions attached. Be yourself...so long as it doesn’t make me uncomfortable.

But in that moment, he trusted Skye. He allowed himself to sink into a silence as his hands slowed, settling on rubbing gentle circles against the hem of Skye’s shirt. He could see the GPS directing Skye, though the volume was all the way down, and Rami watched the little blue dot on the screen ticking down the miles until the car began to slow.

“We’re here,” Skye said softly.

Rami sat up. He felt oddly rejuvenated, like he’d taken a long stress nap, though he hadn’t slept at all, and it had only been twenty minutes. But he supposed he’d needed that quiet time to unwind from the way he’d gotten himself anxious and worried about how the date was going to go.

How? How was Skye so good at this without even trying?

Rami said nothing as Skye pulled into the parking lot, and he used his phone to pay for the spot they took. After a beat, he looked over at Rami and licked his lips.

“Kiss me,” Rami said.

Skye blinked, then grinned and reached for him. He cradled Rami’s cheeks in a

tender hold and guided their lips together. It wasn't as deep as it had been in the house. A little tongue, but his cocks stayed soft behind the zipper of his jeans, and his toes remained uncurled. But it was nice. It was careful and easy and perfect.

"I like you a lot," Rami said.

Skye knocked their foreheads together. "I like you too." He pulled back slowly, then reached for the door, so Rami followed and didn't pull away when Skye reached for his hand.

Their fingers slotted together comfortably. Skye's hands weren't large enough to make Rami's fingers feel overly stretched, and he kept a tight enough hold on him that it wasn't uncomfortable but loose enough that he didn't feel suffocated. And when Skye rubbed his thumb over Rami's, it was a gentle motion that soothed instead of irritated.

Rami murmured to himself, "You were made for me."

"Sorry, I didn't catch that," Skye said.

Rami looked up with wide eyes, cheeks heating. "I didn't mean to say that aloud. I just...I, um. I said?—"

"It's okay," Skye told him quickly. "You don't have to repeat yourself."

Rami tugged him to a stop. "Ahmed hates when that happens."

Skye frowned. "Can you say that again?"

'AHMED,' Rami spelled on his hand. "My brother. When people talk and he can't follow, and then they tell him never mind. He doesn't ever push the issue, but I know

it hurts him when he's left out."

Skye shook his head and stepped in close. "If I was a hearing person, would you have meant for me to hear what you said?"

Rami swallowed thickly. "Uh. Well...no."

"Then you're treating me like you'd treat everyone else, and that's what matters."

"I really want to kiss you again, but it makes me uncomfortable to do it where people can see." He felt like a giant hypocrite for saying that, considering all things, but he had a feeling even if Skye knew what he was doing to earn money, he would have respected that boundary.

"I'll give you plenty later when we're alone to make up for it," Skye murmured. He squeezed Rami's hand once more, then turned and tugged him toward the ticket taker so they could finally, without reservation, start their date.

It was somewhere around the giant aquarium that stretched from floor to ceiling that Rami felt something cracking in his chest. It was like a dam was holding back his feelings, and every exhibit—every moment he saw Skye's eyes light up at the animals behind the glass—made the cracks deeper and wider.

"Skye!" He immediately flushed. He hadn't meant to shout in such a quiet space. Skye turned away from where he was making faces at a three-flippered sea turtle and grinned.

"Yeah, honey?"

Rami took a step closer and reached for him. "Habibi." He'd never called anyone except his baby cousins that before. It felt strange on his tongue.

Skye frowned. 'Repeat?' he asked in sign.

Rami signed precious. Then sweetheart. Then he spelled it. "Habibi," he repeated aloud. "It's?—"

"Oh, I know it. Avan's mom calls me that. Isn't it platonic?"

"Not always. It's more...generic," Rami said, shrugging. "But it's also important."

Skye's body swayed into his. There was no one around, but he was still being careful, and Rami fell even harder for that alone. He closed his eyes, and while he didn't kiss Skye, he pushed his face into the crook of his neck and breathed in his soft, subtle, gorgeous scent.

"Are you getting tired of being here?" Skye asked him.

Rami pulled back so Skye could see his mouth. "No, but I want to be more intimate with you, and I really don't want to do that here."

Skye bit his lip, then reached out and cupped Rami's cheek. "We could go to my place."

Rami felt hot all over. "I want to. Where do you live?"

"The Tower," Skye said.

Rami stiffened. "Oh. I can't...I'm sorry. I can't go there. Not with other people in there. I don't mind your job, I swear, but?—"

"Sweetheart," Skye said, grabbing Rami's hand and kissing his knuckles. "I don't live in the Tower. We all have houses on the property. You won't see a single other

person if you don't want to."

Rami felt his heart begin to settle and slow. "Oh. Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't...I don't want you to think I'm ashamed."

Skye chuckled and tugged Rami into his arms, squeezing him exactly as tight as he needed right then. "I don't blame you for wanting to stay distant from it. Some of the other Sins have met their lovers when they were clients, but some of them have partners who are far removed from what we do. It's okay to feel any way about it so long as you don't ask me to give it up."

"No," Rami breathed out in a rush. "No. No. I kind of..." His ears heated. "I kind of like it."

Skye's grin widened. "Let's get out of here before I burst through my jeans. You're hot enough as it is, and talking about this..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "Come on, we'll grab lunch on the way, and I can give you a tour of my little house, and we can picnic on the floor before we make out until the sun sets."

It sounded unrealistic and absolutely ridiculous.

But also like the best thing Rami had ever been offered.

"Let's go," he said and picked up his pace toward the exit, leaving Skye to trail after him, laughing his ass off all the way.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am*

Seven

Skye was nervous. How was he nervous? Why was he nervous? He already knew what was and wasn't on the table. He knew what Rami was comfortable with, and he knew that Rami wouldn't hesitate to stop him if he went somewhere Rami wasn't ready to go, and he also had a feeling Rami would be very vocal about what Skye was doing right.

So maybe it wasn't that at all. Maybe it was the fact that he was taking someone home for the first time since he'd moved onto the Tower grounds. He'd never had anyone except the other Sins and their partners cross the threshold of his space. He'd never felt safe enough.

He wasn't as bad as Mauro and Avan, who kept apartments off the grounds to keep their work and personal life even more separate than it already was, but he'd never crossed the line. He'd never let anyone see him as Gluttony who wasn't paying for it.

He had no plans to pull that cloak on with Rami, unless he asked for it, but this was toeing the line.

Pulling up into his parking space, he glanced around, but the grounds were quiet. He knew that Flint and Jet were probably working as they had clients who often requested daytime appointments, but everyone else was likely either sleeping off their long nights or off grounds, running errands.

He knew that Stone and August were scouting out new studios for August to work in, and he also knew that Stone was hunting for a vacation beachside cottage that he



insisted all the Sins were free to use, though Skye suspected it would become Stone and August's forever home in the end. The thought made him a little sad but also grateful that the two had found each other.

Skye didn't mind his job, but it wasn't a forever thing. And it had nothing to do with the fact that people didn't want to fuck a saggy old man. He just, at some point, wanted to live his life entirely for himself.

"Are you changing your mind?" Rami asked, shattering the quiet of the car.

Skye turned to look at him. "Not at all. Why do you ask?"

"We've been sitting in silence for two minutes and forty seconds. That's kind of a long time."

Laughing, Skye bowed his head and shook it. "Sorry. Um. This is kind of a first for me."

"Bringing someone home?"

"Yeah. I'm glad it's you, but I think I'm more nervous than I thought I'd be. My house is really normal, but it's right here." He gestured toward the back wall of the cathedral. "I'm afraid you'll realize who I am and what I do and decide it's not for you."

"I already made up my mind," Rami said like it was matter-of-fact. And hell, maybe it was for him. Maybe he wasn't like Skye, constantly second- and third-guessing every choice he made.

He took a fortifying breath, then got out of the car and came around, offering his hands to Rami. He could feel parts of his palms where he was most calloused from

his work, and he stroked his fingers along Rami's hands as he stepped closer.

"May I kiss you out here?"

Rami nodded, ducking his head a little shyly, but he still leaned in, and Skye's lips met his own. They parted, kissing him deeper than he had in the car—not too much, but a promise of what could come if Rami wanted it.

Skye could feel the rumbling vibration of Rami's soft moan, and he had to force himself to pull back before he tumbled Rami against the car and rutted against him until he came. His cock was painfully hard behind his zipper, but he had no idea what Rami was going to be comfortable with, and he would be damned if he pushed him on anything.

"Mm. Nice," Skye told him, breaking the kiss with a flurry of small pecks.

Rami laughed softly and gripped Skye tightly by the hips. "I really like the way you kiss."

Skye felt flushed and even a little flustered, which was absurd, considering he did this for a living. He'd spent years learning to perfect seduction of all types of people—from easy to the most stubborn he'd ever met. And he'd been subjected to every single type of pickup line, fuck, and tease known to man. Or, at the very least, close to it.

So he had no idea why a simple kiss left him weak at the knees.

But here he was, and he wanted to bask in it.

Dragging his hands down to Rami's, he took them both and squeezed before letting go of the right one so he could punch in his door lock code. Skye had always been a

very tidy person, so he wasn't worried about looking messy when the door swung open, and he led the way inside.

"Do you have someone clean for you?" Rami asked as Skye led him into the living room. "Oh. This place is smaller than I expected."

Skye held back a burst of laughter. "Is it? And no. I take care of everything myself."

"Even with your hours?"

Skye turned and looked at him with a quirked brow. "Rami, do you know how expensive one night with me is?"

Rami's cheeks darkened, and he shook his head. "A lot, I assume."

"A lot," Skye said. "I'm not saying that to brag or anything, I promise. Stone set the base price, and then we're allowed to add to it based on the additional needs the client requires. I'm not that busy because the cost of booking here is prohibitively expensive for most people. I have plenty of time to get down on my hands and knees and scrub my floor."

Rami cocked his head to the side. "If you make so much money, why is it small?"

Skye did laugh this time. He yanked Rami closer and kissed his knuckles. God, he was so sweet. "Because these cottages used to be where the nuns slept, and Stone wanted to turn them into a sanctuary for us."

"Nuns," Rami parroted with a frown, and then his brows flew up. "Oh. Nuns . Like—" He waved his hand over his head, Skye assumed in mimic of a habit. "They have that...that hijab thing, but it's kind of stiff and big?"

“Yeah,” Skye answered, still grinning. He tugged Rami toward the front window, which overlooked the courtyard. “When Stone bought this place, he thought about tearing this all down and building a living complex, but the guys he’d already hired then really liked the idea of transforming these into little cottages. And I like it here. I don’t need a lot of space.”

“Oh. No. Me either,” Rami said, shaking his head quickly. “My grandfather’s house is too big.”

“The one you’re in now?”

“Mm,” Rami answered with a nod. He pulled his hand free of Skye’s and began to stim, tapping the tips of his fingers together, swaying back and forth just slightly. “It’s a lot of work, so I...two of the rooms...can help it.” Rami’s swaying made it hard for Skye to catch all the words of his sentence, but he could fill in the blanks easily enough.

“I’ve always been a simple guy. A lot of our clients think we all have these big, tragic, complicated backstories. I don’t talk about my personal life with them too much, but the few people I’ve trusted enough seemed a little disappointed that I came from middle-class parents who had college degrees and nine-to-fives.”

‘Nine-five?’ Rami signed, looking confused. He swayed a little harder.

Skye wanted to put his arms around Rami’s waist and sway with him, but he wasn’t sure how he’d react, so he kept a few inches between them. “Yeah. Office jobs, you know? My dad was a chemical engineer who worked for a paper plant. My mom taught English at the community college. We had a nice home, two cars, the most popular toy every year for Christmas. It was...normal.”

Rami stopped swaying and turned to face Skye. He braced himself for Rami to ask

why. Why did he choose this life? Why did he choose this job? “What’s Christmas like?”

Skye blinked, not sure if he heard him right. ‘Repeat?’

“What’s Christmas like? I’ve never had one. I grew up in a neighborhood where most of the people there were like us. Muslim,” he added like he wasn’t sure if Skye was following. “I mean, I know Christmas. I know Santa and presents and...ham?”

Skye laughed again. “My parents liked a brisket over ham, but yeah, that kind of sums it up. You also have extended family and awkward conversations with people who you haven’t seen all year.”

“Oh. I know what that’s like. We have holidays too,” Rami clarified.

Skye smiled. “Shared cultural experience, then, huh?”

Rami snorted and rolled his eyes. “Probably. I think we have a lot of shared experience.” Rami reached out and touched the side of his jaw. “What’s the difference between doing this as a Sin and just being an escort?”

“The clients,” Skye told him honestly. He took Rami’s hand again and pulled him down to the sofa. He propped his feet up on the table as Rami sat almost all the way backward so he could continue looking out the window, his knees under him, chest pressed against the back cushion. “They come in with expectations. Being Gluttony, they tend to want a lot of indulgence. Or they want to be indulged. They want it slow and heavy. They want it to feel like our time together is an actual eternity and it’s going to go on forever and ever.”

Rami turned his face, laying his cheek against the cushion as he looked at Skye. “Do you like it?”

“Sometimes. And sometimes I just play a part.”

“Mm.” Rami closed his eyes as he nodded. “It’s hard sometimes, isn’t it? To split yourself in two like that? One part belongs to people, one part belongs to you. And...and it feels...a lot.”

Skye’s head was spinning. Rami had hit the nail right on the head, but how? His job as an artist surely didn’t put him in the position to understand so profoundly. But maybe it was something else. His family, his religion, his past?

He ached to ask, but instead, he reached out and brushed a curl back from Rami’s temple that had come loose from his hair tie. “You’re very beautiful.”

Rami opened his eyes again. “I was hoping you would think I was beautiful. A lot of people do, but it doesn’t always make me feel good. You do though. You make me feel very good.”

“Yeah?”

Rami nodded and licked his lips. Straightening, he looked down at Skye’s lap, where it was obvious now that he was turned on. “I want to have an orgasm with you.”

Skye wondered how long it would be before Rami’s blunt honesty would stop being so startling . He loved it, and a small part of him hoped it was never. He hoped he could have this for all the years he had left and that Rami would always make his heart jump just a little.

“We can do that. Tell me what you want to do with me.”

Rami bit his lip. “Kissing.”

“Easy,” Skye said with a grin.

“Rubbing,” Rami went on. “Over the clothes. Just over the clothes for now.” There was something on his face, something he was holding back.

Skye shifted closer. “Hey, sweetheart. Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

Rami quickly shook his head. “No. I...I mean, yes. I want to, but not yet.”

Skye bit his lip as he looked down at Rami’s crotch. He was hard. He had a very, very impressive bulge. “I can be patient for you.”

There was a long beat of silence and stillness, and then suddenly, Rami was grabbing at him, falling backward and pulling Skye on top of him. Their kisses turned desperate, frantic, Rami’s hands searching Skye like he didn’t know where to land.

Skye felt like devouring him, the feeling in his chest intense and almost painful, and he had to break away, gasping for air as he regained some semblance of control. “I want you.”

Rami nodded.

“I really, really want you.”

There was a look of regret—something almost like heartbreak—in Rami’s eyes, and Skye immediately knew where he’d gone wrong.

“Not like that, darling,” Skye said softly, reaching up to cup his cheek. “I don’t want more than what you can give me. I just...I don’t have the words to explain this feeling I get when I touch you. It’s never happened to me before with anyone.”

Rami stared for a long time. He swallowed heavily, his jaw working, but no sounds came out.

“Do you need a moment?”

Rami dislodged one of his hands and tapped his lips, shaking his head.

“Can’t speak?”

Rami nodded.

“Do you need to stop?”

Rami’s head shook so hard his eyes wobbled a little when he stopped, and Skye grinned down at him.

“Okay. Well, you can sign if you need to, but if you can’t do that either, just tap my thigh twice if you need me to stop, okay?”

Rami’s eyes widened, but after a second, he nodded, a little less hectic this time.

“And I’d like to touch your skin. Not here,” Skye said, running his hand over the front of Rami’s tented jeans. “But maybe here?” He pressed the tips of his fingers over Rami’s hip, just above his waistline.

Rami swallowed heavily again, then nodded and reached down, carefully rucking up his shirt. Skye watched the slow drag of the fabric, the revelation of his skin—rich brown, smooth, a little hairy by his stomach, and his mouth watered.

He surged in to kiss Rami again, but this time, he trailed his lips downward, over his throat, dragging over the shirt still covering most of his chest, and then to his exposed



stomach. Rami groaned loudly, his hips thrusting upward as Skye's hands worked to get to his body.

He didn't go too low, but he hooked his fingers in the waistband of his jeans to taste the cut of his hip as best he could. His skin was warm and salty, rough yet soft. Skye's own cock began to throb, and he rocked himself gently against Rami's leg as he scraped Rami's hip with his teeth.

He moved from the right side to the left, tugging down there, feeling half-drunk on Rami's moans. His fingers pulled a little harder, and then he saw the edges of ink on his skin.

"Tattoo?"

He looked up in time to see Rami nod his fist. 'Yes.'

"May I see it?"

Rami hesitated, then shrugged and shifted to the side. His fingers tugged on the button of his jeans, though he left the zipper up, but it was just enough space to pull it down and expose the image there.

A snake. No. Several snakes.

No. Not several snakes. A very famous Gorgon.

Skye's heart began to beat hard in his chest when the face of Medusa appeared because he recognized that exact tattoo. A lean, muscular body appeared behind his eyelids the second he closed them. Strong, thin fingers on both hands gripping two cocks.

In the video Avan had shown him, the Medusa's head danced with the way the man's hips rocked. His cocks—one slightly smaller than the other—were thick and throbbing. Skye hadn't waited around to see the conclusion, but that didn't matter. He'd seen enough.

His head was spinning as he sat back, and he realized the shock of it had triggered a vertigo spell.

"Fuck," he gasped. It felt like someone had knocked his feet out from under him. His hand flailed, grabbing for the cushion as he lay backward, then flung the crook of his arm over his eyes.

"S-skye," Rami stammered, his words thick.

"Vertigo." He took several deep breaths. "Sorry. I need to take my hearing aids out, but I won't be able to look at you for a minute."

Rami's tender fingers brushed through Skye's hair. They were careful as they plucked the molds from his ear canals, and the sudden absence of sound overwhelmed him. His head spun harder for a beat, and then slowly—breath by breath—his eyes began to still, and the world stopped hurtling around him.

Skye felt Rami's fingers slip under his and form into a closed fist. An S . His name?

"I'm okay," Skye said. His voice felt thick in the back of his throat, and he always struggled when he couldn't hear himself.

Was he speaking too loud? Too soft? Tongue too heavy?

Rami didn't seem to care either way. He just held him until Skye felt brave enough to open his eyes. Everything was settled again—except the raging hurricane of

realization in his chest. There was a chance that he'd got it wrong. That Rami was not the man from the video.

But he immediately remembered Avan's words from that morning before he'd gone on his run. "His whole thing is he's a virgin."

Shit. The coincidences were too strong, and as much as Skye thought he should leave it alone, he knew he had to ask.

He sat up slowly, making sure everything was going to stay still, and then he looked at Rami, who was staring at him with wide eyes.

'Did I do something?' Rami asked.

Skye started to shake his head, but he wasn't sure if that was a lie or not. Rami hadn't done anything. Not directly. It was Skye's own wonky head that reacted the way it did. And he did not begrudge Rami his secret. Skye had been planning on keeping his own for a little while, and it was only the fact that Rami had recognized Avan that his cover was blown.

But he was a little hurt Rami hadn't trusted him. Was that fair? Maybe. Maybe not. They'd been on two dates and had been talking for two weeks. It wasn't a lifetime, and neither of them had made each other promises.

But the fact remained that Skye felt something deep and profound, and he was starting to doubt now whether or not Rami felt the same way.

'What's wrong?' Rami asked.

Skye knew it was probably all over his face. He took a breath and then reached for Rami's hip. His fingers brushed over the part of the tattoo that was still exposed. 'Do

you have a FANCORE?’ He spelled the last word.

Rami startled and pulled back. His gaze flickered down to where Skye was still touching him, and then his eyes went wide with the realization. His hand slapped over his tattoo, and his mouth opened and shut. Skye wasn’t sure if he was speaking or not, but if he was, it was too low for his better ear to pick up.

“I’m not judging,” Skye said aloud. “But...there was this video of a man who has two?—”

Rami stood up before Skye could finish his sentence. He stared around wildly, panicked, and then before Skye could say another word, he bolted for the door.

### Eight

He couldn't breathe. Fuck, he was good at running, so why couldn't he breathe . Panic was on his heels as he chased Rami out the door, but he'd given him precious seconds to disappear. Luckily, the grounds were walled in, and it usually took people a good long while to find the back gate to escape.

Rami could have gone for the main building, but Skye had a feeling he would avoid that place unless it was his only option. But he pictured Rami outside crying and frantically searching for a way out, and that was worse than anything else. He didn't want him to be afraid. Not of him. Not ever.

He'd fucked up so badly. He should have kept his goddamn mouth shut and waited for Rami to tell him.

Heading out of his gate, he came to an immediate halt when he found Rami sitting a few yards away with his back to a tree. He was curled into himself, arms wrapped around his knees, but he looked okay. Mostly. His head popped up when Skye started toward him, and his face was full of distress, but he wasn't crying.

And he wasn't scrambling to get away from Skye, so that was something.

All the same, Skye kept his hands up in surrender as he approached. "I'm so sorry. Sweetheart, I'm so sorry. I didn't?—"

"I didn't mean to run. I panicked," Rami blurted when Skye was close enough to hear him.

Dropping to his knees, Skye fought the urge to reach out for him. “I was a jackass. I knew you had stuff you were keeping to yourself. I was just...I was surprised it was you.”

Rami swallowed heavily. “No one was supposed to know.”

“I get that. I know that’s why you don’t show your face.”

“I didn’t think about my tattoo. N-no one knows. No one knows I have it,” Rami said. He began to wring his hands in front of them. They were shaking hard. “I d-didn’t...hmmmm.” He let out a high hum.

Skye gently tapped him. ‘Sign?’

Rami shook his hands out, then signed, ‘I never told anyone about it.’

‘And you didn’t expect to show me,’ Skye offered back.

Rami nodded miserably. ‘I forgot.’

Skye shuffled even closer and let his legs touch Rami’s once it was clear Rami wasn’t pulling away from him. “It’s okay,” he said aloud. “I won’t say a word. You know I can keep this secret.”

Rami swallowed thickly. ‘I wanted that to be separate. It’s just work. Different work,’ he signed. Skye frowned, not sure he was reading the context of the signs right. Different work? ‘I can’t pay my bills on art. No money my house future gone.’ The last bit, Skye understood the signs and the order they were in, but he didn’t understand what Rami was saying.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’m not following. My ASL isn’t as good as yours.” He felt a

pang in his chest like he'd failed.

Rami didn't seem to mind. He lifted his gaze a little and said aloud, "I'm going to lose my house if I can't pay what my grandfather owed after he died. But I can't let anyone take it. It's my home."

Skye's heart cracked in his chest. "I'm so sorry."

Rami shook his head. "No. N-no. No. No, no." He took a deep breath, clearly stuck on the word, and then he tried again. "I like my channel. People tell me what to do, and I can say no if I want. But they pay me a lot of money because I'm different."

"Because of..." He gestured toward Rami's crotch. He hadn't quite let himself think about the two cocks thing. He'd deal with that later.

Rami's cheeks darkened, and he nodded. "Mm. Funny how kids who used to beat me up in middle school because of my body are now giving me thousands of dollars to watch me touch myself."

Skye's cheeks heated up. It had been interesting when Avan showed him on the video, but now that he knew the cocks were Rami's, a flame of desire began to burn in his stomach. And a strange feeling of possession. He felt the irrational urge to ask Rami to keep himself untouched by anyone else except him.

He had no right to do that, of course. That would make him the world's biggest hypocrite, so he kept his mouth shut on that. "You know I'm not judging the way you make money."

"I know." Rami whispered the words, and Skye didn't hear them, but he read them off his lips.

“So why are you afraid of me?”

Rami’s eyes shot up to meet his. “I’m not afraid of you. I’m sad, and I panicked because I wanted to tell you myself. This is”—he gestured down at himself—“hard to explain. It’s just how I was born, but people get so weird about it.”

“Yeah, I could see that,” Skye said.

“People...people I’ve met...” Rami’s voice cracked a little. “I let a guy—” He made the jack-off gesture with both hands. “He approached me in a store and hit on me. He was nice. He was sweet. He told me nice things when he had my clothes off. But it was a bet. He knew me from school, and I didn’t recognize him. They all wanted to know what it was like.”

“Who was he?” Skye demanded.

Rami blinked at him.

“I just want to have a little talk with that dickhead.”

Rami burst into laughter and shook his head. ‘No,’ he signed. ‘I’m fine.’

Skye pursed his lips but eventually nodded. ‘Okay. Well, you know that’s not why I wanted to date you, right?’

Rami’s face shifted into something a little sadder. ‘I know. But...how did you...do you like my channel? Do you watch?’

Skye then realized why Rami had panicked. Not that he believed Skye would judge him or that he’d known all along. He was freaked-out because he thought Skye might be into that sort of thing as a fetish.



His whole body relaxed, and he moved to fit his back against the tree next to Rami. Their shoulders touched, and then he carefully reached for Rami's hand. When he didn't tense or pull back, Skye kissed his knuckles, then his fingertips, then his palm.

Rami's body shuddered and went lax, and Skye felt a surge of triumph that he was able to reassure him and calm him down without a word.

"My friend Avan, he found your channel. He showed me one of your videos. I didn't watch the whole thing. I'm not a subscriber."

Rami bowed his head, looking like he was taking it all in, and then he glanced up. "Did you like it?"

Skye's brows flew up, and he reached for Rami's face, curling a hand around his jaw. "I didn't feel any type of way about it. You were hot—that much was obvious. And that feeling hasn't changed since I got to know you. I want you."

"I know. You were very hard and rubbing on me," Rami said.

Skye laughed again. "Yes, yes I was. And I was definitely going to come in my pants, which I haven't done in years."

Rami's chin trembled on his exhale. "Me too."

"I don't care how many dicks you have. I just like you," Skye told him. He let his words flow unchecked and honest, the way Rami spoke, and it was oddly freeing.

"Even no dicks?"

"I'm not a person who really gives much of a shit about genitals. I care about how we connect. How a person makes me feel. How I can make them feel."

Rami studied him for a long moment. “I’m afraid you’re going to hurt me. That it all sounds like the truth when it isn’t.”

Skye leaned over and kissed his temple. “I get that. And we can go as slow as you want. I don’t have the patience for a long con, but I have the patience to prove that I’m into you. For real. If you’d be willing to let me try.”

Rami looked at him, startled. “Why would I need to let you... oh . Because I ran away.” He quickly shook his head. “I didn’t run away from you . Sometimes I...I get overwhelmed, and I melt down, and I wasn’t ready for you to see that. People...people call it a tantrum, and I promise it’s not a tantrum. I’m not a child. My body responds to stress that way, and it happens and?—”

“Hey. Hey .” Skye leaned in and pressed a kiss to his jaw. “I understand.”

“Do you?”

“Yes,” Skye murmured. “I’ve been doing a lot of reading about Autism, and I know what a meltdown is. It’s not something you have to worry about with me. I want to get this right. I want you to feel safe, and I don’t want to scare you off. It terrified me when I thought I’d fucked this all up.”

Rami was quiet for a long beat, and then he dropped his legs to the ground and twisted, taking Skye’s hands in his. “Can we start over?”

“Inside?”

“Not-not like before. Um. I think I need some time before we, you know...”

“Yeah,” Skye said gently. “But we still have lunch. Then we can walk around the grounds. Maybe meet some of the guys?”

For a moment, Rami looked panicked, and then he took a deep breath and nodded. “Will they think I’m weird? Did your friend show everyone that video?”

Skye opened his mouth to say that of course Avan hadn’t spread it around, but he realized that could be a lie. Avan didn’t know Rami was that man at the time. The day he showed it to Skye, the guy on the screen had been some anonymous, faceless FanCore star.

If Avan had known, he would have kept it entirely to himself.

“He doesn’t know it’s you,” Skye said softly. “I don’t know who he told, but I swear I won’t say a word about who it is until you tell me I can.”

“What if it’s never?” Rami chanced.

“Then it’s never. This is your secret, and I will protect it from everyone if I have to. It’s not their business. It’s never their business.”

Rami reached for him. “Kiss me again. We can still do that, right? You said as many as I want?—”

“And I meant it.” Skye surged in and kissed him, deep and possessive. His toes curled against the grass, and Rami’s fingers dug into his shirt. When it was over, he pulled back and realized that Rami’s jeans were still undone. He met his gaze and reached between them, doing up his button and fixing his shirt until he was put together again.

‘Thank you,’ Rami signed.

Skye kissed him for that, then pushed to his feet and offered both hands out. “Come on. I make a great sandwich, and you can teach me the way you like yours done.”

“I’m a simple person,” Rami warned as they headed for the house.

Skye laughed and tugged on his hand just a little. “Exactly the way I like you.”

Rami smiled, looking bright and happy—exactly the way Skye liked him.

“Wow.” Rami’s voice carried in the chapel. It had taken a massive amount of convincing and promises to get Rami through the doors. The place could look like a sex dungeon, and there was a St. Andrew’s cross on the dais, but when it wasn’t trussed up for a client, it looked like the inside of any cathedral—minus several statues and most of the pews.

Now, though, it held seven Renaissance era–style paintings done by August of each one of the Sins.

Rami had given them each a cursory glance, but he was now transfixed by Skye’s portrait. It was him lounging back on a throne made of cushions, two men and two women around him. Three were kneeling at his sides, and one—the taller man—was hovering beside him, leaning halfway into a kiss.

Skye was still in awe that after sitting for several hours, this was the result. The painting felt lonely though. Almost everyone else’s had come with the image of a lover they now had. Even Flint’s had two lovers that looked very much like Luke and Tomás. Skye thought maybe the sinners in his painting would forever be anonymous. But now, he was starting to wonder if August had some clairvoyance because the man leaning in to kiss Skye looked a lot like Rami.

“You’re very beautiful,” Rami murmured.

Skye bit his lip and shrugged. “The idealized version of me. Or, well, my Sin.”

Rami turned and looked at him and shook his head. ‘Same-same,’ he signed.

Skye didn’t entirely agree, but it wasn’t a hill he was willing to die on. Art was subjective, after all, and so were the aesthetics of living people. Rami saw him in ways he didn’t see himself. Skye had a feeling Rami saw him in ways most people didn’t. Or couldn’t.

“I wanted to sculpt you when I first saw you,” Rami said as they moved toward Mauro’s painting. He didn’t linger on it, nor did he linger on Avan.

Skye coughed a little. “Did you say you wanted to sculpt me?”

Rami nodded and turned to face him. ‘You’re beautiful,’ he signed. ‘I wanted to put that in clay.’

“You can,” Skye said aloud. “If you ever want me to sit for you.”

Rami shook his head quickly. “I don’t have models sit for me. I study them, and then I make the piece on my own. It’s...complicated.”

Skye tugged him close and kissed him softly on the corner of his mouth. “Your process is your process. But you have whatever permission from me that you need.”

Rami’s breath trembled a little on his exhale. ‘Thank you,’ he signed. His fingers hit Skye as he drew them down.

The door across the room opened suddenly, and Rami went stiff, shoving his whole body into Skye’s arms. Skye quickly pulled him close and glanced over, relieved that it was just Hen. He was the easiest person to meet. He had a way of making everyone feel at ease.

“Hey, babe!” Hen called.

Rami stiffened, and Skye quickly tipped his head down. “He calls everyone that. He’s with King. Greed,” he clarified, pointing to the middle painting. “You’ll like him.”

“Am I interrupting?” Hen was crossing the room quicker than Skye could ask him to stop.

“I was just showing Rami around,” Skye said, not letting his lover go. Rami was relaxing inch by inch though, just the way Skye expected.

Hen was dressed casually—leggings, a fuzzy off-the-shoulder sweater, a little glitter on his eyelids and lips. He wasn’t wearing shoes, but his feet were covered in thick, fuzzy socks, and he immediately slipped and only just managed to catch himself before falling on his ass.

“Whoops.”

“Hasn’t literally everyone warned you about those fucking socks in here?” Skye chastised.

“It’s a small price to comfort my little toes,” Hen said. He stuck out his hand to Rami. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Skye is obsessed with you. In a good way,” he added when Rami took his hand.

Instead of shaking it, Rami twisted it to look at his nails. “Like stars,” he murmured.

Hen lifted his brows at Skye, then nodded. “Mm. I’ve been in a sort of space theme lately.”

Rami let him go. “They’re very beautiful. And you’re very beautiful. Why aren’t you

up on the wall?”

Hen burst into delighted laughter. “I’m not a Sin, honey. I manage these disasters. They’d fall apart without me.”

Rami glanced over at Skye, who grinned. “He does manage us well. We all love him. We’d be lost without him here.”

“That’s really nice. It’s like a family. You’re the fun uncle,” Rami said.

Hen folded his hands under his chin and sighed. “I love you. I know it’s early, Rami, but I do. You’re amazing, and I want to keep you.”

Rami looked slightly panicked. “I want Skye to be my boyfriend, and I’m not really into polyamory.”

Hen all but swooned into Rami’s arms. “Yes. We’re keeping you. He can be your boyfriend.”

Skye wanted to smile, but his head was spinning. He had a feeling Rami didn’t mean it literally in the sense that he wanted to be exclusive now. Or put labels on it. He meant it as he said it: that it was what he wanted.

It felt too good to be true, but he reached for Rami’s hand and tugged him away from Hen. “I like that idea.”

Rami softened. “Then I can stay.”

“Tell me you’re bringing him to the barbeque,” Hen said.

Skye shifted uneasily. “I think we’ll take our time with that one.”

“I don’t know if I like barbeque,” Rami told him honestly. “And I have a hard time around large groups of people until I know them really well.”

“Stone will make you whatever your lovely little heart desires, but we don’t need to rush things. Just know there’s an open invite. We cook out at least three times a week.”

Rami nodded, then tugged on Skye’s hand. “I’m feeling overwhelmed. Can we go?”

“Go,” Hen answered for them. “I need to do some setup. Mauro’s client booked the chapel for the night.”

Skye didn’t even have a chance to respond before Rami was tugging him toward the doors. They went out the back exit, and Rami didn’t slow until Skye’s cottage came into view. His feet hesitated in the grass, and then he came to a stop.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to panic.”

Skye shook his head and took him by the shoulders. “I’d never have you in there to witness something you didn’t want to be part of.”

“Is that...can people do that?”

Skye shrugged. “Some clients are really into being watched. Some of the other Sins will participate in that capacity. Stone and August have done stuff together with Jet’s clients.”

“I don’t know everyone’s names,” Rami said. “Which one is Stone, and which one is Jet?”

“Sloth and Lust,” Skye said. He moved his hands up, stroking his thumbs along the



sides of Rami's neck. "You'll meet everyone. I think we should do them one by one at first. The dinners can be a little...hectic."

Rami nodded. "I'd prefer it. I don't like being in situations I'm unfamiliar with." His hands danced restlessly at his sides. "But I really liked Hen. As long as he wasn't hitting on me."

"He wasn't. He only has eyes for King and always has. The two of them are very, very in love."

"I like the idea of being in love. I think I'll like it when it happens to me," Rami said.

Skye leaned in close. "I hope so."

Rami met his gaze for a second, then closed his eyes and leaned in. Their lips met—soft, slow, careful, heavy with promise of what a future between them could look like. Rami's tongue touched him, and Skye groaned softly.

"Can we start over?" Rami asked for the second time that day.

Except, this time, Skye knew he meant something else. He meant the thing Skye wanted to hear. To touch and be touched. "Whatever you're ready for."

"You," Rami murmured. "Your lips. Your hands. Please?"

"Yes," Skye said. He stepped back and took Rami's fingers, tangling them with his own. "Come inside?"

Rami bowed his head, nodded, then let Skye lead him to the door.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am*

Nine

He was shaking with nerves. Not because he was a stranger to anything sexual, but because for the first time in his life, he was doing this with someone he liked. Someone he wanted. Someone he knew wanted him back. There was no chance—at least none in the calculations he was able to run—that Skye was in this for any other reason except he wanted to be there.

It was the first time Rami felt safe.

A pulse of regret began to beat in his chest like a second heart as they walked through the door. He wasn't changing his mind about Skye, but he wished their circumstances were different. No matter how many dates they went on or how hard either of them fell, Rami's situation would remain the same.

He was doing well enough and was going to pay off the taxes on time, but it was still going to be a while before he could let Skye have all of him. And the fact that Skye would be the first—couldn't be the first—was starting to eat at him.

He wasn't sure Skye would care...but Rami still hadn't told him his full plan. His endgame was to auction his virginity off to the highest bidder in hopes he could pay the rest of the bill with some left over to store away so he wouldn't find himself in this position again.

He would have to tell Skye, of course. He had to come clean so they could both make the right and most informed decision on if they wanted to go forward with all this. But Rami was going to let himself have this one selfish moment.

There were still no promises between them. There were no labels, no rules, and the only boundaries were the ones set by Rami.

“Does it matter to you that I’m a virgin?” he found himself asking as Skye led him through the bedroom door. His bed was large and covered in more pillows than Rami liked to sleep with. His comforter was a slate grey, and it looked very, very soft. His fingers itched to touch it, but he turned and touched Skye’s shirt instead.

Skye smiled at him. “No. Would you like it to?”

“No,” Rami said. He licked his lips. “Would you get angry if I slept with another person after we did...um. This.”

Skye’s face did something complicated, and then he took a deep breath and said, “That would make me a terrible hypocrite, wouldn’t it?”

“You’re allowed to want what you want,” Rami said.

Skye’s mouth softened into something like a smile. He pressed his front against Rami’s and took his hands. “I think I would be hurt if you dated someone else. I can’t set rules like that on you because I have sex for a living, and that’s not going to stop anytime soon. You should probably know that, sweetheart. If you and I decide we want more than this right here, you’ll have to be okay with what I do.”

“I’m okay with it,” Rami said. He didn’t really know if it was a good thing or a bad thing that he could categorize something like sex into work, pleasure, and relationships, but to him, it made sense. Work was work. It didn’t matter what you did. You performed some act or service, you got paid, you went home.

There was an invisible wall in his mind between him on his channel and the man who was standing in Skye’s bedroom. But he didn’t know how to say that in words Skye

would understand.

“Then I suppose I feel the same way. If you did it on your channel, I wouldn’t mind. But if you were dating, I think it would bother me.”

Rami let out a sigh of relief. He did understand. “I don’t want to date anyone except you. I don’t really like people very much.”

Skye laughed and swooped in to kiss him. “Neither do I,” he said when he broke away. Rami could feel the echo of his lips—the warmth of them and the tender way Skye held him, not like he was breakable, but like he was precious.

Rami took a breath, then glanced at the bed. “Can I show you?”

Skye frowned. “Show me?”

Rami took Skye’s hand and pressed it to where he was hard and thick in his jeans. Skye sucked in a breath, eyes going wide. “Can I show you?”

“Yes,” Skye said.

“And if it’s too strange, will you tell me?”

Skye took his time with his answer. He closed his eyes in a very slow blink, then opened them. “Yes. The last thing I want to do is hurt you, but you’d prefer that over a lie, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” Rami told him. For years, people assumed he either didn’t feel at all or that he was too sensitive to hear the brutal truth. He hated that to so many, he wasn’t a person just like them. People treated him like he was some sort of alien—someone mimicking the human condition.

It always hurt, so the fact that Skye understood him this way meant everything.

Skye licked his lips, then began to knead Rami's cocks with the heel of his palm. He was mostly touching the one on the right, but as he stroked down, he touched the base of both, and Rami groaned softly. "You like that?"

"Mm. I've only done this once."

"And it's allowed, right? I mean, your rules?—"

"It's allowed," Rami said. "And I want it. I want you."

Skye's breath trembled on his exhale. He bent his head, kissing Rami over his pulse as his hand pressed harder against his dicks. Rami thrust against him, almost content enough to rub off until he came.

But he wanted more. He wanted to feel Skye's bare skin against his own.

Rami tugged Skye toward the bed, and it only took a second for Skye to get with the picture. He snapped into action, going from hesitation to dominating, easing Rami around so the backs of his legs were touching the mattress, and then he grabbed the hem of his shirt.

"May I?"

"Yes," Rami said. "You don't need to be too careful with me. I like it when you take charge."

Skye's pupils blew wide, and his lips parted on an exhale. He gripped Rami's shirt with one hand, the other moving to his own ear to touch the side of his hearing aid. "Do you mind if I take this off?"

Rami shook his head and lifted his hands. ‘No. Never.’

Skye used his free hand to pull his hearing aids out, and he set them on the nightstand. He closed his eyes, his head shaking from left to right a couple of times, and then he looked up again. He was more relaxed, Rami noticed. A line of tension in his body was gone.

‘Undress me,’ Rami signed.

With a single tug, Rami’s shirt was up over his head. With a second tug, it came free of his arms. Skye’s hands went for his jeans next, undoing the button like he had before, and this time not stopping there. He pulled the zipper down, then spread the fly into a wide v and stared at where Rami was bulging against his briefs.

They were black, so they hid exactly how hard he was, but Skye traced the shape of his cocks with the tips of two fingers, and he groaned deep in his chest.

“Do they...can they...” Skye seemed to struggle with his words. He lifted his gaze and then his free hand. ‘Both feel the same?’ he signed with one hand.

Rami nodded his fist. ‘Yes. Same-same. Touch both, please.’

Skye’s hands were trembling again as he tugged Rami’s jeans to his knees, and then he waited for Rami to kick them across the floor. He watched then as Skye slowly and carefully removed his own shirt, then his jeans, then his boxers. He stood in front of Rami stark naked—gorgeous, thin, lithe, tattooed in places Rami was not expecting to see.

He couldn’t help himself from reaching out and touching the ink across his hips. ‘Means?’

‘Nothing,’ Skye signed quickly and laughed. ‘I just like the way they look.’

Rami couldn’t relate, but he did understand. He was a man of aesthetic himself. Sometimes he made sculptures because an image spoke to him. And sometimes he sculpted something that simply looked nice. There wasn’t always a deep reason or complicated rhyme.

And he liked that Skye had decorated his body that way.

Swallowing heavily, Rami backed up against the bed again, then hooked his fingers in the waistband of his briefs. He watched Skye’s gaze move down to where he was hard and throbbing. He saw the way Skye’s throat hitched with his swallow. This was so different than it had been in the past.

The one man he’d let touch him had stared like Rami was some sort of sideshow at a circus. There was a look of curiosity and even revulsion in his eyes when Rami bared himself. And on his channel, the people watching him were screen names and rapid-fire sentences he rarely read, but the few he did treated him much the same way. It was easier to bear when he wasn’t looking into someone’s eyes, but the fact remained he was different from everyone else.

Except Skye.

“You don’t have to if it’s too much,” Skye murmured softly.

Rami knew that, but those words still comforted him in ways he didn’t expect. With a single tug, he dragged his briefs over the curve of his ass. The elastic caught on his cocks, but only for a second. They sprang free, bobbing in the air in front of him. He was so, so hard, aching with the need to be touched.

He found himself staring at Skye’s hands instead of his face. Rami found that fingers

were often more honest than lips and eyes. Skye's hands opened, then closed, then opened again and hung relaxed at his sides.

"Rami," Skye said after a long beat. "I really want to touch you, but I need you to guide me." And then he finally looked up.

With a quick nod, Rami held out his hands as Skye closed the distance between them. He took Skye by the wrists and carefully brought his fingertips to his shoulders. "Anywhere you want. I trust you."

Skye's breath hitched, and his jaw tensed before he gave a firm, stiff nod and let Rami pull his hands away. Instead of going for his erections, which was what Rami had been expecting, Skye went for his chest. He laid flat palms to his pecs, one on the left side, pressing hard to where Rami's heart was beating.

He stood there like that for a long moment, then stepped even closer. His naked body pressed against Rami's. His cock was fat and thick, hitching up against Rami's thigh, and Skye groaned, rocking his hips.

Rami's cocks were pressed against Skye's stomach, the warmth of his skin and the roughness of his hair almost too much. But also, somehow, it was not enough. He wanted more, more, more, with a desperation that was entirely alien to him.

"I like the way you feel against me," Rami said.

Skye looked up. "Sorry, I missed some of that."

Rami repeated his words on his hands, and Skye bit his lip. "Will you touch them?"

"Yes," Skye said. But once again, instead of going for his cocks, Skye took him by the hips and applied pressure until Rami's knees bent. It took him a second to realize



Skye was guiding him down to the bed, but he sat quickly and spread his legs as Skye dropped to his knees.

‘Do you do this a lot? With clients?’

Skye considered the question. “Not like this,” he said aloud, pressing both hands to the tops of Rami’s thighs. He rubbed his thumbs along Rami’s sensitive skin. Sparks shot up his spine, making him want to moan and push into it. He was touch starved, he knew. He was so, so touch starved. “No one has ever been like you.”

‘One in five million,’ Rami signed, and Skye frowned.

“Sorry, I don’t...”

Rami spelled it for him slowly, watching his lips curl over each letter. ‘I’m rare.’

“Yes.” Skye pushed high on his knees and took his cheek against his palm as his other hand finally—finally—moved to where Rami wanted to be touched most. “You are so rare. And I am so lucky.”

Then he kissed him. His hand let Rami’s cheek go, drifting down with a touch of fingertips along his sternum, then his stomach. Before Rami could inhale, before he could kiss back, before he was even aware that seconds were passing, Skye had both cocks, one in each hand.

He held him still for a moment, then slowly began to stroke from root to tip, like he was learning the shape of them, the weight, the girth, the length. Then his grip tightened, and he kept squeezing until Rami felt a lightning bolt of ecstasy and his hips thrust forward.

“Yes,” Skye murmured against his mouth. “Yes. You like that, don’t you?”

Rami hummed, a high-pitched, needy sound, and he began to rock his hips in time with Skye's arms. He was too close.

'Please,' Rami signed.

Skye hummed that he understood, and he sped up. He kissed Rami deeper, the thrust of his tongue matching the rhythm of his hands. The room was filled with a soft fap fap fap , doubled with an echo as Skye paid equal attention to both cocks.

"Oh," Rami said. "Oh. It feels good. I like it. I want to orgasm."

Skye pulled back and looked at him. Rami didn't always avoid eye contact, and this was one of those moments. It felt too good, and Skye's gaze was almost like an embrace itself. Skye's mouth tipped up into a slight grin as he sped up even faster, and before Rami could beg for more, he was coming.

He fell backward, catching himself on his elbows as his hips thrust upward. Skye kept going until he'd milked both cocks of every drop. His gaze was on the liquid spill pooling on his belly, and then he let Rami go, dragging his fingers through the mess.

For a moment, Rami thought he might taste him, but instead, he wiped his hand on the bedspread before lifting all the way up and setting his knee on the mattress. "I want to come on you."

Rami nodded, his body still humming with pleasure and his need to see Skye let go almost frantic in his chest. He couldn't form words, and he couldn't lift his hands or he would fall, so he mouthed, 'Yes.'

Skye's eyes darkened, and he shifted up higher. His hand took his own cock—smaller than Rami's but thick and pretty, with a metal barbell glinting out of the tip. Rami had missed that before in the chaos of seeing him for the first time, but he had the

sudden urge to take it into his mouth.

He couldn't, of course. Not yet. His mouth was a virgin too, and he wasn't willing to give up the possibility for an auction. But he could fantasize as Skye grunted his way to completion.

Rami's fingers burned to touch, but he kept himself in the exact same position he'd fallen, watching with heavy-lidded eyes as Skye brought himself over the edge. He was beautiful all the time, but his expression when he let go was something else. Ethereal, almost. But it also seemed a little...trained.

He wondered if it was on purpose. He wondered if Skye had ever let go—let himself be raw with anyone before.

Skye's come hit Rami on the stomach just above where his limp cocks were resting, and when Skye was finished, Rami fell all the way back. His fingers drifted through the mess, gathering some on the tips, and he reached for his mouth.

Before he could take a taste, Skye grabbed him by the wrist and squeezed. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, but I can't let you."

Rami opened his eyes and blinked at him. 'Why?' he signed.

Skye's gaze dipped down. "We're as safe as we can be. We're tested monthly—sometimes more often, depending on if there's an issue with a client. We always wear protection, but there's also always a risk, and I'm not allowed to let you taste me like that. Not until I no longer work here and I know for sure I'm keeping you safe."

Rami felt a pang of disappointment in his chest. "So, will I never be allowed to suck you?"

Skye chuckled softly, and he dropped both hands on either side of Rami's head, straddling him. "You can suck me. You just can't taste me. Not yet."

But not forever. If this worked out, if this became something, there would be a day when he could. Rami supposed he owed Skye as much patience as he was asking for. And he was willing to give a little more than that too.

"Kissing though. I like the kissing. I like tasting your tongue."

Skye nodded. "I like it too." And then he showed him exactly how much.

When they pulled into his driveway, Rami was sure Skye would kiss him goodbye at the door and then leave. The date had gone strangely—not the way Rami expected, but partially the way he wanted. So he wasn't holding out hope for more than a quick goodbye.

But that wasn't what Skye gave him. Instead, he lingered when Rami put the code in to unlock the house, then leaned in when he opened the door. "Can I come in for a little while? I don't think I'm ready to let you go yet."

Rami's whole being brightened. He wanted that more than anything. He wanted Skye in his space, to leave the impression of him behind when he was gone.

"Yes. I can show you some stuff I'm working on. The house still doesn't feel like mine. I haven't really moved into many of the rooms, but I can show you where I stay."

Skye grabbed his hand and kissed his knuckles. "I'd really like that."

Rami led him into the back room his grandfather had converted into his studio and turned on the main lights. They were bright, but they were a soft yellow instead of

harsh white, and they illuminated all of Rami's half-done projects.

Some of them would be abandoned. Some would be finished soon. Some would take years. He never really felt pressure to work on the timeline of other people's expectations. It was also why he would never really be able to make a living on this alone.

He'd have to figure something else out at some point because he was pretty sure he didn't want to keep his channel up. But he never wanted his art to feel like work. He was afraid that if he did that, one day, it would start to drain him like everything else.

And sculpting was the last bit of his grandfather he had left that felt alive.

"I love this space," Skye said as he walked to the back wall. Rami had several pieces that were finished, fired, and waited to be painted and glazed. "Will you sell these?"

"I have a website," Rami said, hoping his voice carried.

It seemed to because Skye smiled. "You'll have to show me sometime." He took a bit longer, his fingers touching rough, dry clay, pressing into a couple of pieces that were still wet. Rami had the sudden urge to preserve his fingerprints, though he didn't say that aloud. That would be weird.

Wouldn't it?

Then Skye turned to face him. "What else is yours?"

The library had always been mostly his. His grandfather wasn't much of a reader, but when he realized Rami was, he'd set it up for him to have a safe space to be alone and unwind. Rami took Skye there next, waving his hand weakly at the stacks of books he'd never put back on the shelf.

Skye walked over and crouched down near one of the tables, staring at the titles. “Ancient Rome?”

“The Roman Empire,” Rami said. “It, uh...it’s a thing. Special interest,” he muttered.

Skye turned to face him. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, I didn’t catch that.”

Rami took a breath. It always felt so...clinical to say it that way. A special interest. Those were three words out of some WebMD article or a textbook on the symptoms of Autism. It was so much more than that.

Losing himself to history—painting a picture in his mind of what had come eons before him—it felt like being wrapped in euphoria. He could sit and read for hours and hours—for days, if he let himself. He could neglect eating and sleeping and taking a piss or a shower because what he was doing made him so, so happy.

He had to limit himself. It had been easier when he was with his grandfather. He could drag Rami away without making him feel judged. It was harder at home with his parents, who didn’t quite understand the way his brain worked.

They were never unkind. They were just sharp and confused, and it made Rami feel ashamed, even when they didn’t mean it that way. Now, he had only himself for when to draw the line, and he was his own worst enemy most days.

“Are you okay?” Skye crossed back over to him and put his hands on his hips. “Did I say something wrong?”

Rami shook his head. “My life is...small. And pathetic.”

“It’s neither of those things,” Skye said, “and I’m sorry if anyone ever made you feel like that was true.”

Rami had no idea what to say. The truth was, they were both right. To Rami, his life was perfect. To an outside observer, his life was a joke. He didn't mind being both men to strangers. But he wanted to be different in Skye's eyes.

"I don't have a lot to show you."

Skye smiled again. "This is enough for now. Thank you for this."

Rami bowed his head. "Thank you for this afternoon."

Taking him by the chin, Skye kissed him—soft, slow, chaste. A gift, Rami realized. He took a breath, then broke away and leaned his head on Skye's shoulder. "I want to see you again. I don't want to wait two weeks this time."

"Then we won't. My schedule can be hectic, but it gets quiet. And I know you probably have a filming schedule too."

Rami nodded and waited for Skye to look up at him. "I'll make time too. And, um." He hesitated, but he knew what he wanted to say. "You can watch. If you want."

Skye looked startled. "Are you sure? Sweetheart..."

"It might be nice knowing someone's watching that knows me. That...that knows I'm not just some freak showing off for money."

"Is that what you think people see?"

"Some people. It's okay," Rami said in a rush. "As long as they pay me, they can say whatever they want."

Skye burst into laughter and kissed him again. "You are perfect."

“No,” Rami said sternly.

Skye shrugged and tugged him as close as he could, bodies pressed together. He was still smiling. “Fine. You’re not perfect. But you’re perfect enough. Fair?”

Rami wouldn’t answer that because he didn’t believe it, but the fact that Skye did made him grin and cling on just a little tighter and a little longer before circumstance pulled them apart once more.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am*

Ten

Rami: I need you to do something.

Skye: Anything.

Rami: I need you to tell your friends that the channel is mine and ask them not to subscribe. I like the idea of you watching, but I think I need them to not watch. Do you think they'll agree?

Skye: Yes. Absolutely. But are you sure you want them to know?

Rami: If you trust them, I trust them. It's been bothering me.

Skye: Then I'll handle it now. I miss you.

Rami: It's weird, but I miss you too.

"Having a bad ear day, so I'm walking in!" Skye called as he pushed Avan's front door open. Avan was one of the few people who didn't mind Skye walking into his cottage without knocking. Mostly because he didn't usually stay there, so it wasn't really home for him.

Most of the guys had also given Skye carte blanche to walk into their cottages if the doors were closed since he couldn't hear them calling for him to come in. And luckily, there was nothing odd happening in Avan's living room.

At least, not in his view.

King was in Avan's massive, fluffy recliner, reading a book, his glasses perched on the end of his nose. Avan and Hen were on the sofa, feet in each other's laps, and the scent of orange oil in the air told Skye they were exchanging massages.

Skye was hoping Avan didn't have company, but he supposed his request applied to all the Sins at this point. He just didn't know how many of them were aware of Rami's video, but his job was to tell them all who he was and trust that they'd agree to his request.

"Hey, babe," Hen said. "Want a foot rub?"

Skye shook his head and walked over, dropping down to sit on the edge of the coffee table. "I can't stay. I just, uh...I have a favor."

"Sounds serious. But you know I'll do anything you ask," Hen said. King cleared his throat loudly, and Hen rolled his eyes. "Within reason."

Skye shot King a middle finger for even implying that any of the guys would touch Hen the way he touched him. "I'm sure whatever we say here is going to spread around like wildfire, but it's important that we try to keep this all within the Tower walls."

King covered his laugh with his hand, and Hen's eyes squinted. "Honey, you know how gossip is in this place."

Skye eyed Avan. "Mhm. I do. But I also trust all of you when it's this important. Anyway, so this is about..." He trailed off, not quite sure how to bring this up.

Hen frowned. "What's going on?"

Skye took a deep breath, then said, “I don’t know if Avan showed everyone here that FanCore channel with, ah...that one guy?—”

“Mm, I know who you’re talking about,” Hen singsonged. “Two-dicked D’arcy.”

Skye frowned, not sure he caught those words right. “D’arcy?”

“I like alliteration,” Hen said.

Skye scoffed and turned back to Avan. “I’m assuming you showed everyone, then. Do you, ah...do you subscribe to his channel?”

Avan pulled one foot away from Hen and sat up a little straighter, staring at him with a frown. “Why?”

“It...there’s...I have a complication.”

Avan blinked at him. “I don’t subscribe. One of my clients is obsessed with him, and he was telling me about it. I like interesting things, but it’s not my jam.”

That settled something in Skye he wasn’t expecting to be riled up. He turned to Hen. “You two?”

“King was disinterested, and you know me. There’s enough to play voyeur with here. I don’t need to pay extra.”

“Can we keep it that way?” Skye asked.

Avan’s gaze was sharp. “It’s him, isn’t it?”

Skye’s cheeks flushed, but he understood why Rami had asked him to do this. If he

got close enough to do things like jumping in the hot tub or taking his shirt off during a hot summer day in the courtyard, someone else would recognize the tattoo, and he knew Rami didn't want to have another moment full of fear and anxiety the way he had when Skye recognized it.

This was the only way to control how the Sins found out. And the only way to ensure they wouldn't tell anyone else.

"He wasn't going to tell me right away, but when we were fooling around, I saw his tattoo," Skye admitted. "He texted me this morning and asked me to tell you all that it's him, and if you're subscribers, could you not be anymore?"

Hen looked confused, and then his eyes brightened. "Wait? That hot-as-fuck man you had on your arm? The one with the smile that could put the literal sun to shame?"

Skye couldn't help a small laugh. "Yeah."

"Damn," Hen said, whistling. "Impressive. I get why his channel has six-figure subscribers."

Skye winced a little. "Yeah, but he's not like us. His relationship to his sex work is different, and he really, really doesn't want anyone to know his face. Especially with his family. He hasn't talked to me about them much, but I think they're pretty religious, and he's close to them. This whole thing could ruin him."

Avan's face softened. "Hey, I get that. Trust me. And I wouldn't say a word."

Skye rubbed the back of his neck. "Who else did you show the video to?"

"Just you three," Avan said. "And I didn't even really tell Hen or King. They walked up after you left, and the video was still on my phone."

So that was something. He didn't think the other guys would go looking even if they were curious, and it was nice to know that maybe a few of his brothers wouldn't know what his boyfriend's dicks looked like.

"Hey, babe," Hen said, reaching for his knee. "You know our lips are sealed, right? No one around here will ever put him at risk. And if you want me to handle this—like a company memo—I will. You know I can be discreet and threatening when I need to be."

"Of course I know," Skye said with a slight laugh. "And thank you. I might just take you up on that. This is a lot for him. Me knowing was almost too much, and I really...shit. I really like him."

There was a sudden large, powerful hand on his shoulder, and Skye looked up at King, who was hovering over him. "No one will fuck with him, Skye. If they do, send them my fuckin' way. You know I'm always itching to knock sense into anyone stepping out of line."

Skye grinned and gently leaned into King's space. He wasn't the most touchy-feely guy with anyone apart from Hen, but he was getting better at it now that he'd fallen in love. His edges had dulled since Hen had been working on him for the last couple of years, and Skye didn't mind at all.

"So, you and this guy?—"

"Rami," Skye said, trying to pronounce it right.

King nodded. "You two official yet?"

"Uh, not exactly. I don't want to jinx it," Skye said quickly before King could say anything else. "It's new. Very new."

“But you brought him here,” Hen pointed out. “That’s kind of big, isn’t it?”

Skye’s cheeks darkened. “Yeah. But he wanted to come over, and I wasn’t going to tell him no. I’d like to introduce him around too, but I think we’ll have to take that even slower. Maybe one person at a time.”

“Well, he knows me,” Avan said. “He recognized me from that one leak we had a few years back.”

King grunted a few curse words under his breath that Skye couldn’t quite make out, but he didn’t need to. The tone was plenty for him to understand he was still pissed. “If I ever get my hands on the fucker who tried to expose us?—”

“Enough,” Hen chastised. “No one needs to get worked up.” He turned to Skye. “Consider the situation handled. I’m y’all’s manager, after all. Let me manage it, okay?” He stretched his arms over his head, then reached for King. “Come on, baby. I’m all limber and relaxed. Let’s go take a nap.”

Skye was a thousand percent sure that a nap wasn’t an actual nap, but he appreciated Hen being discreet. Skye preferred a separation from all the sex stuff when he wasn’t on the clock. He leaned forward, kissing Hen’s cheek, then gave King’s arm a squeeze before taking the now empty spot on the couch and looking over at Avan.

Neither of them said a word until the front door opened and shut.

“So,” Avan said. “Is it going to be official?”

Skye passed a hand down his face. He didn’t know how to answer that. His gut told him yes. His gut told him that this was his forever person, and if he was careful and didn’t fuck it up entirely, he might actually have that happily ever after he’d been craving for so damn long.

But without actually having Rami speak or sign those words to him, they didn't feel like his to repeat. And he felt like he'd betrayed Rami's trust enough for one day.

"I'll keep you posted," he finally answered when Avan nudged him.

Avan nodded. "For what it's worth, I think he'll fit in here well."

Skye couldn't disagree. They were all misfits in some way—all different but all fitting together like a puzzle that would never look like anyone else's. It was why Skye was happy here. It was why he knew that even after he retired, these people would always, always be his family.

"Wipe that look off your face. I can't stand it," Avan complained.

Skye burst into laughter. 'Sorry,' he signed, his fist rubbing a circle around his chest. "Just don't hate me as much as you hate everyone else for it."

Avan scoffed, but he leaned over and shifted so he could drop his head to Skye's shoulder. "As long as you don't leave me behind. Pathetic and single."

"You'll never be pathetic," Skye told him, resting his cheek on Avan's hair. "And you know I'd never leave you behind."

Avan's silence spoke volumes. He had been left before—by family who moved away and hadn't ever looked back. By his husband who was taken before his time. By friends who couldn't handle Avan's grief.

He knew Avan had never quite recovered from all of it, and he knew abandonment was his best friend's worst fear. But Skye wouldn't ever let anything—not even the love of his life—come between him and these people.

He didn't think he'd have to worry about that with Rami though. The real trick would be convincing Rami that he fit in with all of them. That this could be his safe space too. But he had time for that later. He was in no rush.

He was going to take this slow and careful. For once in his life, he was going to do something right.

It was 7:00 p.m. The sun was just setting, and the sky was hazy with the fading dusk. Out of his bedroom window, Skye could make out a collection of the brighter stars through the canopy of trees that covered the Tower property.

There was also fog rolling in. He could smell it on the breeze and see it creeping like vining tendrils through the branches that were closer to the ground. It was his favorite kind of time, and if circumstances were different, he'd have taken his hearing aids off and gone for a long walk through the mist.

But tonight, he had other plans.

Climbing off his bed, he shut his blinds, then walked to his front and back doors to make sure they were locked. It was the property equivalent of putting a sock on the door handle, and that thought was a little embarrassing, but he was too wound up to actually care.

His laptop was waiting for him, his account freshly active, and he was currently in the queue waiting for the live to start. For Rami's live to start.

For DuoOphis to log in. He had no idea what the name meant, but somehow, he knew it was fitting for Rami.

On a whim, he picked up his phone and sent off a text, breaking his rule that he wasn't going to bother Rami right before a live.



Skye: I'm here. I'm watching.

Rami: I'm about to sign on. You're ManofExcess, aren't you?

Skye: Not very clever, am I?

Rami: I like it. I like that you're watching me. It makes me feel safe.

Skye hadn't expected that. He'd expected Rami to feel exposed or too seen or maybe that his space was being encroached upon. He hadn't ever considered his presence to be something like a ballast to another person. He knew his friends loved him, but he wasn't ever the one they went to when they needed peace or grounding.

His whole body went warm as he settled against his pillows and pulled his laptop onto his thighs. He was naked, his cock half-hard, but he had no idea how his body was going to react to this. He wanted to see it again, of course. He wanted to watch what Rami did—watch how he pleased himself.

Watch him be obedient to the highest bidder.

The screen flashed, then went black. Then, after a single breath, the camera came to life. It was dim, like it had been the first time Skye had seen it. This time, though, he recognized the bedroom. He knew how long the piece of art behind the frame had been hanging there. He knew the feel of the comforter, even if he hadn't been invited to lie on it yet.

And he knew what was above that gorgeous, smooth, perfectly sculpted torso that sat down on the edge of the bed. He knew the feel of those two cocks, which weren't hard yet but were starting to plump. He knew those fingertips and how they were smooth except when he came across bits of dried clay and calluses from working with his hands.

He knew the taste of that ink on Rami's hip, and the curve of his neck, and the lush push-pull of his kisses.

God, he was hard. He was trembling with need. He wanted to reach through the screen and pull Rami close, but he knew he couldn't.

A GIFT.

The words appeared on the screen, and then Rami's delicate hands lifted something so the camera could see it. It was a cock sleeve—opaque purple, the texture like jelly. Rami twisted and turned it in his hands.

WINNING BIDDER: CARL627.

The chat window on the side of the screen exploded as Rami touched the tip of his right cock with the sleeve. In the upper-right corner, the donation amounts began to climb.

NEXT WINNING BIDDER GETS TO CHOOSE A TOY FOR MY ASS.

Skye's entire body erupted into white-hot flames. Fuck. Fuck. The donations climbed higher. Four figures now. He had money. He had so much fucking money it was absurd. He could do this—except...was he allowed?

His gaze became transfixed on Rami, who poured lube into the sleeve, then fit it over his smaller cock. He began to fuck his hips into it, taking the other in his free hand. The rhythm was off-balance, the left taking it faster than the right.

Rami didn't say a word, but Skye could imagine his breath, his tiny grunts, his stuttered moans he was trying to hold back. Skye knew what he sounded like when he was holding on and when he let go. When he was uninhibited, unencumbered by the

weight of strangers watching him.

He moved to the donation box, and he typed in more money than he knew Rami would be happy with, but he had to do this. He had to stake his claim. He was playing by the rules, after all. And he wouldn't fight if Rami changed them after this, but he wanted to be part of it this time.

He couldn't help it.

The bidding ground to a halt. Rami's hands slowed, then stopped. Skye could see the line of tension in him. He'd seen. He knew .

Then his arms sped up again, his hips fucking forward, into the sleeve, into the circle of his hand. "Ah," Rami cried. "Ah, ah, please ," he whisper-gasped. Skye couldn't hear the words, but his auto-captions picked them up, laying them there, bare for the world to see.

The chat went wild again, everyone screaming in all caps that it was the first time they'd ever heard his raw voice. Skye had given that to him. He was sure of it. The donations remained the same: he was the winner.

Rami's body arched, the snakes on his hips stretching, elongating. Skye saw him shudder and knew he was moaning, biting back his cries. And then, he was coming.

HOLY FUCK THAT WAS SO FAST.

MORE. IT CAN'T BE OVER YET.

I CAN'T BELIEVE HOW HOT THIS WAS.

I BET HE'S GOING TO FUCK THE BIDDER.

## WHO EVEN IS THIS GUY?

On and on the chat went, and Skye was trying not to panic because although he was still achingly hard, his head was clearer, and he knew this might have crossed the line. He might have sabotaged his chance at happiness again because he was a mess, and with Rami, he couldn't let go of the feeling of utter and desperate possession.

His trembling hands reached for his phone.

Skye: I'm sorry.

There was no answer, of course. Rami sat there, his chest heaving as he recovered from his orgasm. Then he leaned forward to type. A moment went by, and then the donation box reset to zero. Was he canceling them all?

WINNER: MAN OF EXCESS. CHECK YOUR INBOX FOR ADDRESS AND INSTRUCTIONS.

NEW BID: TELL ME HOW TO COME. FORTY-FIVE SECONDS.

For a moment, Skye had no idea what that meant, but then the donation box began to blow up again. A hundred, five hundred, fifteen hundred—three thousand. He attempted to click on the box, but it was greyed out for him. Rami had banned him, but when he grabbed his phone and opened his bank account app, he saw the money had already transferred.

So maybe he hadn't broken everything. Maybe that was Rami setting a boundary the best he could while in the middle of his life. Skye could accept it. He would accept it. He would do anything Rami asked so long as he could have this moment, so long as he got to be the one who decided for Rami next.

Even if he was never able to do it again.

The winning bidder had Rami edging himself for five minutes on the clock. Skye came hard when it was over, crying into a pillow as he spilled all over himself. It had been a gorgeous thing to watch his lover fall apart. And it was infuriating because Skye wanted to be the one who brought him to orgasm.

His words.

His hands.

His toys.

His money.

He had no right to feel that way. No right to be so possessive and demanding. But it was what it was. He couldn't deny it. When the screen went black again, Skye sat, almost afraid to move as he waited for his phone to blow up. A minute passed, then two, then five.

His heart sank to his feet when there was no response to his text.

Fuck. Fuck—he couldn't let this happen. He couldn't let this one good thing slip away because of his moment of weakness.

He was still sticky with his own come and a little wild-looking, but he reached for his phone in a last vain attempt to get Rami to answer him when suddenly, his laptop flashed with an alert. Skye's eyes widened when he realized the FanCore site was sending him a message request from DuoOphis.

He could feel his heart beating in his ears as he accepted the call. Fuck—no, it was a

video request.

His fingers felt weak as he quickly clicked on the button to start up his camera, and a beat later, Rami's face was there.

"Hey." The auto-captions began to scroll. "I don't normally video chat the winning bidder."

Skye swallowed heavily, then hooked a finger over his ear and shook his head. 'No hearing aids. I have captions if you want to voice.'

Rami quickly raised his hands in reply. 'You won.'

Skye bit his lip. 'Sorry.'

Rami's gaze was more intense than usual. 'Are you sorry?'

Unable to help a laugh, Skye shrugged, and he said aloud, "I know I'm supposed to be, but no. I couldn't help it. I thought about some stranger sending you another toy—one that's going in your ass—and I snapped. It's probably not a good idea if I watch your lives."

Rami was still and silent for a long time. Then he signed, 'I wanted you to win. But I don't want you to spend that much money on me.'

Skye leaned toward the screen and gripped it on both sides. His voice felt thick against the back of his tongue. "I'm rich. I'm very rich. And maybe this makes what we have complicated, but the money I spent doesn't matter to me. You matter to me. Being able to be part of this matters to me."

Rami's gaze darted to the side, hovering there for a long, long beat. "Once per live.

You can only bid once per live.”

Skye’s eyes drank up the captions like they were a feast and he was a starving man.  
“Can I bid on anything?”

Rami looked at him sharply, then lifted his fist and signed, ‘Yes.’

Anything. He could bid on anything.

“What will you have on offer?”

Rami’s mouth twitched into a half smile. ‘Wait and see. Don’t be in a hurry next time. And don’t spend so much on a toy.’

Skye felt elation and something else—something a little dark and very powerful—settle in his chest right on top of his sternum. He rubbed it with the heel of his hand as he thought about the way Rami was looking at him right then.

A tease.

A challenge.

Fuck, he was falling in love.

“Were you thinking of me when you came?”

Rami’s smile widened. ‘Yes. The way you touched me. The way you kiss.’

‘I want to see you soon,’ Skye signed back.

‘Friday,’ Rami said. ‘I need to work on my sculptures, and I don’t want to be

distracted.’ He signed slowly enough for Skye to follow because it was obviously very important to him.

Skye held up a finger as he grabbed his phone and scrolled through his appointments. He had a late evening on Thursday, but Friday, he was free. Saturday and Sunday, he was booked. “The perfect day,” he said aloud as he looked up. That was just forty-eight hours from now.

He hated it, but he could wait that long to kiss Rami if he had to.

“Thank you for tonight,” Skye said.

Rami looked down, thick eyelashes fanning outward before he glanced up again. ‘Thank you,’ he signed with both hands. ‘I miss you.’

Skye sighed and wished he could reach through the computer screen and touch him. He’d wished that several times tonight, but this feeling was different. He didn’t want to fuck him. He didn’t want to tease him and torment him and make him beg for it. He just wanted to hold him.

It was the strangest juxtaposition, but something about it felt...right.

‘See you soon,’ he signed.

Rami nodded, then blew him a kiss and turned off the call before Skye could respond to him. He fought the urge to take a selfie with the three-fingered sign of words neither of them were ready for. Instead, he sent a single text before lying back down and turning off the light.

He got a buzzing reply not too long after, and it was with those words he allowed himself to relax back into his pillows and sleep.



Skye: Tonight meant everything. I hope you know whatever I'm free to give of myself is yours, sweetheart.

Rami: Yes. And whatever you want of me, take it. I'll never hold back.

### Eleven

Biting his lip, Skye scanned the shelves, and he wished for a moment that Rami was there with him to pick this out. But he also had a feeling Rami wouldn't have been into it. It was very likely he would have been overwhelmed by the selection—because there were so fucking many.

Skye had never been someone to frequent sex shops. They had pretty much every toy a person could think of on hand at the Tower, and it had never really been his thing. Not for him, anyway. He certainly didn't mind using them on a partner.

But considering he hadn't had one of those in a long—long—while, it hadn't really come up in this capacity.

“Are you still looking?”

Skye glanced over at Flint, who was staring at him, hands on his hips, brows high on his forehead. His voice was very audible over the low music and the fact that there was no one else in the store, which Skye appreciated. But it also meant that the two of them had become the sole focus of the man sitting behind the counter.

Not that he seemed like a bad guy. He'd given them both a quiet wave when they entered, and then he'd gone back to his very large book. He didn't look like a guy who would be working at a sex shop, but Skye also knew he was stereotyping, and that was wrong.

He'd been a frat boy once. He didn't look like the kind of guy who was going to

graduate and then become a Seven Deadly Sin-themed escort, so...

“Can you not rush me?” Skye asked, turning back to the shelf.

“I’m not trying to, but you know I fuckin’ hate shopping, and the fact that my brother dropped this on my lap is bullshit.” Flint had been tasked with placing a bulk order of replacement items for the Tower. Skye had been hoping it was going to take longer than two minutes.

“Why don’t you go find a coffee or something up the street. I want to take my time with this.”

“You think you’re going to get it wrong?” Flint asked, humor in his voice. When Skye looked at him, his smirk fell. “Oh, shit. You do think you’re going to get it wrong.”

‘I get everything wrong,’ Skye signed slowly.

It took Flint a second to understand what he was saying, but he stepped closer, closing the distance between them, and took Skye into a soft embrace. “Don’t overthink it. I haven’t met this guy, and I wouldn’t have known you were seeing someone if Hen hadn’t done his little PSA about the guy’s FanCore channel,” he added, and Skye knew he was hurt by that, “but if he’s got you this flustered, then I’m willing to bet he’s not the kind of guy who cares what it is. Just that it’s come from you.”

That might have been true for literally anything else, but Skye wasn’t in the position to tell Flint why this purchase was important. It wasn’t just the type of toy. It was also that it was Rami’s first. It was the first time he’d be putting something inside of himself and getting off like that.

And Skye was now a part of that. He wanted it to be good.

“I just need a little more time,” Skye said very softly.

Flint nodded and kissed his temple. “I’ll go grab us both drinks. I’ll even sit down and answer a few emails. Sound fair?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Skye offered a weak smile, and Flint rolled his eyes with a grin, shaking his head before he let Skye go and headed out.

Skye couldn’t hear the bell, but he could feel the slight pressure change when the door opened and shut, and it was only after he was sure Flint was gone that he turned back to the shelf and began to peruse.

He was now overwhelmed with choice. He wished he’d paid better attention to his clients over the years to see what some of them liked best. There might have been a damn consensus, and he’d missed it because he’d been too focused on other things.

“Shit,” he whispered to himself.

“Hey there.”

Skye almost jumped out of his skin, turning to see the guy from behind the counter. He was startled to see he was a wheelchair user, but that only lasted a second. He was very used to seeing Stone jet around on his.

“Christ, you scared the crap out of me.”

The guy let out a soft laugh as his hands squeezed over his wheels. “Sorry. I tend to creep up on people. My chair’s really quiet.”

“And I’m deaf,” Skye said, tapping his hearing aids, “so I suck at noticing anyway.”

The guy’s grin got wider, and he offered his hand. “I’m Pierce. I run this place.”

“Literally?”

“Literally. I own it. As a matter of fact, I have full ownership as of two days ago when my divorce papers were signed.” Pierce’s jaw snapped shut, and he ran all ten fingers through his short, dark hair. “Sorry, way too much information.”

“It’s cool. Sometimes shit’s hard, and you need to tell a stranger who isn’t invested, right?”

Pierce’s face softened. “You get it.”

“I do. And I’m Skye,” he said when Pierce offered his hand again. “The man having an existential crisis over anal toys in your very neatly put-together aisle.”

Pierce’s grin widened. “Can I help?”

“I don’t know,” he confessed. “I’m buying this for a friend.”

“Oh. For a friend,” the guy said.

Skye flushed and laughed. “Not like that. I mean literally for a friend. He’s never used anything like this before, and he’s never done any kind of anal play. I want something that won’t take too much adjusting to.”

“Hmm.” Pierce rocked his chair back a little, and his eyes scanned the shelf. “Are we talking plug, beads, probes, vibes? Dildo?”

That was the problem. Too many options, and Rami hadn't given him any stipulations. He won the bid, so the choice was his. He swallowed heavily, trying not to think about the fact that sometime after Friday, Rami would use it. And if it was good, it would be thanks to Skye.

But if it was bad...it would be all Skye's fault.

"You look panicked. Is this a friend friend or a sex friend?"

"Both," Skye said and signed at the same time. "It's a new thing. No labels yet."

"Got it. So this is potentially a huge deal." Pierce rocked back again, then grabbed his wheels and paced up and down in front of the next rack over. "Will you be participating in this play?"

Skye bit his lip and shrugged. Maybe. Hopefully. Probably not the first time on camera, but after...there was a good chance. "I hope so."

Pierce nodded, and then he pushed his chair to the wall, picked up a long stick with big pincers like a claw machine, and grabbed a box from a shelf even Skye would have struggled to reach on his tiptoes.

It fell into Pierce's lap with a dull thud, and he put the stick back before wheeling to Skye's side. "I've found that the first time you go there, something more realistic tends to feel best."

Skye took the box from the shop owner and turned it in his hands. The box was discreet, but the description said it was a soft, hyper-realistic silicone dildo. "Can I look?"

"Go nuts," Pierce said. "But if you tear the plastic, you buy it."

Skye laughed as he pried the top off. “Noted.” Beneath the cover, nestled in what looked like black velvet, was a surprisingly small, thin dildo with a suction cup at the base. It was peach-flesh colored, a little veiny, with a thick foreskin beneath the molded head.

It looked nothing like his own dick, which was fatter, longer, and pierced, but it wasn’t bad.

“Decent star rating?” Skye asked as he replaced the box top.

“My hus—my ex,” Pierce corrected quickly, “loved it. Even after being together for years, it was his favorite. I don’t want to get too TMI with a total stranger?—”

“Go for it. Trust me when I say I’m surrounded by sex talk more than I’m not,” Skye said without giving himself away.

Pierce smiled almost sadly. “I was injured during our engagement party. I was standing on a table giving my speech when some jackass pushed me off toward the pool. I hit the deck instead of the water first.”

“Shit,” Skye whispered.

“Yeah. The rescue efforts to get me out of the pool pretty much sealed the deal with my spine. It was a huge blow when we were told that without a literal miracle from God, I wasn’t going to get feeling back below here.” He set his hand just above his belly button. “I thought things were going to fall apart, but in the end, we were able to get really creative. Half the products in here were designed by him.”

Skye suddenly felt all wrong taking this toy.

Pierce seemed to notice because he quickly shook his head, chuckling. “They’re not

modeled after our dicks or anything like that. My ex is a lot of things—a jackass, a cheater, a self-centered mama’s boy who can’t say no to anyone except me”—the bitterness was thick in his voice—“but he was also a design genius. But of everything we ever used, we always had one of these in the nightstand.”

Skye ran his thumbs over the box. It was obvious Pierce was carrying more pain than any man should, so if he was recommending this to Skye, it was probably worth it. “It’s good for solo and partner play?”

Pierce nodded. “He could use the suction cup on my chair and ride it and me. And it also fits comfortably in a belt if you want a more realistic fuck.”

There were no bells and whistles. No movement. No vibrations. No fancy colors or weird shapes. It was just...a mostly hard, average-sized dick. And Skye realized then it was perfect.

“I’ll take it.”

“I doubt you’ll regret it,” Pierce said, jerking his chin toward the register before gripping his wheels and giving himself a hard push. “Is there anything else you want to grab before you check out?”

He thought about it for a quick second, but he hadn’t been given permission to get anything else, and he didn’t want to push it with Rami. “I think this is a good start. Flint already placed his order, so?—”

“Oh shit, wait,” Pierce said, spinning his chair once he was behind the counter. “You two were together?”

Skye frowned. “Uh, yeah. Why? Did he say something rude? He’s a nice guy. He just kind of comes off like a murder suspect sometimes.”



Pierce burst into laughter as he took the box from Skye. “No. He and his brother have been clients of the shop for years. I’ve just never met any of the other—y’all call yourselves Sins, right?”

Skye’s cheeks pinked, and he ducked his head as he nodded. “Yeah.”

“Sorry—” But Pierce’s next words were spoken too softly for Skye to catch them.

“Missed what you said.”

Pierce cleared his throat. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. My mouth runs ahead of my brain sometimes, and?—”

“No, no. You didn’t. You’ve been amazing,” Skye told him. “I, uh...I’m not the biggest fan of being recognized for what I do. My job is great, but people are...well. Not.”

“I get that,” Pierce said, all humor gone from his tone.

It wasn’t a surprise that he did. Norwich might have legalized sex work, but the residents had turned it into their main topic to vote on every four years. Luckily, most of the wealthy citizens didn’t want to lose access to their secret habits, so the laws never passed. But it always left Skye and the others on edge whenever another voting year was upon them.

“There’s a reason my ex and I never bothered to live in the city limits,” Pierce said softly as he took Skye’s card and swiped it. He handed it back and put the box in an opaque purple bag with a bow printed on the front. “It’s not worth the bullshit and the judgment.”

Skye nodded and clutched the bag tightly in his hand. “I appreciate you. Do you,

ah...are you a client, or...?"

Pierce's cheeks flushed. "Stone's been offering me a friends discount for years, but it wasn't something my ex was into. I never thought—" He stopped and bit his lip. "I might check it out. I probably won't choose you though—no offense."

Skye burst into laughter. "Nah. Once you see how the sausage fits in its everyday casing, it's not as sexy."

Pierce groaned at the bad joke, but he was grinning. "Maybe I'll see you around though?"

"I'd definitely like that. And thanks again for this." He gave the bag a pat.

"If it's a miss, come back, and I'll hook you up with something else. Friends discount goes both ways."

Skye felt warmth in his stomach, and on a whim, he reached into his wallet and pulled out one of his cards. Snagging a pen from the side of the register, he scribbled his number on the back. "If you ever want a friendly, mostly deaf ear for some trauma dumping, I'd be happy to get coffee sometime."

"Yeah?" Pierce looked unsure, but Skye nodded firmly.

"Definitely. I know how hard it is out here doing the kind of stuff we do. There are good eggs, but they're surrounded by a lot of rotten."

"You're a good dude. I hope you and your friend work out."

Skye felt a rush of something—yearning, maybe—and he held on to it. "I do too. Thanks again, and maybe we'll talk soon."

“You opened this floodgate, man. Enjoy my texts,” Pierce warned, waving the card.

A small part of Skye said that he should be worried, but a bigger part of him had a feeling that Pierce was going to be important in the future. And considering he didn’t make friends easily, he tended to cling on to people when he found them.

He was lighter in his steps and in his chest as he left the shop, and there really was renewed hope settling on his shoulders as he left to find Flint.

Not only had Skye not been given any instructions on what to buy, but he also hadn’t been given any instructions on how to deliver the gift. The chat in the live said he would receive an email, but that hadn’t happened apart from his bid receipt. He’d gotten the video chat, but Rami hadn’t mentioned it on there, nor had he said anything over text.

So, Skye showed up with the box wrapped tightly in the plastic bag, tucked under his arm, and his heart in his throat. He’d taken his hearing aids out—something he had a feeling would become a habit since he could exist in Rami’s space without having to struggle with hearing or the fatigue that came with his brain trying to understand fading sounds around him.

Rami was slowly, bit by bit, becoming more of a safe space for him, and he wasn’t sure what to do with that. Mostly because if he lost it, it would be gutting. He wasn’t really a catastrophizer by nature, but he also hadn’t really had this much to lose before.

He shifted from one foot to the other before knocking on the door, and then he waited with his breath tight in his chest. Long moments went by, and he fought the urge to turn and leave. He didn’t want to look like a fool, standing out there for long minutes like some chump who didn’t get the message.

But he also knew that was his intrusive thoughts talking. Rami had texted him forty-five minutes ago, saying he couldn't wait to see him. Maybe he needed to ring the bell.

His finger was just reaching when the door flew open, and Rami grabbed him by the wrist. "No!" He was able to make out Rami's voice through the fog of not wearing his hearing aids. Skye's brows flew up as Rami quickly let him go and took a step back. 'Sorry, sorry,' he signed with a frantic fist. His hands flew through the rest of the signs so quickly Skye couldn't keep up.

"Hey," he said, holding up his palms.

Rami's own hands stilled.

'I can't follow that fast.'

Rami's cheeks darkened. 'The doorbell. I hate it. I hate it.' He signed it twice with emphasis on his face. 'I was in my art room and tripped over one of my buckets.'

It was then Skye noticed that Rami had a small gash just above his left temple, heading into his hairline. "You're bleeding," he said aloud.

Rami slapped his hand to his cut. "Oh."

Skye quickly hustled him inside, dropping the bag on the foyer table. "Where's your first aid kit?"

It was dark, so if Rami spoke or signed, Skye didn't catch it, but it didn't matter. He led the way down the dimly lit hallway, through a set of heavy french doors that opened to a tidy bedroom that Skye immediately recognized from the live, and then into the en suite bathroom.

The lights were soft yellow and not too bright, which was kind on his eyes, and Skye took a breath before guiding Rami to the toilet. “First aid?”

‘Under,’ Rami signed, then pointed to the sink.

Skye dropped to his knees and found the first aid kit. Some of the stuff looked very out of date, but he managed to get a couple of gauze pads, some antiseptic wipes, and a bandage.

Rami looked a little sheepish as he sat there, so Skye set the stuff on the edge of the sink, then cradled his cheeks and leaned in. “Kiss?” he murmured softly.

Rami nodded, and Skye closed the distance between them. He kept it light but hoped that Rami could still feel how happy Skye was to see him again.

“Better?” he asked when he pulled away.

Rami smiled. ‘Yes,’ he signed. ‘Thank you.’

Skye kissed him one last time before getting to work, and within a couple of minutes, his wound was dressed, and all the bandage wrappers were discarded in the bin. Silence settled between them, and Skye realized how awkward the moment had been.

‘I didn’t mean to force you,’ he signed slowly.

Rami’s eyes widened. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘I dragged you in here,’ Skye clarified. ‘I didn’t even say hello.’

Rami blinked, and then he burst into laughter and leaned forward until Skye was forced to take him into his arms. He didn’t say anything, didn’t sign anything. He just

rested there in Skye's embrace for a long, long moment.

When he finally pulled back, he stood and offered his hands to Skye, who heaved himself up off the ground. 'I cooked you dinner.'

That wasn't what Skye was expecting, but he was grateful for something that felt a little normal. He let Rami take him by the hand, leading him through parts of the house he hadn't seen yet. They passed a little archway that opened up to a kitchen with the same yellow lights.

"It's nice in here," Skye said aloud.

Rami turned his head, frowning. 'Don't understand.'

"The lights." Skye gestured upward. "It's not like most kitchens."

'That-that,' Rami signed. 'When I was little, I had a hard time with bright lights. They hurt my head. My grandfather installed these so I didn't get headaches when I stayed with him.'

It took a lot of context for Skye to understand what Rami was saying, and he felt a surge of frustration because he wanted to be better at this. He knew every time he gave up and put his hearing aids on, it was only going to take him longer in his fluency, but tonight, he wanted to understand all of it.

He needed to understand all of it.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his hearing aid case, stopping only when Rami grabbed his wrist and squeezed.

'I can sign slower.'

Skye smiled and shook his head. “It won’t help. I never use it at home, so it’s not sticking, and I want to understand everything you say to me right now. I want to know you.”

Rami bit his lip, then nodded. ‘I understand. Put them on. We can practice later.’

Skye did, and while he didn’t enjoy the way his head flooded with noise after an already long day, being able to hear Rami’s voice more clearly soothed that ache. “Say something.”

“Hi,” Rami said.

Skye laughed and tugged him close. “I don’t mind being deaf. People never believe me when I say that. But I do enjoy your voice a lot.”

Rami hummed softly and pushed up onto his toes to steal a kiss. “I like yours. And I like your hands when you sign. I like everything about you.”

Skye closed his eyes and basked in those words before letting him go. “Can I help set the table?”

Rami shook his head. “It’s set. I don’t know if you’re going to like what I made. I’m only good at cooking Lebanese food. Well, I can cook eggs pretty well. I really like breakfast eggs. But we didn’t eat anything else growing up, and I thought it was normal until I moved out. I’m sorry if you think it’s weird.”

Skye grabbed Rami by the waist and tugged him away from the counter. “I like all kinds of food. I’m really excited to try yours.”

“You’re not lying to me,” Rami said. It wasn’t a question.

Skye shook his head. “No. This is part of you. I want to know it.”

Rami licked his lips, then gestured for Skye to take a seat at the table, and he did. There were plates and serving spoons but no utensils. There was a plate of bread—large rounds, thicker than pita, and covered in a very strong, fragrant layer of herbs.

His mouth watered.

“My friends call it finger foods,” Rami said as he set three dishes down on the table. “It made sense to me because we don’t have to use forks.” He settled in the chair beside Skye and began to dish out portions without explaining what they were.

Skye supposed he could ask, but he found it easier to just copy what Rami was doing. He tore the bread, swiping it through something that looked like ricotta cheese covered in olive oil, but it definitely didn’t taste like it. It had a tang of yogurt to it, sitting heavy on the sides of his tongue. With the bread, it was amazing.

He recognized hummus, and there were slices of pickled lemon on his plate, along with spicy and very fragrant meatballs, which he began to devour after his first bite. He caught Rami watching him, his smile growing every time Skye swallowed down a mouthful.

“You like it?”

“Love it,” Skye said. His nerves made him full quicker than usual, and he sat back in his chair, watching Rami finish off his plate. The only thing that was a bit much was the lemons, but it brought him almost irrational joy watching Rami devour them like they were candy. I could love you , he thought to himself. I could do this every day and every night if you let me .



He kept those words to himself. It was far too soon.

Instead, he said, “I brought the toy.”

Rami choked on a bit of bread and hummus, and he gulped down water and wiped his fingers on his napkin before he turned to face Skye. “Oh?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to blurt that out in the middle of dinner. It just, uh...felt like there was no good time, and I didn’t know if it was the right thing to do.”

Rami licked his lips and pushed his plate toward the center of the table. “I don’t have a live tonight.”

“Yeah, I know.” Skye bit his lip, then said what he’d been worried about all afternoon. “I wanted to bring it over early because...what if you hate it?”

Rami blinked at him. “You chose it. I won’t hate it.”

“What if you don’t get enjoyment out of being penetrated,” Skye clarified. “What if it’s too much? Or it hurts? I don’t want to ruin the video for you.”

Rami’s brows furrowed, and then he nodded. “I understand. But it’s the same risk with anything. My viewers are paying to see my honest reactions. Some of them are...different. I think they might like it if it doesn’t feel good.”

Skye felt something twist in his chest. He never shamed kinks. Ever. And he probably wouldn’t have cared if people were getting off on that sort of thing if it wasn’t Rami on the other side of the camera. He took in a shaking breath and let it out.

“I won’t tell you how to run your show. But...” He hesitated, then said, “Could I be there when you do it? I won’t be on film or anything. But I’d like to be with you

after. In case it's too much."

Rami's eyes went bright. "Oh. You'd...want that?"

"Yes, but I will fully accept if you say no. I swear," Skye said. "I won't stand in your way."

Rami shook his head, then cleared his throat loudly. "Yes. I want that. I really want that."

Skye couldn't help himself—he gripped Rami around the back of the neck and urged him into a kiss. "Okay. And before your next live, can we do other things together?"

"Yes," Rami said. "Tonight. Can you stay with me?"

Skye went hot all over, his dick thickening behind his jeans. He shifted in his chair and picked up Rami's hands, kissing over both knuckles. "If you want me."

"I want you," Rami said, almost too fast.

Skye grinned and leaned in again. "Then I'm all yours."

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am*

Twelve

Anxiety was an old friend for Rami. The world was loud for him—and overwhelming. It was often too bright and brash and sharp. There were days it was easier to bear, and it often gave people the impression that it wasn't as bad on those days. They didn't understand that sometimes he just had the ability to manage it better than others.

But it was always the same.

Nothing was ever quiet. Or soft. And rarely was the world kind.

He used to viciously envy Ahmed for his deafness. The idea that he didn't have to deal with all the noise was Rami's dream. He would miss music, of course. Music had been important to him growing up. Being away from Beirut, their parents had attempted to instill a sense of home in their children through food and song and language—and Rami appreciated it for what it was.

When he pulled up a sense memory of his childhood, it was the sound of his dad's records, and the smell of his mom's cooking, and the sound of laughter and chatter in Arabic that was kinder on his tongue than English ever had been.

But outside the walls of his house, very few things brought comfort. And nothing ever brought stillness.

Until he met Skye. Rami had been trying to work through how the man made him feel since he'd tumbled into his yard, and it was tonight that he realized for the first

time ever, he felt safe with another person. At least, another person who wasn't related to him.

Skye's presence alone calmed his heart. His laugh calmed his breathing. His smile made his skin heat and his fingers tingle. The way he touched Rami made him want to melt bonelessly into the bed and let Skye love all over him for hours and hours.

He might have asked for that, too, if he didn't know that it was an irrational request, and Skye had better things to do than spoil Rami's mind, heart, and body all day. But it was a nice thought.

This was enough though. It was the look in Skye's eyes when he said he wanted to be there for Rami after the live that made him feel like a bunch of Skye's keys fit perfectly into Rami's locks. Skye was protective, and maybe if the request had come from someone else, Rami might have wanted to run.

But with Skye, he wanted to submit.

He felt settled for the first time since leaving home and going quiet on his family so he could fix the financial problem his grandfather had left behind.

For a while, he hadn't been sure how he felt about Skye jumping into the bids. The money had been too much for such a small thing. His last toy bid had only gone for a thousand dollars. Skye's had been just short of five figures, and Rami was still reeling. He knew Skye was wealthy—he just hadn't realized how wealthy.

The thought made him nervous inside, but he was pinning that for later because he wanted to enjoy his lover's body. He wanted to push boundaries right to the edge of breaking them. He wanted to toy with letting Skye have the few forbidden things Rami had told himself he would not be giving up without a price because it would feel that much better.

That much more satisfying.

And he was starting to realize that in spite of the fact that he did see all of this as a job, and it was easy to emotionally disconnect from it all, he wasn't sure he could let another person touch him. It was a problem he'd need to solve.

Just...not today. Not tonight.

Not now .

“You okay?” Skye asked quietly.

Rami turned just as they passed the threshold of the bedroom and glanced at Skye's ears to make sure he was still wearing his hearing aids before he answered aloud. “Yes.”

“You seem a little...anxious?” Skye's voice rose at the end like he was asking a question, and Rami realized then his lover was unsure.

It was a strange thought because Rami knew there was no way Skye was this hesitant or shy with his clients. At least, not unless they were paying him to be. He was probably many things for pay—a myriad of personalities he could turn off and on.

Rami wished he could see them all. He wished he could see Skye's switch flipped. To see what kind of man he became when he was acting as Gluttony. It made his cocks harden and throb in his jeans, and he rubbed his palm over them.

Skye sucked in a breath, his pupils dilating, and he licked his lips. “Are you turned on?”

Rami nodded his fist.

Skye shut the door behind him, then closed the distance between them, taking Rami by the hips. “What has you worked up?”

“You,” Rami said. His voice was a barely there breath, the way it always was when he was overwhelmed. He raised a hand and switched to slow sign. ‘You.’

Skye’s gaze flickered down, then back up. “Just me?”

Rami wanted to tell him, but he didn’t think Skye had the lexicon to understand it all in ASL, and frankly, he wanted to explain the things he was thinking when they both had a clear head. So he nodded.

It wasn’t a lie, anyway. Just being near Skye got him worked up in ways he never thought he could be.

Letting out a soft hum, Skye moved one hand to Rami’s jaw, tilting his head up to kiss him. His other hand rucked up Rami’s shirt, fingers seeking and finding bare skin. The touch was perfect—not too heavy but not painfully light.

It was delicate, tender, careful.

He kissed Rami like every pulse of his tongue was a gift. He swallowed down his moans, breathed in his breath, body surging into him and moving in time like Rami was a rhythm only Skye could hear.

“Bed,” Skye murmured when the kiss broke. He backed Rami toward it, and he knew exactly how many steps were between his door and the place where he slept, so he was prepared when the backs of his knees hit the mattress and he collapsed onto the covers.

It was unmade because the only time he tidied his sleeping space was when he was

filming. Skye didn't seem to mind or notice as he bracketed Rami's head, hands pressed into the bed, looking down at him with a hungry expression.

"Tell me what we can do," Skye said.

Rami swallowed heavily, then lifted his hands because there was no way he was going to be able to speak. 'Kissing.'

Skye chuckled softly and dropped down to press his lips to Rami's jaw. "Got that one down. Next?"

'Touch me all over.'

Skye lifted one hand and dragged his palm from Rami's throat to his groin. His cocks jumped, and he wished he was naked. "Next."

'Your mouth.' Rami took Skye's wrist and dragged it a little lower until he was palming his cocks. 'Here.'

Skye shuddered and nodded. "Yes."

"I...I can't," Rami stuttered aloud, then pushed Skye backward a little more so he had free signing space. 'I can't do it to you. Not yet.'

Skye's face darkened. "Is that something you plan to put in the auction?"

Rami shrugged. 'Maybe. I've never...' He shrugged and tapped his mouth. 'Not like this.'

"Am I allowed to bid?"

Rami felt white-hot heat rushing through him, and he sat up on his elbows, looking at Skye. He gave himself a moment to find his words. “Are you allowed to do things with me on camera?”

Skye frowned. It wasn’t the expression Rami wanted to see, but he knew it was a question he had to ask. They hadn’t talked much about it, but Skye had rules. Of course he had rules. Every facet of his life revolved around him being a Sin—even if it was just background noise, it was always there.

“I can’t show my face,” Skye told him. “No one can know it’s me.”

‘Is that too much?’

Skye met his gaze, and for once in his life—for a brief moment—Rami couldn’t look away. “Not for you. Nothing’s ever too much when it comes to you.”

Rami shuddered, then grabbed Skye by the face and dragged him into a frantic kiss. Skye met his energy, tongue thick, wet, hot, pulsing in and out of his mouth, sliding along his own. He pinned Rami by the hips and rocked against him.

In spite of wanting something else, Rami felt his orgasm cresting, rising unexpectedly at the base of his spine and rushing through his limbs. His vision whited out, and he moaned loudly as he began to meet Skye thrust for thrust.

Skye’s body was trembling with need, trembling maybe because he was holding back. But Rami’s fingers drifted under his shirt, nails dragging along his skin, and Skye let out a sharp cry. Just as Rami felt his cocks exploding in his boxers, he felt Skye’s whole body shudder to a halt. His moans stopped, his breathing stilled.

Then, he let out a chest-deep groan, and Rami knew then that he’d come. His own orgasm felt almost like an afterthought in the wake of Skye’s. It was like Rami could



feel the echo of his lover's passion in the space between them.

Skye's body went lax, pinning Rami back to the mattress, and the weight was the most comfortable Rami had been in a long, long time.

"Am I crushing you?" Skye asked after a beat.

Rami laughed. "No. I like it."

Skye let a little more weight fall on him. It was harder to breathe, but it was still nice. Then, Skye turned his face and kissed Rami along his jaw. "I haven't done that in a long time. Since I was sixteen, maybe. God."

"Bad?" Rami asked.

Skye pulled back, his face full of surprise. "No. Amazing . The best. I'm so fucking wild about you, sweetheart. I mean, seriously, I'm kind of starting to think I'm obsessed."

Rami flushed and turned his gaze away. The words should have scared him, but coming from Skye, they were different. Social propriety told Rami this was too fast.

But his gut disagreed, and so did his heart.

This felt far too real. Too right .

He let himself bask for a bit, but eventually, the sensation of drying come in his boxers was too much for him to handle. He eased Skye to the side, then sat up. "I have spare clothes," he said, pitching his voice to the tone he knew Skye could hear best. "Do you want to shower with me?"

Skye blinked at him, then smiled. “Yeah. Can I wash you?”

“Yes,” Rami said. He pushed up off the bed and felt Skye’s gaze almost like a physical touch as he moved around his room. He collected a couple of pairs of sweats—the ones he liked least for Skye since he figured Skye wouldn’t mind as much—and two T-shirts. Turning, he smiled at Skye, who was on his side, head propped up on his elbow, and he held out his hand. “Yalla, habibi.”

Skye’s grin spread as he took Rami’s hand and climbed to his feet. Instead of letting Rami pull him toward the bathroom, he tugged him closer and traced a touch around his mouth. “Say that again.”

Rami did.

“Beautiful,” Skye murmured. “Your language is beautiful on your lips.”

Rami shuddered, then kissed him again before picking up his hands and kissing his palms. “Your language is beautiful here.”

Skye’s cheeks and ears went red. He looked for a moment like he wanted to argue, but then he reached up and plucked his hearing aids out of his ears. ‘Thank you,’ he signed.

Rami nodded, then tugged him into the bathroom for what he hoped would be the best shower of his life.

“Can I ask about your family?” Skye said when they were back in bed. Rami had set up a tea tray and a couple of towels to protect the sheet from crumbs, and they were finishing off the man’oushe and labneh, and he liked that Skye didn’t like the lemons because they were his favorite, and he hated sharing.

There were only a few Arab grocery stores within a reasonable distance, so Rami tended to hoard what he couldn't make on his own.

He nibbled on some of the rind as he nodded. 'Anything,' he signed, though Skye had put his hearing aids back in.

Skye's brows furrowed like he was considering his words. He peeled off a strip of bread and dipped it into the yogurt and olive oil. Rami felt something like peace in his chest when he realized Skye hadn't been lying about liking his food.

Rami had only brought a few friends home over the course of his life, and all of them had acted like he was serving them alien cuisine. One friend—the one his mother had personally kicked out—had taken a single bite of dolma and actually spit it on the table before yelling at Rami for serving him something “so disgusting.”

Rami had been mortified at both his friend and his mother and had refused to go to school for a week. He was convinced that Andrew was going to tell everyone what happened and the whole school was going to hate him.

He was also convinced that his mother was going to refuse to let him bring anyone else to his house after that.

Neither of those things had been true, but the trauma of that fear had stuck with him.

“So, you don't speak with your parents?—”

“Wait. I speak with my parents,” Rami said with a frown. He didn't mean to interrupt, but he couldn't help it. “Did I say I didn't?”

“You said you were the family disappointment.”

Rami snorted and set his half-eaten lemon down and reached for his water. “Everyone who didn’t become a doctor or a lawyer is the family disappointment.” His fingers began to tingle, so he gave in to his urge to stim. He tapped each one to his thumb, then wiggled them in the air, watching them dance. “It’s a stereotype, but it’s accurate in my family. In a lot of families. My sister is a psychiatrist. They didn’t love that at first, but she got her MD, so they were happy. And my brother got his doctoral in audiology. My grandfather was a lawyer, but he retired when he moved here, and my mom blamed him for me wanting to be an artist. But she knows it’s just...” He paused and tapped his temple.

Skye reached over the tea tray and brushed a curl away from his ear. “But this is a very good mind.”

Rami bit his lip and shrugged. “I know. And they think so too, even if they still wish I did something different with my life. I love my parents. They’re very good to me, and I think I’m making them really sad by not speaking to them right now.”

“Is it because of your channel?”

Rami looked up, feeling a sense of panic in his chest. “Yes. They can never find out. I can’t...it would...” He hummed in distress.

Skye quickly moved the tray from between them and shifted over so he could curl around Rami. “Hey. They’re not going to find out. You’re careful, right? And it’s not very likely your brother or sister watch FanCore, is it?”

“No,” Rami whispered, then shook his head so Skye would understand. He cleared his throat and felt himself relax. “Sorry. No. They don’t even know I have a tattoo. You’re the only one.”

Skye smiled and touched his jaw. “I like that being our secret.”

Rami nodded and took a few more deep breaths. “My parents wanted us all to be successful because they love us. My mom and dad were afraid me being Autistic would make my life hard. And being gay would make it harder. Being an artist...life would be broke if I wasn’t careful. And they weren’t wrong.”

Skye nodded, brushing a touch up and down his arm. “I have the typical American stereotype family. Roof over my head, food on the table, a car at sixteen, and an eviction notice the moment I graduated high school. If I ever needed money, my parents would send it, but they don’t call to ask me how I am. They don’t invite me over for Christmas. I haven’t seen them in years, and I think it’s just because they’re so busy with their own lives after kids they forgot to remember me.”

Rami felt his whole body jolt. He’d heard about that happening, but he couldn’t imagine that being real. How did someone just throw their kid out at eighteen? Their brains weren’t even fully formed. They were children.

And how did they never call? Not even once ?

“Do they not love you?”

Skye sighed and shrugged. “They do. As best they can, I suppose. We don’t talk, and I like it that way. I have my own family now at the Tower. I have unconditional love I didn’t get growing up.”

“The Sins,” Rami said.

Skye nodded and wrapped his arms tighter around Rami. It was obvious he carried pain from that, even as he tried to say it didn’t matter, so Rami hugged him back. He felt an ache inside that Skye hadn’t known the kind of love he felt growing up. He hadn’t realized saying he was the family disappointment to Skye meant something wholly and completely different.

That letting his parents feel disappointment in his choices hadn't come at the price of their love and support. That they could see the world entirely differently, but that didn't matter because at the end of the day, Rami was their son, and he was important.

"You can meet them someday," Rami said after a long beat.

Skye pulled back. "Your parents?"

"And my brother and sister. And her husband. I also have three nieces," Rami said.

Skye laughed, but the sound wasn't mocking. It was surprise, and hope, and maybe a little joy. "Will they like me?"

"I don't know," Rami answered honestly. "But they'll be kind as long as you don't spit food on the table."

"Is that...a thing that happened?" Skye asked with a frown.

Rami covered his face and groaned. "Just once. But I trust you. They speak mostly Arabic at home, and they don't sign, so I'll interpret if you get lost. But they mean well. It's a lot sometimes. Loud and bright and..." He trailed off. "And it's also very good."

"You miss them," Skye said softly.

Rami's eyes cut downward. "When I make enough money, things can go back to normal."

Skye touched his chin and lifted his gaze. "If you let me help, I can get you there faster. I don't want to take over, sweetheart, and I don't want to make money a thing

between us. But there are things about you that I want as my own. And if doing that means I can also get you back to the life you left behind, I'd like to."

"I know," Rami said. "I'm...I'm not going to say no. Is that weird?"

"Only as weird as me asking," Skye told him. "But we have this too, don't we?" He picked Rami's hand up and kissed his knuckles. "The moments after."

"Yes," Rami said, and he realized just how right Skye was. He could have both. There could be two worlds, split down the middle, and Skye could be in both of them. One didn't have to affect the other. "You might go broke bidding."

Skye grinned and rolled over, pinning Rami to the pillows. "I don't care. I'm going to be working my job for a long time. I can replenish whatever I spend on you."

"Kiss me," Rami murmured. He wasn't sure if Skye heard him or read his lips, but it didn't matter because Skye understood. And he leaned in with a grin and did exactly as Rami asked.

### Thirteen

He stared down at the toy on his lap. It was still in the packaging. He was going to be using it in a few hours, so it needed to be sterilized and examined. When the user won the bid to send him the sleeve, Rami sat with it for hours, playing with it in his hands, studying the weight and feel of it so nothing would feel like a surprise.

It took him weeks to start another live to use it. Weeks, in fact, which led to the one after he met Skye and everything changed. He wondered if there would ever be another user besides Skye who won bids like this.

Surely not for the physical things he was promising. The first cock he sucked would be Skye's. The first tongue inside him would be Skye's. And maybe the first fingers and first dick. He shuddered at the thought as he finally tore open the plastic and lifted the dildo into his hands.

It wasn't what he was expecting. He thought Skye would go with something complicated, full of buttons and lights and vibrations in weird colors. The flesh of it was the same color as Skye's skin—though his cock was redder and darker when it was hard.

But there were no bells and whistles. Just thick, heavy silicone and a suction cup at the base that easily popped off with a push and twist.

He stared at his fingers holding it, at the contrast of his skin, and he thought about the way it looked when he touched his lover. He thought about the feel of Skye's warmth beneath his palms and the way he shuddered like he wanted to be touched by Rami in



spite of being touched all the time by other people.

He had a way of making Rami feel like he was the only man in the world, and that was as terrifying as it was thrilling. It was like a landslide—crashing through his life without warning or any way to stop it. It was destructive and yet oddly beautiful. Whatever was going to come after, Rami knew he would be changed, and for the first time ever, that didn't make him want to turn and run.

Standing up, he moved to the kitchen, where he had his pot ready for the toys he was sent. It was a strange thought. Never in a million years had he thought he would be doing this in his grandfather's house.

"Astaghfar," he muttered quietly, though it wasn't so much Allah's forgiveness that he wanted than his grandfather's. "Jiddi," he murmured aloud, "would you want this for me right now if you were here?"

The answer was no. His grandfather wouldn't. He knew that for a fact. But then again, if he'd been alive, Rami wouldn't be in this position.

But he'd never really doubted this decision. He'd been given his body for a reason, and maybe this wasn't his purpose in life, but it gave him an edge over others that drew an audience. It provided him what he needed.

He couldn't really find the sin in that. At least not the social-moral sin. Religion had always baffled him, so he never took that into account. Of course, some days, he wished he could be the person his parents wanted. That he could be a good Muslim boy who liked girls growing up and had a plain job that earned a paycheck. He could have a happy, quiet marriage with kids and a house and not fuss about every single tiny thing that crossed his path.

It would be less exhausting to not fight his brain every waking moment. To not be

consumed when things simply felt wrong or when his routine was disturbed.

But that was in direct opposition to the fact that in spite of it being harder, Rami still liked himself. He liked being weird. He liked making art and being able to get lost in his thoughts like he was slipping into another universe.

He wouldn't trade it for anything most days.

And now that he'd found a man who liked him as he was, he was feeling even less keen to be anything other than the collection of atoms the universe had gathered together to make him who he was.

He jumped half a foot when his phone started to buzz, and for a moment, he grinned, thinking it would be Skye. But it wasn't. Ahmed was sending him a FaceTime request. His stomach sank. It felt like another ambush, but he was feeling so alone and cut off from his family it was impossible to ignore him.

A chance to see one of them, even for a minute?

He swiped the button to answer, then turned the screen away from the stove so Ahmed couldn't accidentally catch a glimpse of what was in the boiling water. His brother's face appeared on his screen, his office wall visible in the background.

'Hi.'

Ahmed gave him the brotherly glare of disapproval. 'Is that all you have to say?'

'What else do people say when they answer a call?'

"Rami," Ahmed said aloud. That was one of only a few words his brother ever vocalized.

With a sigh, he leaned against the counter. ‘Why are you calling?’

‘Because Mama cried,’ Ahmed signed, his brows dipped low.

Rami felt his guts clench. ‘About me?’

‘She thinks she and Baba said something wrong and hurt you. Yara said she tried to call you, but you wouldn’t answer.’

Rami tried to remember the last time his sister called. Weeks ago. Maybe a month. He’d been in the middle of a live, so he hadn’t seen it until after it was over, and he was too overwhelmed to talk to her once it was done.

By the time he remembered, it was too late, and he didn’t want to be forced to lie. This was hard enough.

‘No one upset me. I’m busy.’

‘With your art?’ Ahmed asked. His hands were full of sarcasm, and that hurt. He knew his siblings loved him—and so did his parents—but there would always be a slight disdain whenever they spoke about his job. It must have shown on his face, though, because Ahmed’s face fell. ‘I’m sorry.’

Rami shook his head. ‘I can’t talk long. I have to go.’

‘Please,’ Ahmed signed quickly. ‘Just call them. Please. If they didn’t upset you?—’

‘I can’t.’ He swallowed heavily. ‘I’m trying to work on some stuff at the house, and I’m...’ He hesitated. He couldn’t tell the truth, but he also didn’t want to lie any more than he already had. ‘I’m seeing someone.’

Ahmed's eyes went wide. 'A man?'

Rami nodded. He was gay. He'd come out years ago, so of course it was a man. He braced himself.

'Do you think they'll be angry? They know you don't date women,' Ahmed signed quickly.

Rami's gaze darted away as he gathered his breath. 'I want to bring him home to meet everyone. He's deaf.'

Ahmed brightened and leaned in closer to his screen. 'Deaf? Like me?'

Rami shook his head. 'He's losing his hearing. Learning ASL. He's not very good. He prefers talking, but he's trying.'

Ahmed still looked thrilled. 'I want to meet him.'

'Soon,' Rami promised. That was vague enough, wasn't it? Soon could be any number of days, or weeks, or months. 'I need more time.'

'Can I tell them that you're not going to call soon?'

Rami bit his lip, and after a long beat, he nodded. 'I promise I will though.' More ambiguity, but he could live with that over a complete untruth.

Ahmed nodded. 'Call me more, at least. Please. Let me know you're okay.'

Rami managed a smile. 'I'm okay. I'm happy.'

Cocking his head to the side, his brother studied him, then looked satisfied. 'Okay.'

But if he hurts you, the whole family will come for him. Make sure he knows that.'

Rami felt a soft, aching pulse in his chest. He missed them. Ah, he missed them so much. He couldn't keep this up for long. He needed to do more and quickly. He had to get his bills paid and end this so he could have his house, and get his family back to the way it was, and maybe carve out a space for Skye too.

"Rami," Ahmed said aloud. Rami looked at him. 'You know that, right? We won't let anyone hurt you.'

'I know. Thank you.' And he meant that.

They hung up quickly after that, and Rami felt a small pulse of regret for not asking how his brother was doing, but he didn't want the call to get any longer. He didn't want Ahmed to ask more questions that Rami couldn't give the answers to.

So he'd live with this feeling in his chest for a little while longer. It wasn't ideal, but for the first time, it felt like there was some promise that everything was going to work out.

"Did you try it?"

Rami startled when warm arms wrapped around his waist. He'd been so lost in his thoughts he hadn't heard Skye come up behind him. Taking a breath, he leaned back into his lover's arms and followed his gaze to the bed, where the dildo package was still lying spread out on the covers.

"No. I boiled it."

"You—oh." Skye laughed and kissed him on the side of the neck. "Good call. I always forget that's a thing."

Rami quickly turned to look at him. “You don’t sterilize?”

Skye’s grin lit up his face, and he kissed Rami again like he couldn’t help it. “We have someone do that for us, sweetheart.”

“Very spoiled,” Rami murmured.

Skye laughed again and tilted Rami’s chin to the side so he could kiss his lips. “Mm. I suppose I am. In a lot more ways now than I was before.”

It took Rami a second to realize what he was implying, and when he did, his body jolted. “I...you think I spoil you?”

“Very much.” Skye’s face was full of the blunt honesty Rami preferred, and he wasn’t quite sure what to do with that admission.

He licked his lips, then muttered, “Thank you,” before breaking away.

Skye let him go, and Rami could feel his eyes on him as he began to clear up the trash. He shoved everything into the little bin beside his bed, then carefully tugged the sheets and comforter into their correct positions. He fluffed the pillows, then grabbed his laptop and attached the webcam to the top before positioning it on his desk.

He knew the setup by heart, but it felt strange to be watched this time. He was self-conscious of every move and was doing his best not to second-guess what he’d been doing for a while now. Skye wasn’t there to judge him.

Skye was there to watch him and then to bring him back down to earth when it was all over.

“Am I making you uncomfortable?” Skye asked once Rami was done.

He was standing in the middle of the room, letting himself work through his stims, his body relaxing a fraction with each sway of his arms.

“No,” he said. “I always get anxious before a live.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. I can’t understand you when you’re moving your head like that.”

Rami turned and didn’t want to stop stimming, so he raised his hands instead and repeated himself in sign as he continued to move.

“Got it. Is there anything I can do?”

‘No,’ Rami signed. Then he stopped. It always felt weird when he went still after so much movement. It was like his body had been buzzing, and now, it was completely silent. He took a breath, then walked over and stood in front of Skye. “I want you to bid on me.”

Skye blinked at him. “Bid on you?”

Rami bowed his head and let out a trembling breath. “I know I have no right to ask?—”

“Sweetheart,” Skye said, touching Rami’s chin and drawing his gaze up. “You have every right to ask me anything you want. You’re my boyf—uh. We’re...we have a thing.”

“Boyfriend,” Rami said.

Skye swallowed heavily. “We’ve only been on two official dates.”

“Three. I count you coming over here as three.”

Skye rolled his eyes and grinned. “Fine. Three. We’ve only been on three dates.”

Rami wrung his hands in front of his chest, feeling a little distressed. “I don’t understand. Is there...is there a rule I don’t know about? Is there a time limit we have to reach before we can be boyfriends? I’m sorry it’s so confusing for me. I’ve never done this, and I don’t want to break any rules, but?—”

“Wait.” Skye reached out and took him by the hips. “I’m sorry. We don’t have to follow rules or some timeline. We feel how we feel. I just didn’t want you to rush into anything you’re not ready for.”

“If you don’t want to date other people, and I don’t want to date other people, why wouldn’t I be ready?”

Skye’s smile widened. “When you put it that way, I sound like a fool, don’t I?”

“Never,” Rami whispered, then signed it so he didn’t miss the word.

Skye closed his eyes in a slow blink, then reached up and curled his hands around the sides of Rami’s jaw. “Be my boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

Skye kissed him long, slow, and careful. Not enough to get his cocks hard, but enough to spark the heat that would soon become an inferno. “Okay, boyfriend. You can ask me for anything you want.”

Rami liked that word. A lot. It made him curl his toes into the carpet, and he let out a happy hum. “Boyfriend.”



“Again.”

Rami’s smile made the word sound strange with his lips stretched, but he said it anyway. “Boyfriend.”

Skye nodded. “What do you want me to bid on?”

“Everything,” Rami said. He licked his lips and glanced around. “I want to be done with this. I miss my family, and I want to be with you. If—if you like watching me, I could do stuff for you. But just you. When this is all over, I want to get back to my art, and I want to stop worrying that the county is going to come take the house.”

“And you won’t just take money from me, will you?”

Rami clenched his jaw and shook his head. “Not yet.”

“Not yet,” Skye repeated. He looked thoughtful. “You know about history, right?”

“A lot about history,” Rami said.

“Art history.”

Rami felt anxiety crawl up his spine along with joy because he loved—loved—talking about art history. He loved losing himself in the words, sharing every single fact he knew. But that was the fastest way to drive people away from him.

He swallowed heavily. “Probably too much.”

“I doubt it could ever be too much,” Skye said softly. “But you know about patrons, obviously.”

“Renaissance artists had them. Actually, a lot of artists...well, a lot of professions had them. There’s a long history behind it.” He clamped his jaw shut quickly, but Skye just swooped down and kissed him.

“Right. Sometimes it was business. Sometimes patrons were rich old men who didn’t have the talent they wanted, so they became obsessed with people of a lower class who did.”

“Yes,” Rami said. There was more to it than that, but he liked that Skye knew even that much.

“I’d wager that sometimes—maybe not often, but every now and again—there was an income or class disparity, but the two of them fell in love despite that. And one took care of the other.”

“Like a modern-day stay-at-home spouse,” Rami said.

Skye let out a trembling breath. “Mm. Or a partner who adores their significant other and wants to do everything in his power to give him what he can so he can follow his dreams.”

“I understand what you’re trying to say,” Rami told him. “I...I want to finish this. If I give up now, it’ll feel like the sacrifices I made were for nothing. And I don’t mind the idea of people watching me as long as you are too.”

Skye sucked in a breath and nodded. “I will be.”

“But I want you to be the one to bid tonight. I want you to win the bid. Please.”

“I can win the bid,” Skye vowed.

“Even if it’s more than?—”

“I don’t care how much it is,” Skye interrupted him. “If it’s more than you need, you can take me out to dinner.”

Rami burst into a fit of laughter, burying the sound against Skye’s front. “Yeah, okay.”

“Repeat?”

Rami lifted his head and repeated himself through his smile.

Skye’s grin matched his own. “What am I bidding on next?”

“Tonight,” Rami said. “While I’m using your toy, you have to be in the other room. It’ll be for the person to choose how I come. Any way they want me to.” Rami cupped Skye’s half-hard cock through his pants and rubbed. “Any way they fantasize about.”

“Shit.”

“If you don’t want?—”

“I want,” Skye said in a rush, cutting him off. “Sweetheart, I really, really want.”

Rami swallowed thickly, both of his cocks now hard and throbbing. “The live after that will be to fuck me. I need you to win that too.”

“Consider it done,” Skye vowed. “And then it’ll be over?”

“Yes.”

With Skye's money, Rami was already close. With the way his viewers would drive up the other bids, he would meet his goal and then some. He'd be okay, exactly like he wanted. Only better, because it would be Skye. Because he'd get to keep this after it was all over.

Skye tugged him close again, leaning in, and they kissed until Rami's alarm went off. He broke off reluctantly, then took a step back. "I have to start the live."

"And I have to start my laptop because I will be damned—in the literal sense—if I let anyone else get to choose anything else for you."

"I like that," Rami told him.

Skye gripped him by the chin—hard, possessive, and perfect. "So do I. Have fun with that tonight, sweetheart. But remember while you're on the video, however good it feels on your own, I'm going to make it feel even better after."

Rami's whole body shook with a tremor. "I like you." I love you . Those were the words he wanted to say, but as much as Skye told him they were doing this on their own terms, he was going to wait for that. He needed to be sure—to know it wasn't just because Skye was the first person who was good to him.

He had enough already. He could be patient for that—and for everything else that was to come.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am*

Fourteen

Skye was set up in the living room on the sofa with the blinds closed and most of the lights off. He was too far away to hear the noises coming from Rami's bedroom, even with his hearing aids all the way up and the background filter turned on. But that was fine.

He had a view of his lover on the screen, and that was enough.

Skye had no idea what Rami was planning to do with the toy. He hadn't asked. Rami asked him to set up his laptop and log in to the live so he could bid, and that's exactly what he'd done. All of this was a surprise. All of this was...

Hell, it was perfect.

Rami was sitting on a folding chair, legs spread, both cocks hard and thick. His thighs were trembling, and although Skye couldn't hear anything after turning his speakers all the way down, he knew his beloved was gasping and moaning as he slowly lowered himself on the dildo.

He'd stuck it to the seat of the chair, and it had taken him a full four minutes and nineteen seconds to take it down to the hilt. Skye had almost come twice, able to keep himself from shooting off only because he had practice doing it. But he wanted to wait. He wanted to hold back because after the live was over, Skye had plans.

Big ones.

His cock jumped against his thigh as he thought about being able to take Rami in his arms and slowly pump the toy in and out of him as he played with his cocks. Fuck.

He shuddered, keeping his eye on the screen because Rami leaned over, and Skye knew he was typing. Then, text appeared on the screen:

BIDDING FOR YOUR CHOICE: HOW DO I MAKE MYSELF COME NEXT?  
YOU CHOOSE ANYTHING. NO RESTRICTIONS

The bid count shot up faster than Skye could get his fingers to move over his trackpad. There was no point in putting in a number now. He was going to blow them out of the water, but he wanted to wait. He wanted to see how high he could get Rami's count before he put in his own. He wanted Rami to understand how much he was desired by total strangers—how much they all thought he was worth.

His gaze remained fixed on the timer as it counted down. Rami began to fuck the dildo harder, and Skye recognized the line of tension in his body. He was afraid Skye was going to miss it. That he wasn't going to bid enough. That he was going to have to give this up for someone he didn't know.

Skye would never let that happen.

At forty-five seconds to go, the bidding ground to a halt at seven thousand dollars. Skye knew it made him some kind of asshole that it was chump change to him, but he wasn't doing this to show off. He was doing this to take care of the man he was pretty sure was the love of his life.

It was time.

He wasn't going to risk playing games, so he started his own bid at ten thousand, but the number didn't move.

Shit. Someone had bid higher.

He put in fifteen, and the bid changed with ten seconds on the clock.

Holding his breath, he typed twenty into the little box, poised to hit Send in case the person vying for his beloved decided to try again...

And then the timer ended, and he got the notification that he was the winner. His name showed up on the screen, and he could see Rami's hands shaking as he grabbed himself and finished himself off for the audience.

Skye knew the live would go on a bit longer, but that was enough for now. He exited out of the site, closed his screen, then tiptoed down the hall, hoping to God he was quiet enough so the camera didn't pick him up.

He stood a few feet from the door, watching the glow from the laptop screen and the ring light flicker beneath it. His mind played a thousand different scenarios in his head. He was hard, but the feeling of being turned on was starting to wane. He knew in that moment he'd give Rami anything he asked for, but a piece of him was hoping his lover would just want to be held.

They could play with the toy tomorrow or the day after. Any day because this was one thing ticked off his list now. One thing that belonged to Skye from here on out.

His breath caught in his chest when he saw the lights dim, and a beat later, the yellowish overhead light in the room came on. That was his signal. He opened the door very slowly and saw Rami standing in front of the closed laptop, his bare ass exposed, perfect, round, and lush.

Skye cleared his throat, and Rami didn't startle, which meant he was already fully aware of his presence. He stared an extra few indulgent seconds. Rami had lube

smear along the crack of his ass, the light catching it just right. His hands were loose at his sides, though his fingers were as restless as ever with his stimming.

Skye wished he could see his face. "Tell me what you need."

"I—" Rami went quiet.

"Anything, sweetheart. Anything at all."

Very, very slowly, Rami turned the upper half of his body, twisting just enough for Skye to see his profile and make out most of his lips. He gestured to the chair where the dildo was still stuck to the seat. "Can we not tonight?"

"Of course."

"Did you come?"

Skye bowed his head and shook it. "No. But I don't need to."

"Skye—"

His body finally snapped into action. He closed the distance between them and curled his body around Rami's, chest to his lover's back. His arms wrapped around his waist, lifting one hand to drag a careful touch through the coarse hair on his belly.

"I don't need it," Skye assured him.

"You wanted to...to use it on me after I was done here."

"I wanted to be with you. I wanted to make sure that you felt good in case the whole thing with the toy went bad. I don't need to come. I do that for my job. The only thing



that matters is you.”

Rami swallowed heavily. “Are you sure?”

Skye glanced over at the chair, the dildo still shining with lube. It looked odd then—alien. Skye turned his gaze away and kissed Rami on the side of the neck. “All I need is to be here so you don’t have to be alone after all that. It was your first time.”

Rami swallowed thickly. “It was different than the other things I’ve done.”

“I know,” Skye whispered. He gently tugged Rami toward the bed, pulling back the covers and mussing them the way he knew Rami liked. He caught a smile on his lover’s face—sort of surprised and yet also resigned. “Lie down. I’m going to get something to clean you up with.”

“I...oh. Do I need that?”

“You have come on your thighs, and lube can feel kind of gross when it dries. Trust me, yes?”

“Yes,” Rami murmured as he settled into the sheets.

In the bathroom, it only took Skye a second to find a washcloth, and the water didn’t take long to heat up. He added a little soap, then let out a happy noise when he found some witch hazel under the sink. It was still in date, so he soaked another cloth with it, then made his way back to the bed.

Rami wasn’t under the covers, so Skye used the soapy cloth to clean his thighs and his cocks. They twitched a little as he mopped up the last traces of what he’d spilled, and then he carefully eased Rami’s left knee toward his chest.

“Hold for me. Just like that,” Skye told him.

Rami’s eyes squeezed shut as Skye cleaned off his hole, then took the witch hazel cloth and pressed it against him. Rami hissed and squirmed. “Feels...weird.”

“Painful?”

“N-no. Yes. I can’t tell if it’s pain or not.” Rami took a slow breath, in and out. “It’s sore though.”

“This is witch hazel. It’ll help,” Skye promised. He held it there a moment longer, then dropped both cloths on the floor in front of the nightstand and crawled over Rami’s body. It was easy to settle in beside him. Curling into his side felt like coming home.

Rami let out a lungful of air before turning into Skye and hooking a leg up over his hip. “Is this okay?”

“Yes. Anything is okay,” Skye told him.

Long, silent moments passed as Skye just held him, and bit by bit, he felt the tension leaving his body. After a while, Rami’s breathing deepened and grew more even, and Skye thought he might have been asleep.

Then he spoke.

“That was harder than I expected. It was...good. Very good. It felt...I don’t know. Different than I expected it to.”

“Good?”

“Very,” Rami said, but there was hesitation in his voice. “But it was also lonely.”

That’s what Skye had been afraid of. “I should have figured out how to stay close while I bid.”

Rami quickly shook his head and held tighter. “It was better that you didn’t. Safer,” he added. “I don’t want to get caught rigging the system.”

Skye went to argue that he wasn’t rigging the system. Skye was bidding fair and square. Anyone could outbid him if they had the money and if they were quick enough. But he also knew that he had privilege most people didn’t.

“If I lose, what will you do?” Skye asked him.

Rami pulled back and met his gaze. “Cancel all the bids and claim it was a glitch. I hate lying, but I think I’d hate someone else touching me more now that I have you. I know it’s not fair.”

“It is what it is. You’re only taking bid money from me. People are getting exactly what they pay for otherwise.”

“I still feel guilty,” Rami admitted.

“That’s okay too. I think guilt is easier to bear than whatever you’ll feel if you let someone else win.”

Rami shuddered hard and held him tighter. “Yes.” Then, he gave a jaw-cracking yawn, and his body went a little more boneless. “M’tired, I think.”

Skye kissed the top of his head. “Let me take my hearing aids out, and you can hit the lights. You need rest, and I need to spend a few hours holding you. I’ll make you

breakfast in the morning.”

“Let me cook for you,” Rami murmured softly as he loosened his grip so Skye could take his hands back.

Skye grinned at him as he reached for his hearing aids. “Whatever you want.”

‘You,’ Rami signed after Skye pulled them out. He took them from Skye’s hand and set them on the nightstand. The lights went out after, and Skye ignored the pulse of anxiety he always felt when his world went both dark and silent.

Then, a hand slipped around his wrist, and his fingers were guided to Rami’s chest.

He pressed down until Skye’s hand went flat over his beating heart. It was to that exact rhythm that Skye found himself drifting into one of the most peaceful sleeps he’d had in many, many years.

Skye woke a little disoriented and confused. He was in bed, but it wasn’t his bed. The smells weren’t the same, the sheets were softer than he used, and the pillow was all wrong. It took his brain far too long to catch up to the events of the night before.

He was at Rami’s. He’d stayed over and held him until they both fell asleep.

He felt a pang of regret in his stomach when he realized he was in bed alone. He’d wanted to wake up to Rami’s face. He wanted to kiss him hello. Instead, he reached out and touched the indent beside him, which was now cold.

Sitting up slowly, Skye let himself adjust to the world. His vertigo in the mornings usually took him out at the knees. His tinnitus was screaming like a billion locusts in his head, and he reached for his hearing aids, popping them in. It didn’t erase the buzzing, but it allowed the ambient noise in the room to become loud enough that it

all blended together.

He wondered if it would be like that when he lost most of his hearing. Would the screaming persist when he couldn't hear enough to equalize the never-ending ringing? That scared him more than silence.

But he didn't want to think about that now.

Swinging his legs over the bed, he stood and took a few wobbly steps toward the bathroom. By the time he was done with his morning piss, the world was facing the right way up, and he washed his hands and face before venturing out.

He could smell coffee somewhere, which was a good sign that Rami hadn't run from however he was feeling the night before. Skye kept his steps slow but louder as he made his way into the kitchen, and he smiled to himself when he saw Rami at the stove, his head bobbing, massive headphones over his ears.

Whatever he was listening to had his hips shaking, and Skye almost gave in to the urge to rush over and take him in his arms. But he didn't want to scare him. He reached for the light switch instead and flicked it on and off. The sun was bright enough that it wasn't super effective, but Rami turned his head at the flicker and smiled widely when he saw Skye.

He was dressed now in low-slung sweats and a thin T-shirt, and he had fresh specks of clay on his arms. He'd obviously been up for hours working, which settled something restless in Skye's chest.

'Morning,' he signed.

'Hi,' Skye signed back. 'What are you listening to?'

Rami waved him off. ‘Arab pop music,’ he spelled. ‘My dad’s favorite.’

Skye walked over and pulled Rami close, kissing him softly on the corner of his mouth. ‘Can I hear?’

Rami pulled the headphones off and winced before handing them over. ‘You probably won’t like it.’

Skye eased them over his ears. Headphones weren’t easy for him anymore. They never fit properly over his hearing aids, and as it was, he struggled to understand lyrics he didn’t already know. But he supposed it wouldn’t have mattered anyway since he didn’t speak a word of Arabic.

When the foam settled on the sides of his head, he was surprised at how much sound could pick up almost immediately. It was a lively beat with heavy drums and rapid strings. The person singing had a low, melodic voice, which, in spite of not being able to hear it well, made him smile.

He bobbed his head in time with the melody and felt a little rush in his chest when Rami’s mouth opened on a laugh.

‘You like it?’

‘Yes,’ Skye signed back. Fist-kiss . The look Rami gave him of surprise and joy made Skye wonder how many people were shitty about what parts of his culture he’d shared. He seemed convinced that at every turn, Skye was going to hate his food, or the words he used, or his music.

He understood. He’d seen it enough times and heard plenty of his clients speaking about it since he was sort of a priest of sin, taking his vow of confidentiality. But it hadn’t hit home like this outside of the Sins, and it felt even more profound with

Rami because he knew then he was falling in love with him...if he wasn't in love already. He wanted to wrap around him and protect him from feeling the pain of the world.

No matter how irrational the thought was.

'Thank you,' he signed, pulling the headphones off. It took him a moment to readjust to the quiet kitchen as Rami set them aside. "You can listen. I don't mind. We can sign."

'We can sign,' Rami repeated. 'But I was only trying to keep myself distracted so I didn't wake you.'

Skye grabbed him and pulled him close, kissing his neck. "I wish you would have. How long have you been up?"

Rami's cheeks darkened as he glanced away. "A little while."

"What does that mean," Skye pressed.

Rami let out a sigh, his shoulders rising and falling almost dramatically with the force of it. "I don't sleep well. I never have. I can only get a few hours at a time, and then my body gets restless. My parents tried everything to get me to sleep—medication, therapy, meditation—but I think we all gave up on a normal schedule by the time I was a senior on high school."

Skye realized this was a tender point for him too. He cupped Rami's jaw. "I wasn't judging. I just wanted to make sure it wasn't me keeping you awake."

Rami didn't look entirely convinced, but he nodded with the smallest smile, and Skye couldn't help but think it was just for him. That it was a smile only a few people had

ever seen. “Breakfast is almost ready. Do you get hungry in the mornings?”

“Eh, but I usually eat because I like to go on a run.” Rami pulled a face, and Skye burst into laughter. “Yeah, you’re going to get along with a few of the guys really well. The only one who runs as much as I do is Stone, and even he’s been slowing on that lately.”

Rami scoffed and turned back toward the stove. “I don’t like the way it makes me feel. I only like breathing hard for one reason.”

Skye lit up, and he reached out, curving his palms over Rami’s ass. “Can I take a guess at what that is?”

Rami looked over his shoulder. Skye had been half expecting a serious, unsexy answer, but Rami gave him a coy grin. “I bet you’d get it right.”

Skye’s heart beat a little faster as he dragged his hands up toward Rami’s waist and tugged him backward against his body again. He dipped his head and kissed his neck. “I bet I would. And I’ll skip my run this morning. I didn’t bring my shoes or my jogging clothes.”

“Next time, you can. I don’t mind. I like working in the morning, and as much as I like having you here too, I don’t...I’d...if it’s okay with you?”

“Hey,” Skye interrupted after Rami began to stammer, “you can do whatever you need to do. I’m happy to hang around.”

“Yeah?”

Skye kissed his cheek before letting him go. “Yes. Now. About that breakfast.”



It ended up being more food Rami had grown up with. Baked eggs in tomatoes with more spices than Skye could name and more chewy flatbread with the yogurt, oil, and spices he'd been served before. There was also some haphazardly chopped fruit that Rami stared at as though it were full of poison and a silver carafe of coffee that his lover set in the middle of the table.

“Do...have...?” Rami asked as he sat.

Skye missed most of the sentence with Rami's head tilted down and voice too soft, and this time, he couldn't fill in the blanks with context. He always—always—hated asking people to repeat themselves. Nearly everyone got a look on their faces that made his stomach ache, like he was the worst burden for not being able to catch the words.

But Rami never made him feel that way.

“Sorry, sweetheart. I missed that.”

‘Caffeine,’ Rami spelled slowly on his fingers. ‘Do you have that in the morning? Coffee? Tea?’

The fact that Rami always switched to sign whenever Skye got lost instead of repeating himself ad nauseum did something to Skye's insides. He felt safe and...and he felt okay.

He hid the smile he wanted to plaster across his face and settled for a smaller grin. ‘Love coffee.’ He went with the fist-kiss sign to emphasize how much he relied on it.

Rami's eyes glinted as he pushed the carafe closer, and he kept his face up this time when he spoke. “I don't like it.”

Skye only just heard the words, and as much as he enjoyed sign—and as much as he was enjoying it even more now with Rami, who so effortlessly slipped into the language—he also really liked the sound of Rami’s voice. Picking up his plate, he moved two chairs closer.

“Is this okay?”

‘To hear me?’ Rami signed.

Skye nodded his fist, then grabbed the carafe and began to pour as he switched to English. “I like your voice in the morning. It’s kind of hoarse and thick.”

Rami’s brows furrowed, but he didn’t look insulted. Maybe just a bit confused. Skye had a feeling he wasn’t used to compliments like that. “Why do you like that?”

Skye shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s...” He struggled to find the right words, but then he thought of something August always said that fit. “A friend of mine calls it a happy brain scratch.”

Rami’s eyes went wide, and he nodded. “Yes. I...yes. I have that with a lot of things. You have that with me?”

Skye reached over and cupped his face, running his thumb over Rami’s lower lip. “Yeah, baby. I do.”

Rami closed his eyes and leaned in. “You’re my happy brain scratch.”

Skye felt those words. To an outsider, they were probably ridiculous. Sappy and cheesy at best. But he didn’t care. They were almost better than I love you. Not quite, but nearly. He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly before he spoke again.

“Being with you makes me feel really good, Rami. I know our situation is...”

“Different?”

Skye laughed. “Mm. Complicated. Definitely unusual, and probably not for everyone, but I haven’t felt like this before with anyone.”

“Yeah,” Rami breathed out. Skye couldn’t hear that, but he could easily read the words off his lips. “I can’t wait for more.”

The words made sense to him in ways he wasn’t sure Rami meant, but then again, maybe he did. Rami seemed to be the only person who really got him. Except for when he was with the Sins, Skye had always felt very, very alone. Like a square peg with a round hole, only just too small for him to fit into. If he twisted, he could fit one, maybe two corners past the edge, but that was it.

With Rami, he was the perfect shape to take all of him. The soft parts, the harder ones. The easy bits and the sharper edges that sent most people running. Everything that had been a deal breaker for Skye’s relationships in the past seemed to be everything Rami needed in his life.

And the same was true in turn. Skye had never felt so content. The fact that it was happening so fast did have him on edge because what if it came crashing down? What if he, like Icarus, was flying too close to the sun? He didn’t want to lose his wings.

But he liked Rami far too much not to take the risk.

“One more kiss before we eat?”

“Probably best to do it now,” Rami said, then leaned in. “The onion in the shakshuka

is going to give you bad breath.”

Skye laughed as he cupped Rami’s jaw to guide him closer, used his lips to part Rami’s, touched his tongue with his own to taste him. He was fragrant with the spices he’d used for cooking, and his mouth was warm and lush and pliant.

Fuck, Skye was falling so hard.

“Thank you,” he said when he pulled away.

Rami’s eyes were very soft, and he hunched his shoulders in pleasure, nodding like he’d lost his speech again. Skye loved his voice, but he also didn’t mind the silence. In fact, he decided on a little more. Reaching up, he took his hearing aids out and set them beside his plate before pulling the dish of eggs closer.

He caught Rami’s grin aimed down at his plate, but very visible. He felt content now. And he wanted to chase this feeling with Rami for the rest of his life.

Fifteen

Even a few days off running had Skye struggling to find his conversational breath as he and Stone circled the park. It was an overcast day with the promise of rain, so he wanted to get his run in before he was relegated to the treadmill.

He certainly loved the gym at the Tower, but nothing beat fresh air in his lungs. They'd been running in silence for a while. Stone seemed to understand that Skye needed that for a bit, and all he'd done was cast the occasional grin as they followed the paved running path.

But about two miles in, Skye felt a little better.

“You, uh...you ever meet August's family?”

Stone wobbled a bit before catching his stride again, and Skye felt a little bad because his friend was prone to falling when he lost his concentration. His prosthetic legs were a damn marvel with the current technology, but Skye knew they took far more effort than Stone made it seem.

“Mm, no. He doesn't really...you know, talk to them, or even about them all that much. He ain't close to anyone besides us.”

Skye was pretty sure none of the Sins had relationships with their biological families. Well, except Avan. But his parents had moved back to London when Avan was seventeen, so he didn't have to really try and hide what he did. He flew back to visit once or twice a year, and they were none the wiser.

But while none of their stories were the same, all the Sins had pieces of shared history—and so did most of their lovers.

Rami was different. He was very, very different, and Skye was just now starting to become worried because eventually, Rami was going to stop his channel and go back to his life as an artist. He wanted his family to meet Skye—and that was great, of course. Skye wanted that. Badly.

But it also meant lying to them.

Skye personally had no moral qualms with lying about his job in order to keep the peace—and to keep people from being ill-informed dickheads about the reality of his own sex work. But he could tell Rami was starting to bend under the weight of deceiving his family.

And he knew damn well that they could never tell Rami's parents or his siblings the truth about what he did.

Stone tapped him on the shoulder as they rounded a corner in the path. "Why do you ask?"

Skye let out a soft groan and rubbed a hand down his face. "I'm sure Hen had a chat with you about the guy I'm seeing."

"Yeah. His big PSA," Stone said, clearly trying to hide a smile.

Skye rolled his eyes, then spotted a bench and signed, 'Stop now?'

It always took Stone a moment to slow his stride and halt without falling. He passed the bench by a few feet, then walked backward and collapsed on it, breathing a little heavier than Skye was. He was also older than Skye, and he'd been slowing down

now that he didn't have to keep up his physique in his retirement.

"Do you want to talk about him?" Stone asked when Skye eased down onto the bench, then turned to face his friend so he could see his lips. It was harder to catch all the words outside, even if the park was quiet this early in the morning. The ambient traffic noise always fucked him up.

He swallowed heavily. "I'd like you to meet him. But he doesn't want a big thing. No barbequing with the guys."

Disappointment briefly flashed over Stone's face, but it was gone between one blink and the next. "I get it. I mean, how long did it take August before he could handle being around everyone for more than a few minutes."

"Yeah. They're a lot alike in some ways." Skye twisted his fingers together between the gap his knees made. "Anxious artists. Virgins," he added softly.

Stone's brows lifted. "Oh? Hen said—well. Never mind."

Of course he'd heard the rumors—which weren't really rumors. It was all true. "The FanCore thing," Skye finished for him. "He still considers himself a virgin for what he hasn't done."

"And you two haven't?"

"We're following his rules," Skye said. "That's not the issue I'm having. What he and I have feels good."

"So what is the problem?"

Skye shrugged. "I guess there really isn't one. Not really. I mean, except the fact that

his life is pretty normal, and ours isn't. At all. And I know I'm terrified of some crisis that probably isn't going to happen, but I can't help it. Some days, it feels like I'm about to self-sabotage because he's the best thing that ever happened to me."

Stone's smile softened, and he leaned back, lifting his hand. 'I understand,' he signed.

Skye scoffed. " Sure you do. Your perfect relationship and its happily ever after."

Stone looked a little surprised. "It was the furthest thing from perfect, Skye. I know it was a long time ago, but the two of us almost didn't make it. August was terrified of everything, and I was terrified of fucking him up because there are parts of my traumatic past that will never heal. Hell, I'm still dealing with my parents' bullshit."

Skye winced. Stone had been embroiled in a legal battle after his brother had come to the Tower. It had been two years now since Onyx had come into their lives, and while he wasn't a loud presence at the Tower, he was starting to come around more. They'd cleared out the cottage that had been August's paint studio now that they were closing on a property to both live and work in, and Onyx was officially in training as the next Lust.

And he knew how hard that was for Stone to take. Onyx wasn't the baby of his family, but he was one of the youngest siblings. He'd come to the Tower full of stories about how their family had gotten even worse after Stone and Flint left, and Stone snapped.

He called child services to come do a sweep, and while he was never in the running to foster the little ones, he'd been paying a good chunk of his life savings to make sure they all went to decent homes that would be able to help them overcome everything.

And that was pain, Skye knew, that would never go away. Pain he'd never be able to relate to.



“Sorry,” he murmured.

Stone touched his arm and shook his head. “I’m just trying to say that I understand when you have something here”—he tapped his temple—“telling you that you don’t deserve good things.”

Skye nodded. “When I’m with him, I can’t hear that voice at all. But when we’re apart, I’m...I’m afraid. He’s really close with his family, and he hates lying to them. I don’t know how I can fit into his life without having to lie to them constantly. Or how I can ask him to do that.”

Stone let out a long, slow breath that Skye couldn’t hear, but he could see the way his chest expanded, then deflated. “I don’t have advice for that. I’m sorry.”

Skye waved him off. “It’s fine. Obviously, I should let Rami take the lead on this one...”

“Rami? That’s his name?”

Skye flushed. “Yeah, sorry. Rami...” Oh God, he didn’t know his last name, did he? Or if Rami was his full name or a nickname. Fuck, what were they even doing? “Jesus, I barely know him. How can I be falling this hard this fast?”

“Because when it’s right, it’s right,” Stone told him once Skye looked up again. “The rest are details you can figure out along the way.”

Skye wanted to believe him. He was desperate to believe him. But things had a habit of falling apart when he let himself get too comfortable. And maybe it was self-sabotage because where he would have rolled over and called it quits in his past relationships, right now, the only sensation in his chest was the desire to fight.

To keep this.

To wrap his body around Rami's and hold on tight with all four limbs.

"Yeah, I know that look," Stone said, grinning.

Skye rolled his eyes, but the reason he'd come to Stone in the first place was because he knew his friend got it where some of the others maybe didn't. Jet and Taylor had become instant friends, and while they'd had their ups and downs in the beginning, their lives seemed to just fit perfectly without strain or adjustment.

King and Hen had been best friends and circling each other for years. Theirs wasn't a question of if but when.

Flint and his two men had been a difficult road, only because Flint was still fistfighting his childhood trauma and struggling to let people close, but Tomás wasn't a man who gave up on anything, and Luke was a ballast who was willing to be their port in the storm.

Everyone had their struggles, but only Stone knew what it was like to never feel worthy of love from a man like Rami.

"Just breathe," Stone told him. "Take it one day at a time. Communicate. I wish someone had told me that when I first met August. Just breathe, then talk. And don't underestimate what he's capable of or willing to handle."

Skye couldn't help his laugh. "I could never underestimate him. He's...shit, he's never, ever been afraid to tell me what he thinks. And, I don't know." He paused to rub the back of his neck. "There are things that seem too good to be true."

Stone quirked a brow and gestured for him to go on.

“He doesn’t want sex all the time. We’re both in sex work, but he’s happier just cuddling. Which...I suppose makes sense when you think about it.”

“Like two chefs living together who only eat takeout?” Stone suggested.

Skye wrinkled his nose, but yeah, that was pretty much it. “He knows ASL. He’s fluent?—”

“Wait, really?”

Skye bit down on his lower lip for a second. “His brother’s Deaf. Like fully involved in the community, you know? With the capital D ?”

Stone’s eyes went wide. “Damn.”

Skye couldn’t help a small laugh. “Yeah. The rest of it...it’s all little things. He lets me be possessive without expecting the same from me. He can see me in a very black-and-white way—like how my job is my job and it doesn’t affect where we stand with each other.”

“Keep him,” Stone said.

Skye’s laugh was a little tense. “I’m trying. It’s hard to remember that I deserve good things sometimes. I love this job, but sometimes it really does feel like we’re fallen angels. That at some point, karma is going to bite me in the ass for defying a god I don’t even believe in.”

“I get it. I’d say it gets easier with time, but it doesn’t. We just learn to handle those moments better—and rely on the people who love us to remind us that we’re good people and worthy of happiness.”

“Can you text me that once a week?”

Stone threw his head back and laughed. “Yeah, babe. Count on it.” He slapped his hands on his thighs, then pushed himself up. “Come on. Let’s get this run over with before I quit and head over to that new Tim Hortons.”

Skye groaned as he followed. “You’re a dick. I want a doughnut so fucking bad right now.”

Stone burst into laughter again, then seized Skye’s hand and pulled him toward the path that led to the main street instead of the rest of the park. Skye grinned and let himself be tempted into their own small, gluttonous sin.

‘You really like the ocean?’

Skye took a moment to make sure he understood the question Rami had signed. It seemed...silly, but he realized a second later that Rami didn’t seem entirely comfortable. They’d only been at the beach for a few minutes. Skye suggested a spot that was far off the beaten path—not much of a hike, but it only had street parking and no shops or restaurants.

Locals would visit, but most other people avoided the spot like the plague. And that was one of the reasons Skye loved it. The other was the small jetty made up of big, dark rocks that hosted the tiny signs of ocean life in their own little bubble.

It was like an aquarium, only the animals weren’t trapped behind glass, and he kind of loved that. He dreamed of retiring somewhere like this—somewhere that felt well and truly like his.

‘Do you want to leave?’

Rami looked startled. ‘No! Why do you ask?’

Skye gestured at him. Rami was tense, his legs pulled up to his chest, arms wrapped tightly around them, only loose enough to sign. He was normally not the most expressive man, but today was even worse. His face was completely blank, and Skye was starting to feel like maybe he’d done something wrong.

Rami stared at him for another long beat, his face still unreadable, and then his shoulders moved with a sigh. Skye couldn’t hear it—he’d taken his hearing aids out since the white noise of even the smallest waves tended to drown out words—but he could see the shifts in Rami’s body.

He felt finely attuned to them. Like he was a song only Skye could hear.

‘I’m having a bad day,’ Rami eventually confessed slowly on his hands so Skye could follow. ‘Sensory overload,’ he spelled.

‘Is there a sign for that?’

Rami shrugged. ‘I don’t know if there’s an official sign for it. My brother has a home sign, but I never use it with anyone else.’

One of the things Skye loved most about ASL was that—the ability to create a little sub-language within his circle of his most trusted friends and family. He wondered if he and Rami would have some of their own, one day. He liked the idea.

‘If it’s too much, we can leave,’ Skye promised him. ‘We can go back to my place. Or yours. Or we can do the date another day. Or?—’

‘Stop.’

Skye dropped his hands quickly, and for reasons Skye pretended not to understand, Rami's cheeks darkened.

Rami licked his lips. 'I want to spend the day with you. And I want to spend tonight with you.'

'Yes.'

Rami's eyes brightened, though he didn't smile. 'I want to spend time in your favorite place, even if it's too much for me.'

Too much. Skye liked that sign. It was very...expressive, even with Rami's currently blank face. But it came with a rush of guilt because Skye loved being at the beach, but his love didn't need to eclipse Rami's discomfort. Skye was happy to accommodate him. He was happy to twist their day into the shapes that were easy for Rami to fit into.

'I have an idea.' Skye stood up and extended his hand, but Rami didn't take it. After a beat, he wriggled his fingers, but Rami remained firm.

'We're leaving?'

'Trust me,' Skye insisted. He could see then Rami's resolve crack. Rami trusted Skye with an absolute faith Skye wasn't sure he'd ever felt like he'd deserved before now. But he had promised himself weeks ago that he would never, ever abuse it.

Taking his hand, Rami let Skye haul him to his feet. He stood off to the side as Skye gathered up the beach blanket, then collected their shoes. Luckily, they hadn't brought much, and it was only a few minutes before they were back up the dune and heading for the parking lot.

Skye turned his head when he felt a short tap on his bicep. Rami had stopped, and he looked almost on the verge of tears.

‘What’s wrong?’

Rami swallowed thickly and shook his head. ‘I ruined...’ Skye didn’t understand all of what Rami was signing. ‘Broken. Sorry.’

Skye tugged Rami along toward the car, his feet moving faster with an urgency he didn’t entirely understand. What he did know was that he needed to be somewhere quiet. Somewhere he could speak and understand when Rami spoke back to him. He needed the chaos to settle so he could comfort his lover because changing his plans to make Rami feel safe was not a hardship. It would never be a hardship.

And he needed Rami to understand that.

Dropping the blanket by the side of the back door, Skye unlocked the car and gestured for Rami to get in. He slid behind the wheel, then leaned back and took a breath before snagging his hearing aid case from the dash.

They were nearly charged and on when he put them in, so it only took a second for his world to adjust to a rushing of sound he hadn’t had access to before. The hitch in Rami’s breath, the little hum of his own, the creaking of the leather seats beneath them.

Turning his head, he licked his lips. “Can you repeat what you were saying out there? I didn’t understand all of it.”

It took Rami a second. It was obvious he was struggling with verbal speech. He lifted his hands and dropped them twice, and Skye hated himself for not being fluent enough to give Rami a break from trying to connect his brain to his mouth.

“I ruined today. Everything feels broken, and I’m so sorry.”

Skye leaned over, curling his hand lightly around the back of Rami’s neck, and pulled him in until their foreheads were touching. Rami hated eye contact, but Skye had come to learn he loved this. And it felt far more intimate than simply meeting his gaze.

“Nothing is broken. Nothing is ruined. I love the beach. It’s kind of a calming place for me. But I also take my hearing aids out and dull all the sounds. It’s less overwhelming that way, and I don’t have the same sensory sensitivities you do. I don’t mind leaving.”

“You seemed like you needed it,” Rami pointed out.

Skye shook his head, then dipped down and took a quick but possessive kiss. “I needed to be with you.” He let him go and sat back, and then something dawned on him, and he grabbed his phone from the console. “I have an idea.”

“What—”

“Let me see if it’s possible before I tell you,” Skye interrupted.

Rami nodded and sat back while Skye sent his text. As he waited, he stepped out to put the blanket back in the car, and the moment he was in the open, he could hear the crashing waves. Not as intense as they were on stormy days, but he understood why it would be too much for Rami. The sound was soothing to him, but it was also chaotic.

Getting back in, he saw his light blinking on the phone and picked it up, smiling. Rami gave him a curious look, and Skye tapped his fingers on the back of his phone. “Can it be a surprise?”



Rami's eyes widened, brows lifting. "I...don't always love surprises."

"I think you might like this one," Skye told him. He was pretty sure he knew Rami well enough to gauge, though he was now beyond nervous.

Rami worried his bottom lip between his teeth, then let out a breath and nodded. "Yes. I think I'll like your surprise."

Skye felt a rush in his chest as he started the car, backed out of the spot, and began to drive.

It was clear Rami had no idea where they were when Skye pulled into the small parking lot. He was looking around, clearly confused since they were right in the middle of downtown, and that was the last place Skye would have normally taken him.

But they weren't going to the main street. Skye had a code on his phone and a plan.

"It seems...crowded out there today," Rami said nervously. "On the street. A lot of people shopping."

Skye turned to him and took his hand, kissing his knuckles. "We're not going shopping. We're going in through that door." He pointed to the rust-stained metal door in the back of the building.

Rami blinked at him. "In...the building?"

"It's not open to the public right now. And you'll see right away where we are. Trust me?"

Rami hesitated, then nodded and got out of the car. Skye followed him and met him

at the curb. He offered one hand out, which Rami grabbed, squeezing nervously, and he used his other to punch the code into the panel on the wall that disengaged the dead bolt. The lock clicked open, the sound heavy, reverberating against his palm.

He tugged on the handle, then held the door open with his foot while Rami stepped in ahead of him. When it shut, Skye glanced around, then found the alarm and typed in the same code to shut it off. There was a series of small beeps, just like August said there would be.

And then there was silence.

At least, he was pretty sure there was silence.

“It smells like paint,” Rami said.

Skye laughed and nodded, heading toward the lighted end of the corridor. “Yep. Come on.” Their hands met again, palms warm and soft as they touched, fingers grasping tightly. Skye felt a rush under his skin, and he wondered if he’d ever stop feeling this way when it came to Rami.

A part of him hoped so because this was a lot, and he wanted to get to the point where they simply just...were with each other. And a part of him hoped he’d always at least understand how lucky he was to know this man.

It only took a couple of seconds to reach the main open floor of the gallery, and Rami caught his breath, squeezing Skye’s hand before dropping it. August had been working there for years, and so much of his art was all over the walls now. There were a few sculptures he’d done in his past and a few paintings of the Sins that hadn’t made it onto the walls of the Tower.

And there were several of Stone—not his face, but in intimate poses that few people

ever got to see him in. Skye's favorite was him lying on his back on the deck of his hot tub, legs off, bare-skinned, eyes closed. He looked at peace. He looked in a way that Skye rarely ever witnessed, but he knew was more common now that he had August.

"I know this man. I saw him on the Discord when the Sins were leaked," Rami said, walking over to the painting Skye had been musing about. Rami reached out and gently touched the frame. "His lover painted this."

"How can you tell?"

Rami turned his head, and a smile played at his lips. "Because this is how I see you."

Skye's heart felt like it was going to beat straight out of his chest. He grabbed Rami by the wrist, tugging him close, kissing him deep and heavy, a little sloppy, but he was desperate to convey the way he was feeling with touch and taste.

Rami groaned loudly and surged into him. "Not here," he said with a gasp. "Right? Not here?"

Skye laughed and shook his head, his whole body burning. "Not here."

"And not yet."

Skye knew instantly what Rami meant. They wanted each other in every way it was possible to have each other, and he had a feeling Rami was getting tired of waiting. Just like he was. "When?"

"Soon. Next week," Rami said, his voice thready. "If you..."

"Yes," Skye interrupted, not caring what Rami was going to say next. "Whenever

you're ready, I'm ready."

Rami bowed his head and wrapped his arms around Skye's waist. "The bidding will go high."

"I have enough."

"But—"

Skye tipped Rami's chin up to look into his face. "I. Have. Enough."

Rami licked his lips. "I feel like a sugar baby."

"If I could have done that and saved us the trouble of you worrying whether or not I'd win the bid, I would have," Skye told him with a small smile. He cupped Rami's jaw and ran his thumb over his roughly shaven, warm skin. "But I also kind of like the idea of taking you in front of everyone who wants you."

Rami closed his eyes, letting out a trembling breath. "Me too."

Skye bent down and kissed him again. "Let me show you around here while we wait. It's quiet."

"It's art," Rami said.

Skye nodded, frowning. "Yes. Is that...bad?"

Rami snorted and rolled his eyes. "I love art. I love art in every form there is. This is...my ocean. It's my beach."

Skye was hit with a punch of relief. He'd gotten it right. "That's why we're here."

Sometimes we'll do my ocean, and sometimes we'll do yours. And we can start here." He picked up Rami's hand by the wrist and laid a kiss to his palm.

"I think I—" Rami stopped.

Skye knew what he was going to say, but he was profoundly grateful that he didn't finish his sentence. Not yet. Not with this one last thing hovering between them. He closed his eyes and knocked his forehead against Rami's. "Me too."

"Yeah."

Skye kissed him one more time. "There aren't words now, but there will be soon."

"Okay," Rami whispered. Skye barely heard it, but he felt the breath over his face and the motion of his jaw, and it was in that moment he realized he was absolutely and completely content.

Sixteen

Rami knew it was growing up using ASL with his brother that gave him the worst poker face of all time. Ahmed appreciated it since not everyone in their family used sign properly, but it made for some difficult conversations. Especially when Rami hadn't seen his brother in months and he was trying to look happy to be at lunch with him.

Which, in reality, he was. He'd missed his family like they'd been a limb he'd lost, and even if it was just his brother, it was something. But Rami was distracted. Tonight was the night—the night. Skye had been working, his schedule fuller than usual, so Rami hadn't seen him since their date. It had been nearly a week, and the night before, Skye sent him a text letting him know he was free and ready for the auction.

He sent over his request for Rami's live that night—edging himself into oblivion with tingling lube applied to his nipples. Rami was both excited and terrified to play with himself because this was a little new, and it was also Skye. It was all Skye.

He was the only one behind the screen who mattered.

His feelings were throwing all of Rami's plans into disordered chaos. He'd wanted to drag this out more, but with the money Skye had used to win the bid on the toy and then on this night, Rami was so much further ahead on his plans than he thought he'd be. And he knew with tonight—with the way the bid would climb for his virginity and the fact Skye would beat them all, he'd achieve his goal.

And then some.

He just wasn't sure what came after. He still didn't earn enough to support himself with his art, and while he knew Skye would jump in and offer to be his sugar daddy or his patron or something, Rami didn't think he could be in a relationship like that. Not with the feelings he had for Skye.

Ahmed choked loudly on his swallow of water, his eyes going wide. 'Did you just spell SUGAR DADDY?'

Rami's gaze darted to his fingers, which had obviously betrayed him. His echolalia was worse when he was stressed, and he'd learned a long time ago that it translated to finger spelling random words over and over. He just hadn't realized his brain had picked up on that one.

Wonderful.

'Ignore,' he signed.

Ahmed crossed his arms and stared pointedly, and Rami knew it was only a matter of time before he was going to crack. His first instinct was to lie, which would have worked in his favor because one of the stereotypes his brother believed about him was that Autistic people couldn't lie.

Rami could lie. And well. Even with his shitty poker face. He didn't often do it because he rarely saw the point, but he realized now was probably a good time for it. He didn't think he was ever going to tell his siblings or his parents what Skye did for a living.

There was no point. His parents were open-minded and accepting, but he didn't think they'd get on board for some Dante's hell-themed brothel employee falling for their

son. Especially their son they tended to infantilize.

‘My boyfriend is rich,’ he finally answered. That was the truth, which made the lie easier. ‘I was thinking about how different our lives are.’

Ahmed’s expression relaxed, and he leaned his chest against the table, signing lazily, ‘I want to meet him.’

Rami nodded. ‘I know. He’s nervous. He’s never met a boyfriend’s parents.’

Ahmed’s brows lifted. ‘No serious relationships?’

Rami shrugged and didn’t answer. The truth was, he didn’t know. He and Skye spent hours talking, but they both tended to avoid what was and focused on what would be. Or on the present, which Rami enjoyed the most.

‘When?’

‘As soon as I get everything with the house taken care of,’ Rami told him.

Ahmed looked annoyed. ‘Are you going to throw out all that old stuff?’

Another point of contention. His brother and his parents wanted him to renovate and sell the place. His sister was the only one on his side about keeping it the way it was. He knew it wouldn’t ever bring his grandfather back, but preserving bits and pieces of him felt...important. Rami struggled with remembering people who weren’t around, and he was terrified to lose the man who had one of the strongest hands in making him the man he was right there at that table.

A man he really liked.



A good man who was proud of himself, confident, and loved.

‘Sorry,’ Ahmed signed after a beat. He must have seen the look on Rami’s face. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you. I—’ His hand stilled, and his brows furrowed.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘There’s a man watching us. Watching you,’ he clarified.

Without really thinking much about it, Rami turned in his seat and ignored his brother’s waving hand of protest. His gaze scanned the patio, and then—to his both joy and horror—it settled on his beloved.

Skye was standing in the alcove that separated the indoor and outdoor seating with a very, very tall man behind him. Rami recognized him from the Tower data leak, but he couldn’t remember which one he was.

‘Your brother?’ Skye caught his eye and signed across the room.

Rami gave a slight nod, and then he heard Ahmed make a loud noise, and he turned back to him. He could lie again. He could say it was just a friend—just a guy he met. But he knew there was no way he could be anywhere near Skye and not touch him.

‘Is that him?’ Ahmed demanded. ‘Is he on a date with someone else?’

Rami heard Skye choke, and he knew it was all over. Rolling his eyes up toward the rolling clouds, he took a fortifying breath, then waved Skye over. ‘He’s not very fluent in ASL, so go slow. Don’t be rude.’

Ahmed had a glint in his eye that said he’d been thinking about it, but after he watched Rami’s face for a beat, he settled back with a small pout. ‘Fine.’

Skye was at Rami's side in a moment, hovering a few feet away like he wasn't sure what to do with himself. His tall friend wasn't with him. 'Hi,' he finally signed.

Rami gestured at the empty chair between himself and his brother. 'Skye,' he said, spelling, then giving Skye's sign name. He did the same for his brother, and then he turned to his love. 'He knows.'

'About...?'

Right. Yeah. That needed clarification. 'You and me. Dating.'

Skye looked relieved, and Rami didn't blame him. His biggest fear was having that conversation with his family, and he couldn't imagine how it would feel if he'd had to do it with Skye's. Turning, he extended his hand to Ahmed, then pulled back. 'Nice to meet you. Sorry my ASL is slow. Rami told me a lot about you.'

Ahmed's hands were still, his face unreadable. The moment of profound silence stretched on and on. Skye shifted in his seat, then fiddled with his hearing aids like maybe they were the problem. Finally, just before Rami kicked his brother under the table, Ahmed smiled.

'Nice to meet you. You know my baby brother's never had a boyfriend before.'

Rami's face burned with embarrassment at both his brother's confession and the fact that he used the sign 'precious' instead of 'little' when calling him the baby of all the siblings.

But Skye was very much himself. He just leaned over and snagged Rami's hand, kissing his knuckles before letting go. 'He and I have that in common. I've never felt this way about anyone before.'

Ahmed swallowed heavily as he stared at Skye, trying to search for the truth in his hands and face. After a beat, he nodded. ‘Come to dinner. Meet our family.’

Skye’s gaze darted over to Rami, and then he bit his lip. ‘I don’t speak any Arabic.’

Ahmed snorted. ‘Neither do I.’

Skye’s eyes widened, and then he burst into laughter. ‘I’m also bad at ASL.’

‘My parents are worse. You’ll be fine. They’ll like you.’

That might have been a stretch. Skye was as far from Rami’s culture as it got, really. His parents still struggled with the fact that Ahmed considered himself Deaf first and Lebanese second. They just couldn’t wrap their minds around the fact that he could belong to a group of people who hadn’t birthed him or raised him.

So bringing Skye into the mix?

It would be hard. But Rami was too in love to really care, and he had a feeling he’d have his brother on his side. ‘Soon,’ he answered for them both. ‘I’ll let you know.’

Ahmed nodded, then pushed to stand. ‘I’m going to give you two a minute. Meet me at the car?’

Rami realized their lunch was over. Somewhere in the middle of the conversation, Ahmed had paid the bill, and the server cleared away their plates. He was so absorbed in his own situation, and his ears burned with slight embarrassment.

“What’s wrong?” Skye asked aloud as soon as Ahmed was gone.

Rami felt a punch of relief at hearing Skye’s voice. It was soft and soothing and

careful without being patronizing. He slouched in his chair. “Can we talk about it later?”

“Was your brother being mean? Did I miss something?”

Rami shook his head a little too quickly, making himself dizzy for a second. He leaned in toward Skye so he wouldn’t have to struggle to rely solely on reading his lips amidst the conversational din of the restaurant and the noise of traffic. “I think he’ll be really supportive.”

“But your parents won’t,” Skye said.

“It’s complicated.”

Skye let out a tiny sigh, then cupped Rami’s chin and pulled him in for a kiss. “I get it. One of my friends has parents a lot like yours. Immigrants, worried about losing their children to...” Skye paused and frowned like he was searching for a word. “What was it called in ancient history? Hellenization?”

Rami blinked, then burst into laughter, grasping for Skye’s hands so he could tug him into another kiss. “How do you know about that?”

Skye grinned and shrugged. “I noticed the books you like to read, so I’ve been doing a little study myself. That way, I’ll know what you’re talking about when we’re in bed after...everything.”

Rami’s whole body felt like it was suddenly too big for his skin. Like he was going to burst with joy and the disbelief that this was real. That this man could exist and not be lying to him. It took him a moment to remember Skye hadn’t come alone, and they weren’t supposed to see each other until after the auction.

Skye would be bidding at his own house since he had a late team meeting, and they weren't going to do anything intimate until the next night when Rami did his possibly final live. He wasn't sure about that either, and he wanted to be somewhere quiet and safe so he could talk through it.

"Hey," Skye said softly, "really, are you okay? You seem unsettled."

"I am. But we can't talk about it here," Rami told him. "Maybe later?"

Skye nodded. "I was going to see you in the morning, but why don't I drive over after it's done."

Rami felt a punch of relief that was almost physical. "Yes. Please."

Skye tugged him in for a kiss. "I should let you get back to your brother, and I have to get back to my coffee date."

Rami stiffened. Had he been wrong about the guy? Was he not a Sin? "You...is he...a client?"

Skye snorted. "No, sweetheart. That's King—Hen's boyfriend. He's one of my best friends. We call these our coffee dates. We drink too much caffeine and talk shit about our coworkers."

Rami bowed his head. "Sorry."

Skye lifted his chin, gaze on Rami's lips. "Again."

"Sorry. I don't mean to be insecure."

Skye knocked their foreheads together, then between them signed so only they could

see, 'Never forget I'm yours.'

Those were the words Rami needed. After tomorrow, everything was going to change, and he needed strength and hope to believe that whatever shape they took on the other side was going to be stronger. And better.

And would last forever.

Rami stared at himself in the mirror, his gaze fixated on the small dimple he had in the little wrinkle on the left side of his chin. It was only visible when he pursed his lips or smiled. His gaze tracked his jawline and his beard, which was getting a little too long for his comfort.

He scratched at his skin for a second, then made himself stop. If he continued, he'd get obsessive about it, then be unable to focus on anything except shaving, and he couldn't afford that kind of distraction. He was about to start his live. The clock was ticking down, and there were ten minutes left.

He was freshly showered, his hair twisted high on the back of his head, and he was wearing a large tattoo cover patch over his ink because he wasn't going to take another risk like the one that had given his identity away to Skye.

Not that he regretted that now, but he couldn't help think about how wrong it might have gone if the situation had been different. If he'd never met Skye, he'd be doing this night alone, waiting on a stranger to take his last bit of virginity.

The thought made him feel...strange. Uncomfortable. And yet also profoundly grateful that a man had tumbled head over heels—literally—and landed in his front yard.

He lifted trembling fingers and ran them around his lips. They were dry and chapped,

but he had no energy to do anything about his nerves. He'd used it all up prepping himself for what was to come.

Behind him, in the bedroom, his laptop was perched on the end of the desk. His setup was what Skye had asked for. He'd shifted his bed to the side, and there was a chair with the toy Skye had bought him suctioned to the seat. He was going to ride it and stroke himself with his legs spread so both of his cocks would be on display.

He was going to edge himself and edge himself until he saw Skye's bid, and then...

Then it would be over. The long months he'd been doing this—using what he'd been given at birth to pull himself out of a rut—were about to come to an end. It felt...strange. Like he was about to mourn the loss, which he wasn't expecting. He hadn't loved being on display only because he wasn't a huge fan of attention.

But it was easier when they were nothing more than screen names. When they hadn't seen his face. When he was entirely anonymous, apart from his one defining feature that no one would ever see again apart from Skye.

He supposed there was a sadness to it because it was this platform that had allowed him to feel like he was special, unique, and wanted where he'd always been made to feel like a freak. Like a sideshow. Like some fulfillment of a random fetish that reduced him down to his cocks—a man whose personality and wants and needs didn't matter because he had two dicks to fuck with, and that's all he really should be.

He supposed that was one of the logical reasons he'd fallen in love with Skye: he wasn't a freak to him.

He was just...Rami.

He was an Autistic artist with probably too many special interests and anxiety that

was often off the charts. He was a man who cooked really good breakfasts and loved his family and hated the beach but loved the water. He was a man who grew up speaking Arabic and ASL but somehow still struggled to roll his R s on certain words and for whatever reason could never keep his pinky down when he was signing the letter D .

He loved caterpillars but hated butterflies. He liked maghmour for breakfast in the morning because it was savory and labneh and honey with dinner because it was sweet. He hated the feeling of sand between his toes but felt at peace when he had bits of dried clay in the creases of his palms. He preferred sunset to sunrise, winter to summer, and between the ages of four and six, he wanted to play tambourine in a folk band.

He was an atheist, and yet he still prayed when things felt like they were at their worst. And every now and again, he really did feel like Allah was watching over him.

He was so much and so little all at the same time, and somehow, the person he'd grown into was the perfect man for Skye. No adjustments, no compromise.

Just him.

They had a big, bright future together that was opaque for now, but he knew it would become clear soon enough. He wasn't really sure he bought into the whole happily ever after thing because no one just stopped being sad or angry or scared once they fell in love. But he knew all those things would be easier to bear with a partner who let him deal the way that came naturally to him.

So this was both an ending and a beginning, and he supposed he was allowed to be a little melancholy about it.

His phone buzzed, and Rami nearly jumped out of his skin before scrambling for it.



There was a text waiting for him on the screen, and the name alone allowed something in his gut to settle.

Skye: Can we call really quick?

Rami didn't answer through text. Instead, he hit the FaceTime button and waited until Skye's face filled the screen. When it did—with his squinting eyes and tiny smile that was for Rami and Rami alone—he felt his whole body relax, like someone pushed an Off button on his stress.

“Hey, sweetheart.”

“Marhaba, habibi,” Rami said very softly.

Skye laughed. “I won't even tell you what my captions think you said. I'm glad I can read that off your lips now, though it would be nice to know if there was a sign for that.”

Rami snorted and rolled his eyes, signed hello, then used the sign his brother did for habibi—all four fingers brushing off his chin twice. It was kind of a catch-all for babe or sweetheart, but he liked it. And the way Skye's face brightened, it was clear he did too.

“Are you okay?” Skye asked after a moment of silence.

Rami shrugged. “Nervous. It's almost over. Tonight is the last auction.”

“Is that what you want?”

Rami had been asking himself that question, but he didn't expect to hear it from Skye. He knew his lover was possessive. He knew he didn't like sharing. He also

knew Skye found it arousing to watch Rami play with himself, but he figured Skye would be celebrating that Rami would be ending his channel and that it would settle into whatever their new normal would be.

So it hadn't been a real consideration.

"I...don't know," he admitted. "I mean, yes, I'm done with the auctions, but I'm not sure I want it all to go away. Is that wrong?"

Skye shook his head. "No, sweetheart. It's not wrong. Maybe we can talk about it after the live tomorrow."

Rami hadn't known until that exact moment that was what he needed to hear. But the words grounded him because they were honest. "Yes."

Skye's smile softened. "Okay. Go get yourself ready. It's almost time, and I have my bidding fingers all ready to go." He wiggled the fingers of his left hand at the camera. "See you soon."

"I won't see you," Rami pointed out.

Skye laughed. "But you can think of me."

He could. And he absolutely would. He indulged in staring at Skye's face for another long second, then ended the call without a goodbye because it wasn't really that. It wasn't a goodbye. It was a momentary pause until Skye was at his door and his arms were around Rami again.

He took a breath, then stared at his setup, and for the first time in a while, he felt like this was the right thing at exactly the right time.

Seventeen

He had exactly six minutes and nineteen seconds before Rami's live started. Not that the bidding would begin right away, and frankly, Skye's participation in the bidding wasn't supposed to come in until the end. Though he fully intended to drive the amount up if it slowed down.

He had this money to spend, and the only person he wanted to give it to was Rami. A small part of him was afraid it would complicate things in the future. That maybe Rami would somehow feel beholden or in debt to Skye. The bigger part of him knew it wouldn't be an issue because Rami did tend to see things in black and white, and this was nothing more than a transaction.

A purchase.

There was weight to it, of course. He was buying Rami's virginity, but his hands had already made Rami come more than once. So had his mouth. And the toy he'd bought for him. All of those things were special and important, and Skye knew he had to have this.

He needed to call this moment his.

Maybe it was wrong, but he was a Sin, goddamn it. Sure, he was also human, but what he'd been doing for so long and the way he'd split himself into one man and one fallen angel had forever changed who he was. There were times he wanted to embrace the darker side of himself, and Rami was giving him that chance.

His entire body was filled with a hunger he struggled to name. It was wrapped in love and maybe a little obsession, but there was more to it. He just wished he understood himself a little better.

Checking the clock one last time, he decided to step outside and breathe for a few. He was already logged in so Rami would see his name and not panic, and Skye didn't mind if he missed the beginning of the show. He did like watching the chat. He found it wildly erotic that so many people were so turned on by his beloved.

That was the source of his possessive feelings. Everyone wanted him, but Rami was his and his alone.

And he didn't even mind the objectification angle of it because it meant that Skye had been given a gift from Rami: knowing him for who he was. Loving him for who he was. Not just the two dicks hanging between his legs or the quiet, punched-out moans he gave when he got himself off in front of hundreds.

And Skye knew if he was careful enough and clever enough, he'd get to keep Rami until the day they took their last breath.

"Someone out here?"

Skye jolted as he stepped off his porch, then walked over to his fence and pulled the door open. Jet was there, head tipped down, cane in his hand. He was a little sweaty, like he'd just come from a jog. Or a hard fuck.

"Work?" Skye asked.

Jet's face lifted. "Mm. Chapel session. I feel like I ran a marathon. I'm getting too old for this crap."

Skye burst into laughter. He and Jet were two of the youngest Sins, but he was starting to realize that this job could make him feel old when it wanted to. “They weren’t being an asshole, were they?”

“Nah. Just athletic.” Jet dug the tip of his cane into the dirt, then felt his way forward with his left hand until he touched the fence. He leaned against it with a heavy sigh. “You had a busy week.”

Skye groaned, rolling his eyes up toward the stars. There had been a system glitch, and when Hen was making appointments, they weren’t showing up in the calendar. When they repopulated, the system had scheduled them all in a cluster and sent out appointment confirmations to all their clients. Tuesday, Skye had two clients back-to-back. Wednesday, he had one that lasted until midnight, and Thursday was a bright and early 8:00 a.m. session. He’d been so out of it he hadn’t had much time to talk to Rami the way he wanted, though his lover didn’t seem to mind.

But that led to the smallest flicker of worry in his gut because what if Rami eventually did get tired of Skye’s schedule?

“Does Taylor ever get...I don’t know...uncomfortable with this whole thing?”

Jet barked out a laugh. “Yeah, he absolutely does. It’s easier when he doesn’t think about it, but sometimes it bothers him. Which is human, I think.”

“He’s never asked you to stop, has he?”

Jet shrugged. “He’s asked me if I will. And when. I think a small part of him just wants to know that he’s more important than anyone else. That I’d burn down this life to make him happy.”

“And you would.”

Jet grinned. “I absolutely would. For him, knowing is enough. He doesn’t have a countdown calendar to retirement or anything like that.”

There was so much for Skye and Rami to talk about. Their relationship was still so brand-new. There was so much to learn, so much to know. He didn’t need to rush toward complications.

“You’re very quiet,” Jet said, then lifted his hands. ‘Need me to sign?’ For a blind man, he’d picked up on ASL better than Skye expected him to—which was maybe unfair to say. Jet was one of the smartest people Skye had ever met, and he had a penchant for languages.

“No,” he said. “Hearing aids are on, and it’s quiet out here. I’m just...dealing.”

“Love is tricky when you’re fallen,” Jet said.

That was a truth Skye had never had to face until right then. “Didn’t think I would ever feel like this with someone. That’s part of the problem.”

“It always smacks us in the face right when we least expect it.”

Skye couldn’t argue with that. Not even a little. “I hope you can meet him soon.”

“You know my door’s always open. If he likes cats, he can come hang out with Thursday, and Taylor will want to cook. He’s been getting into stone-fired pizza lately.”

Skye laughed. Their lives were...strange. So fucking strange. But also incredibly wonderful. “Thank you.” He realized it was long past three minutes and nineteen seconds. “I’d better get in. I have a thing with Rami right now, but I’d like to take you up on your offer soon.”

Jet leaned his cane against the fence, then held out both arms, and Skye wasted no time in sinking into them. Jet was his best friend—his brother—his family. Very few things felt better than knowing he would always have this.

“Love you,” Jet said quietly against the side of his head. “You’re going to be fine.”

Skye nodded against his shoulder, then pulled back and gave Jet’s shoulder a pat. “Tell Taylor I might come by for pizza even if Rami can’t make it.”

Jet laughed again and felt for his cane. “You know he’d love that. Nothing makes him happier than showing off. But promise me it’ll be the most amazing pizza you’ve ever had. Even if it’s...well. Not.”

“Always,” Skye said. He grabbed the top of his fence and stepped in. “See you.”

The door closed with a loud whine, and with a fortifying breath, Skye turned, faced his house, then took the first step toward the start of his forever.

“Uh. Uh uh uh uhhhh.” Rami’s moans were hard, heavy, with every rise and fall on the dildo that was attached to his chair. His nipples were pert, dark, and a little puffy from the tingling cream he’d rubbed on them earlier during the session.

Skye was enraptured, watching Rami stroke his dicks while lube gathered at the base of the toy as he fucked himself deeper and harder. He wished he was there. Christ, it was killing him to be so far away.

He was harder than steel and refusing to touch himself because his finger was poised over the mouse, which was ready to send his bid. The numbers were climbing, but they were nowhere near Skye’s limit.

Still, the clock was ticking down, and people were getting frantic.

Desperate.

There were all-caps cries for Rami to come. For him to stop the bidding. For him to show his face. Everything Rami wouldn't do. It made Skye smile despite the fact that he was so horny he felt like he was going to lose his mind from his need to come.

He shifted against the sheets, the weight of the blanket on his hard cock almost too much to bear. His gaze fixed on Rami's hands as he stroked himself so hard Skye knew the sounds of skin against skin were filling the room. He couldn't hear it—without being there in person and his hearing aids on, that was a sound he'd lost.

But the sight of it was enough.

It was more than enough.

Skye's gaze moved to the timer, and his heart jumped. A minute and fifteen seconds.

“ Uh uh uh uhhhhh .”

Fifty seconds.

“ Uh...ahhhh... ”

Thirty seconds.

The numbers shot up higher—higher. Not close enough to scare him, but enough that Rami could never question again whether or not he was worth all this.

“ Ah !”

Ten seconds.



Skye's finger hit the mouse, and his bid buffered...

...and buffered.

"Fuck!" he cried, but before he could truly panic, the timer ended, and the notification popped up on his screen that he was the winner. He hadn't realized his heart was pounding and racing until he noticed the beat of it thrumming deep inside his ears. His throat felt constricted for a moment, and he only just realized that Rami was slumped back, torso out of the frame, his thighs and lower stomach covered in his own come.

Skye's body shivered, and his tongue ached at the sides with the desire to lick it all up and taste him. He swallowed that down, then breathed deeply as the screen went black and the live ended. His hands were trembling as he reached for his phone, and he held it tightly until it began to buzz.

It was another FaceTime request.

'You did it,' Rami signed. It was obvious from his expression he'd lost his verbal words.

Skye nodded. He fought back the desire to lift up the three-fingered sign that could only just convey how he truly felt about this man. "I did it. Are you okay?"

'Yes,' Rami's fist nodded. 'See you soon?'

"I just need a minute to regain my composure, and—" He stopped abruptly when he felt his head give an almost violent lurch. Then the room began to rock back and forth. "Shit. Shit. I can't...fuck, I can't see straight."

Rami was signing, but Skye couldn't follow his hands. He hadn't had a vertigo spell

this bad in a long, long time. He supposed he should have expected it. He could cut out all the salt in the world, but nothing would ever be able to cure his stress.

“Skye,” he heard, very faint and muffled. His ears were ringing now—like a thousand high-pitched bees, and they felt like someone had stuffed them full of that goop the audiologist used to make his earmolds. “Let...if you...come over.”

Skye shook his head, making the vertigo worse. “I’m so sorry, baby. I’m so sorry.” Oh, and here came the nausea. He swallowed heavily. “I’m having a bad spell.”

“Skye,” Rami said very slowly and very loudly. Normally Skye hated when people shouted at him, but right now, he needed it. “I’m coming over.”

“You can’t drive.”

“I can Uber. Be there soon.”

The call ended abruptly, with just enough time for him to drop the phone and lean over. Skye lost control over his head, his ears, and, a moment later, his stomach.

He was still walking like a drunk when his doorbell flashed, but he was a little more steady and far less sick. He dug out his folding walking cane he hadn’t used in too long, and he managed to get the door open without an incident. His nystagmus was a nightmare, but he got a glimpse of Rami’s worried face and waved his hand at him.

“It happens. I promise I’m okay. But I can’t really focus on sign right now, and I can’t hear shit, so I might not be the best company.”

Warm, careful hands touched him, guiding him into an embrace. Skye’s entire body relaxed against Rami’s strong one, and he gave no resistance when Rami began to guide him back to the bedroom. The lights were off, and he let out a sigh of relief

when Rami didn't turn them on.

He just eased Skye back under the covers, and then with careful movements that didn't shake the bed, Rami slipped in beside him. No words were spoken. There was just this—two bodies that fit together like the last pieces to a puzzle to make the picture a whole. Rami spooned him, hooking his calf over Skye's legs, and his cocks were limp but fat, pressing through his sweats and into the small of Skye's back.

"I won," Skye eventually murmured.

He heard Rami's laughter, muffled and faint through his tinnitus, and then Rami squeezed him in response.

"You're all mine now."

Rami shifted so his mouth was right behind Skye's ear as he said, "I always was."

And if that wasn't the truth, they were both damned.

Eighteen

Skye knew it was late into the morning when he woke up. The blinds were drawn, and the room was dark, but he could almost feel how much time had passed. Reaching out, he found the side of the bed Rami had been curled up in empty and a little cold. His heart rose into his throat, beating out a tattoo of anxiety.

Sitting up slowly, Skye tested his equilibrium. He felt steady and stable, the vertigo all but gone apart from a little swooping sensation when he swung his legs off the bed. Then he let out a tiny cough and realized that his hearing was more muffled than usual.

This had happened before—the feeling of overstuffed ears and the high buzzing sound of his tinnitus that eventually eased up in fizzes and pops over the course of a day or two. But lingering in the back of his head was the knowledge that at some point, his hearing wouldn't come back. Maybe he wouldn't lose it rapidly like this—a wave all at once.

But maybe he would.

None of his doctors could predict the way it would go. When he first got his diagnosis, his ENT told him that most people didn't lose much of their hearing. They told him only fifteen or twenty percent of people lost it in both ears. They told him what he did lose would happen very slowly, over time.

He beat the odds in all of those.

It was hard to feel as crushed about it as he had before though. Not with Rami in his life. Not with the Sins as his family. Not with the stability he thought he'd lost when his world had literally been pulled out from under his feet.

He cleared his throat again and glanced around for his phone, but he couldn't find it. Had he left it in the living room? He struggled to remember what had happened after the auction, apart from Rami showing up and crawling into bed to hold him for the rest of the night.

After taking a piss, brushing his teeth, and getting dressed, Skye ventured out of his bedroom but found everywhere else devoid of his lover's presence. Rami didn't drive, so he would have had to take an Uber, and Skye would have expected Rami to wake him up. Or at least leave a damn note.

He found his phone on the floor beside the end table, and his heart sank when he realized it was dead. With groggy eyes and slow hands, he pawed around the drawer for a charger, and then when the light was blinking, he ventured outside his front door in hopes of seeing some sign of his beloved.

It only took a moment of adjusting to the low, midmorning light for him to catch a glimpse of exactly who he was looking for. Rami was across the lawn under one of the crepe myrtles, sitting beside August. They had their backs to the trunk and their heads tipped down over one of August's massive sketchbooks.

Skye almost left them to it. This was what he wanted, after all. He wanted Rami to endear himself to his friends. He wanted Rami to find the same closeness with the Sins that he had. He wanted this place to be more than a den of iniquity. He wanted Rami to feel safe there.

But he also wanted to touch him. To kiss him. To wrap his arms around him and remind himself that this was all real.

Rami looked up when Skye was halfway across the grass, and although he didn't smile, his eyes lit up. August followed his gaze and lifted his hand to give a short wave, his brow furrowed—clearly annoyed that Skye was interrupting them.

Skye would apologize later. Right now, he just needed to remind himself he wasn't alone. That waking up in the bed by himself after a night like last night wasn't an indication that Rami would eventually leave him.

Fuck, he hadn't even realized he was afraid of that until his head voiced it.

'Morning,' he signed.

'Morning, habibi.' Rami used the same sign he had before, mouthing the word so Skye knew what it was. His chest warmed as he dropped to his knees and glanced at the work August was showing off. It was early sketches of Skye's painting session. Several poses that August ended up hating on the canvas, but they looked not half-bad in smaller form.

Rami hooked his finger over his ear.

"Bad day," Skye said and winced. He could barely hear himself at all.

'Dizzy?' Rami asked.

Skye shook his head and leaned in to take a quick kiss. 'No. Much better. Can I cook you breakfast?'

Rami nestled a little closer and nodded, and Skye took a moment to wrap his arms around him, and he held him, basking in his sunbaked warmth. After a beat, he looked over to meet August's gaze, who was studying them. He looked less annoyed.

‘You-you,’ August signed, pointing first at Rami, then at Skye. ‘Nice.’

Skye snorted. “Yeah. It is nice.”

August said nothing after that. He was learning ASL, but he was slower than the others. His anxiety made it hard for him to function in class, and he’d dropped two of them when the professors refused to excuse him from the Deaf event portion of the lesson.

Skye didn’t blame him. He didn’t understand what it was like to have anxiety so bad he couldn’t leave his bed, but he’d seen the way it ravaged August on his worst days. Hell, he’d seen the struggle he dealt with on his best ones.

The fact that he knew that much was enough for Skye.

‘Can I finish looking at art?’ Rami asked after a beat.

Skye nodded and tipped Rami’s chin up to kiss him. ‘I’m hungry. Come in when you’re ready.’

He took one more indulgent second to press his body against Rami’s, and then he climbed to his feet and enjoyed the sensation of grass against his arches as he made his way back to his cottage. He rounded the corner to go in the side gate when he saw Stone, Flint, and Onyx climbing into Stone’s truck. Their faces looked drawn and worried.

He thought about texting Flint to ask what was going on, but he had a feeling it was sibling business, and that wasn’t his place. They would share when they were ready. But his heart ached for everything they were trying to do for siblings who hadn’t asked to be born into the family that had mistreated them.

Skye had only heard a handful of stories from both Stone and Flint, and that was enough to make him want to find his parents and beat them until they were unrecognizable. He didn't think either of them would appreciate that, but God, it would feel good.

Skye jumped when a hand landed on his shoulder, and he spun to find Avan smirking at him.

"...it...some...you...later, right?"

With a small sigh, Skye shook his head. "Sorry, man. I can't hear shit today."

Avan looked worried. 'Vertigo?'

'Last night. Hearing's gone today.' He jerked his chin toward the house and saw Avan follow him out of the corner of his eye. Inside, he motioned for him to wait, and he headed into the bedroom to grab his hearing aids out of their charger. He watched for the blink, then slid the molds into his constantly sore ear canals and waited for the familiar sensation of sound opening up.

And it was there. A little. But not the way it should be. He cleared his throat a few times and hummed to test the sound of his own voice. He'd be able to get by, so long as there was absolutely no background noise. It was a hard ask, but in his cottage, he could at least control it.

Avan was in the kitchen waiting for him, a pot of coffee already brewing. Skye could have kissed him. "I hope you made enough for three."

"I saw your man," Avan said, stepping closer and pitching his voice in the range he knew Skye could hear best. "He looks happy."



“Last night was somehow the shittiest and the best night ever,” Skye told him. He bit his lip, but he knew Avan was well-informed about what Rami did on his channel, so there was no point in lying. “I won the final bid.”

“Oh damn,” Avan said, whistling. “He was cool with it?”

“He asked me to. I’m going to film with him.”

Avan’s brow furrowed. “Bro, you know we can’t be seen on?—”

“Trust me,” Skye interrupted, “he’s got this down to an art. They’ll see dick in ass and nothing else that’ll identify me.”

Avan gave him a look. “You’ve got some decoration down there, man. You don’t think people will notice?”

With a snort, Skye walked over to his fridge and pulled out ingredients for a breakfast burrito. He noticed that Rami preferred savory food in the morning, and while he couldn’t woo him with generations-old cultural family recipes, he could at least do peppers, sausage, eggs, and some hot sauce.

He didn’t think Rami would mind.

“I’m being serious,” Avan warned once Skye had the ingredients laid out.

“How many sex workers, camboys, and porn stars have their dicks pierced, dude?” Skye told him. “You really think my Prince Albert is going to give me away? Besides, anyone who does recognize my dick is bound by an NDA. I’m not worried about it.”

Avan bit his lip as he watched Skye start to beat a handful of eggs in a bowl. He

waited until the noise of the whisk died down to ask, “Is this going to be a thing for you two?”

Before that morning, Skye would have said no. He would have said hell no. Their contracts with the Tower didn’t explicitly forbid other sex work jobs, but there were restrictions. He could get away with it if he really wanted to, but the thought had never crossed his mind before.

He was happy where he was. At the end of the day, he wanted to do anything except have sex after a long week with clients. But he had a feeling Rami wasn’t ready to give up his channel just yet, and he found he didn’t mind the idea if it was the two of them together.

Skye could be the one to show Rami off—to torment the audience that they’d lost their chance at him and now Rami was all his. For good.

Forever.

“Wipe that look off your face. It’s disgusting.”

Skye burst into laughter and shook his head. “You staying for breakfast?”

“And cockblock my best friend? I’ll pass.” Avan walked to the counter and snagged a mug, filling it to the brim with coffee, no room for cream. He pressed a kiss to Skye’s cheek, then rested his forehead against Skye’s temple. “I love you. If you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“I’m happy,” Skye murmured.

“Then I fucking love this guy too.”

Skye laughed. “Don’t tell him that before I do, please.”

Avan grinned as he stepped back and sipped his coffee. “Take your time. You know I hate saying the L word more than twice a week.” He tipped his mug toward Skye, then showed himself to the door long before Rami appeared to make the perfect morning somehow, impossibly, even better.

Skye hadn’t made any plans for the afternoon because he’d expected to be at Rami’s for the day. He figured his lover would work in his art room, and he would explore the house or maybe walk around the neighborhood. Maybe he’d sit on the beach for a while with his toes right at the edge of the surf.

He felt a little lost as he stared out his dining room window, slowly demolishing his food.

Rami eventually came inside just as Skye was finishing his own breakfast, and he didn’t seem to mind that his burrito was slightly cold. He sat down at the table without saying a word, a tiny smile playing at his lips, and he sipped coffee and devoured his food like it was his last meal.

Skye couldn’t help but wonder if maybe it felt like that to him. Tonight was the night. The big night. An ending of sorts but also a beginning. Rami hadn’t wanted to talk much about it, and Skye had been in no position to question him the night before.

But he realized they couldn’t go into the live without at least having some conversation.

“Can we talk?”

Rami looked up from his empty plate. ‘Bad?’

Skye smiled, shook his head, and responded back in sign. ‘No. But tonight is big.’

Brows furrowed, it was obvious Rami was trying to make sense of what Skye meant. He’d used the sign for large when he should have used important, but before he could correct himself, Rami nodded.

‘Big changes.’

Skye sagged forward in relief that his boyfriend understood him. ‘Let’s go into the bedroom.’

Nodding, Rami stood and offered his hand, and Skye took comfort in the warm press of his fingers as they moved down the hallway. The bed was still unmade, so Skye shifted the covers back and pressed his back to the wall, Rami crawling in beside him.

He was still a little warm from sitting out in the sun, and he smelled like the outdoors. Skye took a deep breath in, then rested his temple against Rami’s curls. “Can we talk?”

“Out loud, you mean?”

Skye nodded. “My ears are still really bad today, but I need to make sure we’re both on the same page.”

“Mm.” Rami took Skye’s hand and began to play with his fingers—tapping his fingertips, tracing lines on the insides of the knuckle bends, running his thumb over Skye’s nails. “Good page, right?”

“I hope one of the best pages in the book of our life,” Skye told him. “I know you’ve been struggling with the channel ending.”

Rami let out a breath, and though Skye couldn't hear it, he could feel the tremble of his exhale. "I don't know why."

Skye pulled back and looked down at Rami. "I think you do."

Rami looked angry for a brief second, and then his face crumpled. Skye felt a surge of panic, like maybe he'd touched a raw nerve and fucked this all up. Then Rami curled against him. "What good am I?"

Skye's entire body startled at the question. "Wait. What are you talking about?"

"I don't...I have nothing. I have this house that I should have sold because I can't afford to keep it up," Rami said, his voice trembling. "I'm too...I'm too fucking Autistic to work the way my parents want me to work. I've tried, and I get fired every time because I'm weird and strange and socially awkward. I have one skill that won't ever pay my bills, and I can't keep relying on someone to pull me out of a financial hole." Rami squeezed his eyes shut. "But I was good at this. At making people want a naked body that has only ever been ridiculed and mocked."

Skye's soul ached to be able to leave his own body and wrap around Rami's, protecting him from the pain he'd felt in the past. "Sweetheart..."

"I wasn't a virgin on purpose," Rami said. "I was a virgin because, before you, no one wanted me for me. If they wanted to sleep with me, it was because they wanted to see what it felt like to be with a man who had two penises. They wanted to watch me touch myself and see if my pleasure was as odd and different as I was. Like I was some sort of carnival attraction. But online, I was...I was something else."

"You are something else," Skye told him firmly. "If you need hundreds of people telling you that you're worth it in order to feel like you're worth something to the world..."

Rami looked up, his jaw tense, eyes full of fire. “Then what? What if I do need it? Does that make me pathetic?”

Skye met his gaze. “No. Not even a little bit. And I will be there with you. I’ll help you however you need help. As long as no one recognizes me, I can be on your channel with you if that’s the direction you want to go. Or I can help you set up scenes. We can come up with clever auctions for people to bid on that won’t cross your personal boundary lines. Or mine.”

Rami’s chin wobbled for a second, and then he swallowed heavily. “That wasn’t what I thought you were going to say.”

Skye’s brow furrowed deeply. “What did you think I was going to say?”

“That I was a joke if my self-worth was rooted in the admiration of anonymous strangers,” Rami told him honestly.

Skye held back a startled laugh. He cupped Rami’s cheek and rubbed his thumb along his jaw. “First of all, I’m the last person who could ever judge you for needing that kind of validation. Secondly, never once in the weeks of knowing you have I ever thought you were a joke. Or pathetic.”

Rami took a beat. “I don’t need the admiration of strangers for self-worth. I know I’m worthy. But I don’t know how much I can ever contribute without this. I’m nowhere near as talented as August. I’ll never have an art gallery.”

Skye turned his body so he was almost on his side, and he tugged Rami against him. “I will buy you a goddamn gallery if you want one. And I would offer you mountains of money, but I know you won’t take them.”

“Well...you never mentioned mountains before.”

Skye reared back, then burst into laughter at the glint in Rami's eye. "Fine. Not mountains. But I do have enough to take care of us both for the rest of our lives if that's something you want to think about down the road. But I know you need to be independent too."

Rami's lips twitched into a mostly there smile. "I don't want to be under anyone's financial control."

"So what if you keep your channel for a while? Until we take our relationship to the next step. Then you can work on your art or see if there's something else you can do to earn money without needing to worry about bills. You'll have enough in savings by then that if you need to leave me for whatever reason, you can."

"I don't want to leave you."

Skye held him tighter. "I don't want you to either. But neither one of us have...ah...what's that word for seeing the future?"

"Clairvoyant. Like Cassandra," Rami murmured.

Skye had a vague idea about who that was. Some ancient...Greek? Roman? She gave accurate prophecies, and everyone thought she was insane. "We have no idea what's going to happen, but the only thing that matters is you feel safe and secure both with me and without."

"I...don't know what to say. I didn't expect that." Rami turned and rubbed his face against Skye's arm. "Can I have some time to think about everything?"

"However much you need. I just wanted you to know that I'm here. However you want me."

“All the ways,” Rami said, then tipped his face up. “I want you all the ways. Kiss me, please.”

It was the easiest yes Skye had ever given.



Nineteen

“Will it feel like the toy?” Rami couldn’t help but ask.

Skye glanced over at him, brow furrowed the way it always was when he was making sure he understood what Rami was saying. “Yes...but also no.”

Rami hated those ambiguous answers, even if they actually did make sense in the end. “Can you explain?”

Instead of looking annoyed, Skye’s face softened, and he walked around the side of the bed, approaching Rami, who was in front of his desk. He’d spent the last few minutes getting the camera angle right so they could do what they needed to do without giving their faces away.

It would be tricky, but he was getting better at stuff like that.

He’d been tense since they arrived at his place, and a small part of him wanted to call it off. He wasn’t sure he actually wanted to do this for the first time in front of all those strangers who felt entitled to those intimate parts of his life. But his hesitation had only lasted until he realized that this was having sex .

Making love...that would come after.

No, that wasn’t true. He and Skye had already done that.

They hadn’t said the words, but Rami felt it every time Skye touched him with tender

fingers, careful but not patronizing. The way he was doing now. He rested both hands on Rami's hips and met his gaze, though Rami's stayed focused on Skye's chin.

"It'll feel full, like the toy. I'm a little bigger than the toy, so the stretch will be a little bit more. But it'll be more alive," Skye murmured. "No matter how pliant and soft and moldable a toy is, it won't ever quite match up to an actual cock."

Rami felt his own twitch in his boxers, and he palmed them for a second, letting out a gentle moan. "You make me horny."

Skye chuckled slightly, the sound kind, not mocking, and he dipped his head in for a kiss. "You make me a lot of things, sweetheart."

Rami shivered. He loved hearing Skye call him that. "How many minutes?"

"Fifteen," Skye said. "I'd like to prep you before we turn the camera on."

"Oh," Rami said, feeling a little guilty. "I already gave myself an enema today. I kind of thought that was maybe, well, more private. At least until we've known each other long enough to piss in front of each other?"

Skye burst into a fit of laughter, holding Rami tight. "Baby, no. That's...that's not what I meant. If you want to use those, you can do that on your own for now. That's fine." He sobered, and the look on his face was hungry and dark. He ran his hand from Rami's hip to the globe of his ass and squeezed. "I thought I might finger you. Stretch you."

"Oh," Rami breathed out. "Yes. I would like that a lot. I might come though."

"Think you'll have enough for a second orgasm for the live?" Skye asked him.

Rami nodded hard. “Mm. I’ve never been this turned on. It’s making me kind of nervous.”

“I’ll be right here. And hey,” Skye said, his expression turning thoughtful, “we could record this if you want. Save it for if you have a slow week and want to make some cash.”

“I—oh. I never thought about that,” Rami said. He glanced at his setup and realized it didn’t matter if their faces showed because with a recording, they could crop and edit. “Yes.”

Skye nodded, looking pleased with himself. “Let me get some lube. You get the recording set up.”

Rami got to work, listening to Skye rummage around in their supplies as he made sure the camera was pointed at the bed. He did his best to keep his usual angle so the editing work on the video would be less intensive. It would be new for him—but the idea Skye was presenting was taking all the anxiety out of his decision. He still wasn’t sure he was going to keep his channel, but the idea that he not only could but that Skye could be part of it meant something.

It left more secrets in the palms of his hands when it came to his relationship with his family, but having Skye with him took some of the weight off. He wasn’t shouldering the burden of what he was doing alone. He hadn’t realized that was part of the problem until now.

“Skye?”

He turned his head and smiled. “Yeah, babe?”

Rami took a deep breath, then lifted his hand, palm out, curling his middle and ring

finger toward his palm.

Skye blinked. Then blinked again. Then shook his head a little. Then he cleared his throat, dropping the lube on the bed with a dull thud. His mouth opened and closed. Hands rose, then fell.

Rami felt a small surge of panic. Had he gotten it wrong? Was it too soon? He knew Skye felt the same way. They'd admitted it to each other without words or signs, and both agreed they needed a little more time before they were ready to say it. Rami was just waiting until the moment felt right, and for whatever reason, it was this one.

But what was about to happen was what always happened: he fucked up. He was too much—or maybe not enough, and he'd ruined this with Skye.

His heart felt like it was cracking in two, but before he could fall apart entirely, Skye was suddenly in his space. Warm arms wrapped around his waist, Skye's nose shoving into the crook of Rami's nose as he backed him up, and up, and up until he hit the closet door. His breath left his lungs in a short rush, but he barely noticed.

How could he with Skye all but attempting to crawl beneath his skin. Rami loved it. He had always been sensory seeking as a child, and that hadn't changed much as an adult. Where others shied away from touch, Rami wanted more of it. More than what he knew most people did.

And Skye seemed to know when to give that to him. Almost like it was instinct, perfectly tuned in to Rami.

His fear was fading into joy as Skye began to kiss along his pulse point.

"You love me," Skye was repeating over and over, a whispered mantra.

Rami eased him back so he could look into his face. His eyes were wide, shining, maybe even a little wet, though it was hard to tell in the dim light of the room. Rami nodded.

“Can you say it aloud?” Skye reached a finger up to trace Rami’s lips. “Just...I want to hear it.”

“I love you,” Rami repeated.

Skye laughed, though the sound was almost like a sob, and then he surged in and kissed Rami deep and almost desperate. He let it carry on for a moment, but his anxiety was back, and he was suddenly feeling unsure. Was Skye joyful because someone loved him or because it was right?

“What’s wrong?” Skye asked, responding to Rami’s stilling hands.

“You...do you feel...”

“Oh. Shit. Fuck,” Skye cursed, slapping a hand over his eyes. “Baby.” He curled his fingers around the back of Rami’s neck and squeezed tight. “I’m so in love with you it’s absurd. There are moments it kind of scares me because it’s so soon, and I don’t even know your last name?—”

“It’s Jaroudi,” Rami said automatically.

Skye laughed softly. “Jaroudi. Am I butchering that?”

“Yes,” Rami said, seeing no need to lie. Skye was not used to Arabic, and he wasn’t going to fault him for it. “I don’t mind.”

“Oh,” Skye said, still chuckling. “Well, good. But I’ll work on it. Rami Jaroudi.”

He shivered at the sound of his full name on Skye's lips and tongue. He swallowed heavily. "Skye..."

"Balan," Skye said. "Skylar Adam Balan," he repeated.

Rami repeated his name slowly. It was simple, easy, and so very him. And it was only then that the weight of what Skye had said—all his words—hit him. He loved him. He was in love with him. It was the same powerful, terrifying feeling Rami had been both chasing and running from since they met. He wasn't alone. It was a shared experience with the promise of so much more to come, so long as they stayed out of their own way.

"I'm in love with you," he said.

Skye laughed and nodded. "Yeah. I'm happy."

"Kiss me again. I won't stop you this time," Rami told him.

Skye's face was as bright as the sun, and Rami had to close his eyes against it. But the vision remained behind his eyelids, growing more intense as Skye's lips met his. He groaned softly, arching his body into Skye's, hands running up and down his back, counting his vertebrae, tracing his hip bones, squeezing the globes of his backside.

Skye was his. Well and truly and completely his.

"Make me come," Rami begged.

Skye pulled back. "Sorry, baby. I missed that."

'Make me come,' Rami repeated in sign.

Skye's cheeks pinked, and he nodded. "We'll be late for the live."

"I'll post a message. I need to have this before we're in front of everyone," Rami told him. "Please. I need this for me. For us."

"Anything you want," Skye told him, meeting his gaze. He leaned in and kissed him once more. "Go hit Record, and then let me introduce you to God."

Rami had almost made a sarcastic remark about being an atheist and how if he did believe in Allah, he wouldn't believe he peeped into the bedrooms of humans because sex was the furthest thing God would care about. Sex was far too human to matter to the divine.

But he was glad he didn't spoil the mood. Less than three minutes after their confession, Rami found himself on his back, legs spread, Skye between his legs. Right then, he felt a little bit like Skye was lifting him up to touch the heavens.

He'd started by kissing the insides of Rami's thighs and gently stroking over his balls, and then Rami heard the click of the lube cap, and his world shifted. How had he gone this long without feeling some part of Skye inside him?

He couldn't open his eyes, couldn't form coherent words with speech or sign. He was a prisoner of his pleasure, thighs trembling as his hips bucked upward and his cocks twitched almost angrily against his stomach.

He was too close and too far, and the feeling was made worse when Skye finally found his prostate and began to gently stroke his fingers over it. It was too much.

Without words to beg for more—or for it to stop—he wasn't really sure what he needed—instead, he took both dicks into his hands and began to stroke them hard and fast. It was the only way to make the feeling inside him make sense.

His orgasm rushed toward him without much warning, and between one breath and the next, he was coming. He let go with a sharp, loud cry, his whole body moving almost violently against the sheets. It was only when he felt the last pulse of his right-side cock that he realized Skye's fingers were no longer inside him.

Instead, he was stroking a gentle touch over his hole, his backside, his legs.

Rami took several long breaths and wondered how he was supposed to go live now that he'd been through that. But he was profoundly glad he'd done this first because everything had been so...so raw. Almost primal. And that wasn't something he wanted to share with an audience of strangers.

"Skye," he said weakly.

Skye pushed up and laid his body down on top of Rami's. The weight of him was everything. He was able to let out a full breath, and his thoughts became more coherent. "Tell me that wasn't a bad idea."

Rami shook his head and forced himself to open his eyes. He loved looking at Skye. He reached up and ran his finger over Skye's thin, very manicured eyebrow. "It was the best idea. I wouldn't want to do that on camera."

Skye leaned down and took a kiss. "Will you be able to come again?"

Rami blinked and assessed himself. If the feeling of Skye's dick was anything like his fingers, he wouldn't be able to stop himself. "Yes."

Skye grinned and kissed him again. "We shouldn't keep your audience waiting. The sooner we get this done, the sooner I can hold you."

That was the only thing Rami really wanted. It took more effort than he wanted to



give to peel himself away from Skye, but he didn't mind the few minutes alone in the bathroom to clean up. He felt loose and limber in more ways than one, and he was looking forward to feeling how Skye's body was going to move as he took the last bit of Rami's virginity that he'd been holding on to all these years.

It felt right. It felt like all that time he'd been rejected and mocked actually meant something good. It had been painful at the time—excruciating on nights when he was so lonely he wanted to wail into his pillow—but now, it felt like that pain was worth it.

He wasn't a fool. He knew that this might not last forever. In reality, nothing did. They'd eventually die, and their energy would be spread out into the universe to become something else. But in that moment, life felt like it had meaning.

For a second, he understood why his parents and siblings believed in something bigger and higher than themselves.

“Rami?”

He blinked and realized he'd gotten lost in his thoughts. Reaching back, he opened the bathroom door. ‘I got distracted. Two more minutes,’ he signed with one hand, then shut the door again and ran the cloth under the warm water and cleaned himself up. His hole felt a little sore, and he had no doubt it was going to be worse in the morning, but he was looking forward to that ache. It would be like a constant reminder of what had been, and what was, and—if it all worked out—what would be.

Twenty

Rami took a lot longer than two minutes, but Skye knew he probably needed the time to gather himself. Rami had damn near fallen apart during his last orgasm. It was powerful in ways Skye had never seen before, not in his long years of working as an escort and seeing all sorts of people in all sorts of emotional situations.

Tears had slipped from the corners of Rami's eyes, but Skye didn't panic. His face was full of joy and ecstasy, and his kisses were sloppy and happy when it was all over. So he took his time making sure he had all their supplies ready, and he made sure the camera was where it should be.

He was going to fuck Rami in his chair. The plan was for him to be seated when the camera came on, and then Rami would walk into the frame like he always did. After that, they left it unscripted. Rami wanted it to feel real, and Skye understood.

There was less weight to it now that Skye had fingered his boyfriend. He knew what he felt like deep inside him. He knew what Rami's body did when Skye stroked his prostate and what he looked like when he came from having something of Skye's filling him.

The mystery was gone, but for the first time ever, that wasn't a bad thing.

Out of his periphery, Skye saw the bathroom door open, and Rami appeared. He was moving a little slow, but there was no hesitation in his body. He just looked tired.

"You know you can tell your audience that you need another day, right?" Skye said.

Rami frowned, then shook his head. “No. I want this right now. I don’t want to wait another night to have you inside me.”

Skye shivered, his cock growing thicker. He waited until Rami was just close enough, and then he snagged him by the waist. “Kiss me and tell me you love me before we have to turn this damn camera on.”

Rami smiled and dipped his head low. His lips barely touched Skye’s, but he spoke loud enough for Skye to hear him. “I love you.” And then he kissed him until Skye’s toes curled.

They couldn’t linger. Rami had to pull back, adjust Skye until the only thing in the frame was his chest, legs, and cock, and then he turned him slightly sideways so the camera would be able to get the angle that allowed everyone to see Skye’s cock sinking deep into Rami’s ass.

And as Skye held his breath, Rami stepped to the side, then reached over and clicked a few buttons. The monitor buffered, and then suddenly, Skye could see himself on the screen. For a moment, he felt a rush of panic, but then he remembered he was safe. He was with Rami. No one would recognize him who hadn’t had a session with him, and those people were legally obligated to keep their mouths shut.

The edges of a few tattoos were visible, but that wouldn’t last long. Soon enough, Rami’s body would be covering them.

Skye’s lungs felt a little tight as he tried to remember that air needed to flow in and out, and he steadied himself just as Rami moved into the view of the camera. Like always, he said nothing. He walked up and ran his fingers along Skye’s chest, circling his nipples, then trailing down to play with the head of his cock.

Skye knew the drill. They hadn’t rehearsed this, but he knew what was coming next.

He plucked the condom from the side of the bed and handed it to Rami, who made sure the viewers could see it. When Skye turned his head, he saw the scrolling chat and the donation button at the top of the screen.

The numbers were rising. He was too far from the screen to make out who was saying what, even with his contacts in, but it didn't matter. In that moment, he didn't give a shit. Nothing else in the world mattered except Rami's perfect, clever fingers holding his cock and rolling the condom on him.

He caught his breath and struggled to keep from saying anything. Though his hearing was still nowhere close to as normal as it had been, everything in the room sounded so damn loud. Every breath was like a roaring wave, every step like a gunshot. Skye had never felt so on edge before. Not even his first night working as Gluttony.

And for the first time since he'd been with Rami, he felt his Sin close to the surface. He was a goddamn glutton for this man. Nothing else mattered except having him as much as possible, in every way possible. He wanted to spend the rest of his life indulging in Rami's presence, in giving him everything he wanted, in holding him every night.

It was a ridiculous ask of God, or the universe or whatever was out there, but he didn't care. He wanted more. There would never be enough.

It took everything in him not to beg Rami to touch him more—to move closer. But his silence was rewarded when Rami turned toward him, straddling one of his thighs and pointing his ass at the camera. With a single wiggle of his hips, Skye knew what he was asking for.

He picked up the lube and smeared a fresh dollop on his fingers, then used his free hand to pull Rami's ass cheek to the side, exposing him. The chat was going wild. Even if he could have read it this far off, he couldn't have kept up.

And Rami would be able to make his next dozen mortgage payments on tonight alone with the way the numbers were climbing.

Skye turned his attention to his lover. His beloved. The love of his life. He stroked two fingers down the crack in his ass, then circled them over where they'd been just a handful of minutes before. Rami's body twitched, and he gave a barely there groan. It wasn't louder than some of the other unconscious noises Skye knew he made on the lives, but this one was for him.

This one was because of him, and that was going right to his head.

He squeezed Rami's hip to warn him, and then carefully, he slipped both in at once. Rami allowed himself a loud groan as he fucked his hips forward. His cocks were hard again—not fully, but close. He humped them against the top of Skye's thigh, leaning forward so everyone had a view.

Skye shoved his fingers in deeper, harder, the loud squelch dominating the room. He closed his eyes as he lost himself to the feeling of Rami's body moving with the rhythm of his hand, and it took a lot of effort to stay present in the moment because there was still so much more to be had.

A finger traced along the back of his neck. Letters, Skye realized. N O W. N O W.

Now.

He understood. He let his fingers slide from Rami's hole, and then he spread his legs as his lover turned, and Skye took him by the hips, guiding him down. When Rami was crouched and nearly there, Skye gripped his dick and aimed. Rami's weight sank down on him, catching, slipping, then catching again.

He groaned loudly again as the head of Skye's cock slipped past the first ring of

muscle. Then Rami froze. Time seemed to freeze with him...and then he let out a breath, relaxed his core, and sank all the way down.

Skye couldn't help the noise he made. It was instinctual, almost animal. It was a bone-deep satisfaction of relief for something he hadn't realized he'd been waiting for. He could have been perfectly fine and content the rest of his life never having this.

But now that it was his?

Now that Rami had allowed him this moment of impossible closeness?

This would live rent-free in his head for the rest of his life. This, and that three-fingered sign he'd been given minutes before, would be the moments he relieved on his death bed.

I love you , he thought loudly as he gripped the side of the chair with one hand and gave a hard thrust upward. Rami grunted, his ass clenching. Skye did it again, and again. Rami began to match him, his legs flexing as he rose and fell on Skye's cock.

Eventually, he leaned back, his legs spread wide, bouncing restlessly, and Skye knew that twitch in him. Knew what he wanted. What he needed. Reaching around with both arms, he took both of Rami's cocks—one in each hand—and he began to stroke them out of time with each other.

Rami let out a soft cry of both need and protest. Skye knew they were both playing it up for the camera a little. He was desperate to get Rami to come so he could have the man all to himself again, but he wanted to make this last as long as possible. He wanted Rami to feel empowered with the thrall he had over all these strangers.

His hands began to slow after long, agonizing minutes of teasing him. They began to

match rhythm. Rami let out a sobbing sigh of relief, and he began to bounce on Skye's dick again. He'd been holding off his orgasm for so long that Skye realized he wasn't going to last.

He stroked Rami faster, harder, shoving him toward the edge of that cliff, and Rami's body began to heat him as he got closer.

Yes , he thought loudly. He would have given anything to scream Rami's name as he came—but there was time for that later.

His hips moved, humping up into his tight hole as his balls tightened and his orgasm burned at the base of his spine. Rami squeezed down around him, and before Skye could help himself, that was it. He was coming. His grip got sloppy, so Rami gripped Skye's hands and began to jack himself with them.

Skye pulsed another rush of come into the condom deep in Rami's ass as he pictured what that looked like on the video. And then Rami was letting go. He cried out louder than he ever did—loud enough for Skye to hear him perfectly. Hot ropes hit his knuckles as both their arms slowed down, and Rami collapsed backward into Skye's embrace.

He held him, kissed over the back of his neck where the camera couldn't see. He stroked a touch over his chest, his nipples, down the hairy trail toward his cocks. He gently ran his fingers over both, making them twitch, making Rami groan. Then Rami reached for something on the bed, and the screen went dark.

He had a little remote, and suddenly, with the push of a button, it was over. It was done .

Skye swallowed heavily. "Is it safe to talk?"

“Mm,” Rami said. He made no move to get up, and Skye was grateful because he needed his weight for a moment. It kept it all feeling real. Safe. Like it wasn’t some dream he’d conjured up in the darkest, most lonely moment of his life.

He kissed the back of Rami’s shoulder again and loosely wrapped his arms around his waist. “I love you,” he murmured.

Rami let out a sound that might have been a laugh—Skye wasn’t sure. But he knew it was the sound of joy and maybe even peace. “I love you too.”

Hell. He was never going to get tired of hearing that. Not ever.

Testing the door handle, Skye marched into Jet’s place when it turned and opened. It was the signal he wasn’t going to walk in on anything naked. Probably. There had been some mistakes in the past, but it was usually a safe bet.

And he felt a gut punch of relief when he stepped into the living room to find Jet lying on the couch with his knees up, his braille refresher over his thighs, fingers reading, and Taylor on the floor by his feet, working with his laptop on the coffee table.

Jet turned his head, and Taylor looked up.

“Skye,” Taylor said.

“Hi. I think I’m having a panic attack.”

“Metaphorical or literal?” Jet asked.

“Both?”



Feeling for Taylor's head, Jet carefully moved his legs around his partner and then set his refresher down on the table before opening his arms. "Come here."

Skye looked over at Taylor, checking in with his eyes, and Taylor rolled his own. "Go get your cuddles. I'm too swamped to care."

Skye wasted no time leaning into Jet's space, letting his much larger friend tug him into a tight embrace as they settled back against the cushions. Not to be left out, Thursday gave a loud trill and hopped up on Jet's lap, shoving between them.

"What's wrong?" Jet asked.

Skye took a small breath. "How do I fuck another man?"

Jet made a sound like he was choking on his tongue. "Babe, if you haven't figured out that by now, I don't even know what you're doing at work."

"That's not what I meant," Skye said, shoving at him. "How do you fuck someone else after you fall in love?"

"Oh," Jet said very softly.

Taylor cleared his throat, then stood up. "I'm going to excuse myself from this conversation if you don't mind."

"Shit, I'm sorry," Skye said in a rush. Taylor's voice was very tense. "I didn't mean?—"

"No, hon. It's not you." Taylor flipped his laptop closed and bent down, pressing a kiss to Skye's forehead. "I've been having a bad week, and it's making me feel irrational. Jet's been amazing at giving me extra attention, but I don't think I can hear

this right now. I'm going to go bother August for some help with my photos."

"He's a finalist for this huge international award in photography. He has to submit a portfolio along with the piece that's been nominated," Jet said, grinning proudly. Taylor's cheeks pinked.

"Will you show me the piece?" Skye asked him.

"Yep. Come by later after your crisis has been averted." He squeezed Skye's shoulder, then leaned in and took a filthy, quick kiss from Jet. "Tell me you love me," he murmured.

"To the ends of the universe," Jet said only just loud enough that Skye could hear it. He pretended he couldn't. Those words belonged to Taylor.

Gathering his stuff, Taylor let himself out the front door, and Skye collapsed back against his friend. "I didn't mean to screw up your harmony."

"You didn't," Jet assured him. He ran his hand up and down Skye's arm. "And I've been where you are. The first few sessions after I realized just how in love I was were...hard."

"Did it go back to normal?"

Jet worried his bottom lip between his teeth, then let out a breath. "No. Not...not exactly. It got easier. But it took a lot of embracing the concept that Sloth isn't all of who I am. That he's the man who does this job, and Jet is the man who loves Taylor beyond all ration and reason."

Beyond all ration and reason. That was exactly how he was feeling. It was too goddamn soon, but he was struggling to give a shit what everyone else considered

normal or the right time. As Stone had said to him before, everything else was details. He had time to learn details, and he didn't need to deny what was in his heart to do it.

Rami was his. And he was Rami's—totally and completely.

"I'm going take your silence as understanding," Jet said after a beat.

"Fuck. Uh...yeah. Yes. I'm just in total crisis mode because Rami is the best thing that's ever happened to me, and somehow, tomorrow night, I have to check that shit at the door and go make a man fall for me for a handful of hours."

"You have to make him fall for Gluttony. You have to keep him wanting and needy and indulgent until that timer runs out. And then Gluttony clocks out, and Skye goes home to the love of his life," Jet corrected.

Skye let out a rush of air. "How did you do it?"

"We spent as much time together as we could. Taylor was dealing with his own crisis over his studio, and he was kind of buckling under the weight of grief from all his terminal kids," Jet said. "He needed more space than I did, and giving it to him was hard, but it was worth it."

"I don't know that Rami wants a lot of space," Skye mused. "He wants time to be left to his art, and he likes quiet—which works for me. But he seems to want me nearby."

"So be nearby. Figure out your new normal for the both of you. Figure out where you fit into his life and where he fits into yours."

That was the only real thing that scared Skye in that moment. What if they fit together but didn't fit anywhere else? What if Rami's family hated him? What if Rami didn't like the Sins? Things had gone well so far, but Skye had a long history of

people disliking him for no real discernable reason other than he had that kind of face.

Rami loved his family. A lot. He was close to them, and Skye couldn't stomach being in the way of that. So what would he do?

What could he do?

"I can literally hear you panicking harder."

He let out a watery laugh and rubbed both hands down his face. "I don't know how to stop."

"Just breathe. He loves you as much as you love him, right?"

"Yes," Skye said. He could answer that honestly and with full confidence. After the live was over and Rami dealt with the admin side of collecting money and making sure there were no dangerous threats said in the chat, Rami led him to the bathroom.

They undressed carefully and spent a short forever simply touching under the warm spray with bubbly hands and soft lips trading careful kisses that got them both heated but ultimately led nowhere. It was perfect.

Rami put together another snack tray, and they ate in bed with Ponyo on mute because Rami said just watching the animation helped him feel relaxed. Eventually, they dozed off in each other's arms and woke the next morning much the same way.

Their lives had to separate eventually. Rami was still unsure what he wanted to do with the channel, but he needed to get back to his art, and he needed to call his parents to arrange a time to go visit.

And Skye had appointments, though what he really needed was this time to crisis over them because he didn't want to give up his job. He loved his job. He just needed to make sure that it was the right thing for the both of them.

“What does he think?”

“About my work?” Skye asked.

“Mm. He's never asked you to quit, has he?”

“No. And I wouldn't ask him that either,” Skye told him. “He sees it far more black and white than I do. It's ridiculous that he's the one who's okay and I'm the one losing myself.”

“You're not losing yourself. You're in love,” Jet pointed out. “Most of us now have been there. And we've all made it work. You might be the odd one out, but I'm willing to bet you just need time to breathe.”

“Yeah,” Skye said. He had a little time. And he was starting to feel a little more normal now that he'd gotten everything off his chest. It made him feel oddly better that Taylor actually did struggle sometimes. It made the whole thing feel a bit more rational, and that was what he needed. “Do you think his parents will like me?”

“I think any parent who doesn't like you for their son isn't looking out for their interests,” Jet told him seriously. “You are one of the best of us, Skye. And I mean that.”

Skye felt warm all over. And comforted. And safe. This was his home and his family, and just then, it hit him that he really could have both. “Thank you for being one of the best things that ever happened to me.”

“Save that sappy-ass shit for your boyfriend,” Jet said with a grimace, then laughed and pulled him close. “But I could say the same thing. And I’m happy for you.”

And God, it had been so long, but Skye could finally say he was happy for himself too.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am*

“I feel like this is going to be too much.”

Rami turned and looked at Skye, his brow lifted in that way that told Skye he wasn't sure if he should be flattered by his concern or annoyed. “For you or me?”

Skye sighed. “Both. Either. I'm just stressed.”

“About my family?” Rami asked. He held out his hand, and Skye felt a wave of comfort when he took it.

Skye nodded, biting his lip. “What if they don't like me?”

Rami's brow furrowed, and he glanced away from Skye toward his parents' front door. The house was nothing special. It had the same look as most of the other houses on the street. It wasn't where Rami grew up, he'd told Skye. His parents had sold that place and got something bigger so they'd have room for their grandkids, so they got one of those build-a-home places in a gated community.

Rami hadn't loved it, but since he'd moved out to live in his grandfather's place, he liked it a little better.

“Skye?”

“Mm?”

“Do you trust me?”

Skye looked at him, eyes going wide. “Of course I do. Have I given you the impression that I don’t?”

Rami shook his head, a tiny smile playing at his lips. His fingers were twisting together, his nervous stim, but he shook them out, then reached for Skye’s hand and squeezed it. “I don’t know how they’ll feel about you. They won’t be unkind because my parents are never unkind. They’ve only yelled at one of my friends, and to tell you the truth, he deserved it.”

“The dolma spitter,” Skye said, wrinkling his nose. Rami had told him the full story a few weeks ago when Skye began really prepping to meet the parents.

It had been three full months since he’d taken Rami’s virginity on camera. Three long, glorious months of getting to know the man he’d fallen in love with. And time together had only made him want Rami more, in every meaning of the word.

Things were quiet, and still, and so good. Rami had paid off his tax bill, and together, they filmed three or four videos a week, which Rami edited and put up on his channel. His subscribers had gone way down, but they were toying with the idea of bringing back the auctions, allowing people to bid on what Rami and Skye did together.

Rami still wasn’t a hundred percent on board, so Skye wrote it down on a piece of paper and literally pinned it to a board so they could revisit it later. Rami really loved that idea.

For a while, Skye was able to pretend like he didn’t need to do big, important things. Like meet the parents. The first time Rami saw them again, he’d gone on his own with his brother. And he went for dinner once, sometimes twice a week. But Ahmed had apparently spilled the beans one night at a dinner, so...

Now, it was time.



“Can you tell me what’s scaring you?” Rami asked.

Skye looked at the house again. He saw a small face peeking through the living room blinds. One of Rami’s nieces. His heart began to beat a little faster. “If they really don’t like me, is there any way forward for us? I don’t ever want to come between you and them.”

Rami shook his head. “I understand why you don’t get it because you didn’t grow up the way I did, but there won’t ever be a choice between you and them. Even if you’re not the person they’d pick out for me, they won’t ever stand in our way. They want me to be happy. And I’m happy.”

What a novel concept , Skye thought with a wry grin. He knew he’d never be taking Rami home to his parents, but he did bring him home to the Sins, and after the first barbeque where Rami discovered he really did like Stone’s Southern cooking, he turned up at least once a week to eat and visit.

And he had even been given a room at August’s studio to display some of his art. He’d sold a piece the week before, all on his own.

So maybe Skye did understand what acceptance without conditions looked like.

“Let’s go inside. Oh, can you remind me what your nieces’ names are?”

Rami laughed. “The tallest one is Layla. She’s seven. Middle one with the short hair is Maya, and the youngest is Haifa. They will definitely ask you to play Roblox, and you can say no.”

Skye groaned. “Will they hate me if I do? Or if I forget their names?”

“They don’t hate me and I won’t play with them. And my mom forgets even after all these years. She just calls them her little darlings and lets them play on her

computer,” Rami said. “Now. Come on. The longer we sit here, the worse your fear will get.”

Skye supposed it was true, so he got out and let Rami take his hand, leading him up to the door.

All of Skye’s fears were unfounded. Well. Mostly. Rami looked exactly like his dad—who had the same sort of serious, thick-browed stare that was unrelenting, even when he wasn’t making direct eye contact. He knew he was being sized up and judged, but in the end, it didn’t feel so bad.

It helped that he knew what to eat and how to eat it. He dove in with his fingers, and followed everyone’s lead, and made sure to compliment without being over-the-top. The girls enjoyed helping him pronounce the names of everything, and Skye could see Yara watching him, trying to hide her smile.

When no one was looking except Skye and Rami, she signed, ‘I like him.’

Rami flushed deeply and scooted just a little closer to Skye, though they were avoiding all PDA, which was a thing Rami had warned him about. His family was a little on the conservative side and preferred no PDA from anyone, and while Skye wouldn’t have minded a few kisses just to settle his nerves, it didn’t take long before he felt comfortable under their watchful eyes.

Ahmed showed up after dinner, and Skye found it fascinating how they managed to make communication work without his parents really knowing much ASL. They used a lot of home signs that didn’t make sense to him, but he hoped one day he’d be around long enough to get it.

He’d had lunch more than once with Ahmed though, so it was nice to have a friendly face join him when he stepped outside for a little fresh air.

‘Hi,’ Ahmed told him, knocking on the railing to get his attention.

Skye grinned and nodded. ‘Hey.’

‘Too much?’

Skye shook his head, glancing back over his shoulder through the kitchen window, where he could see Rami’s mom squeezing his cheeks and kissing his forehead. ‘It’s nice.’

‘Rami told me you don’t talk to your parents.’

Skye nodded. ‘I haven’t seen them much since they handed me a check and the key to my first apartment. But growing up, my house was never like this.’

‘We were lucky,’ Ahmed told him, though he looked a little sad. ‘They did the best they could—even if their best wasn’t always great.’

‘Signing?’

Ahmed let out a long sigh, an unconscious hum following. ‘Not just me. Rami too. They thought they could parent the Autism out of him. They were frustrated when it didn’t work. Just like they thought if they forced me to speak instead of sign, I would assimilate better. Eventually, they understood that Rami and I are different.’

Skye didn’t know what to say to that. ‘I like him different.’

Ahmed laughed and rolled his eyes. ‘I know. It’s very obvious. And I’m happy. I’ve never seen him loved the way you love him. I haven’t seen a lot of people loved the way you two are with each other.’

Skye felt warm in his chest. ‘I didn’t think it was possible.’

‘You scared me at first,’ Ahmed confessed.

Skye’s brows flew up. ‘Me?’

He shrugged. ‘Rich, white, drives a sports car. I thought maybe you knew about his secret and were playing with him.’

Shaking his head, Skye turned his gaze out onto the horizon for a long beat. ‘By the time I found out, I didn’t think twice about it. It’s just part of him. I love everything he is.’

‘I believe you,’ Ahmed assured him. He turned, resting his side against the railing. ‘I hope I find someone as good as you.’

‘Aren’t you?—’

Ahmed shook his head. ‘It’s over. Neither of us were sad about it. I think I realized after seeing you two, I want something more.’

‘It’s worth the wait,’ Skye told him.

Ahmed looked down, then took a breath and nodded. ‘I hope so. Anyway, I just wanted to come out here and tell you that of all the men lucky enough to know my brother, you’re the most worthy.’

Skye grinned and knocked his elbow against Ahmed’s. ‘Thank you.’

‘And if you’d like to call me your brother someday...I’d like that.’

Skye’s stomach did an almost violent swoop. He hadn’t thought about that before. Not marriage or kids or anything so...average. But his life wasn’t always going to be the Tower or Rami’s channel. There was room for other things too—a foggy future

that was coming more into focus every single day.

And God, he was so happy.

‘I’d like that,’ he eventually answered. ‘You might be the first to know.’

Ahmed grinned at him, then turned and settled by his side, watching as the last tendrils of dust faded into the dark night sky.

“I’m going to marry you someday,” Skye whispered. He was sated now, still breathing a little heavy, his cock slowly going soft inside Rami. He’d have to pull out soon so the condom didn’t leak, but he was taking a moment.

Rami stiffened, then eased away, releasing Skye in a soft slide as he turned onto his back. “What?”

Skye swallowed heavily, then reached for Rami, cupping his cheek. “I’d like to marry you someday,” he amended.

Rami licked his lips. “Officially?”

“Mm. If you want. Only if you want.”

“When you ask me, I’m going to say yes,” Rami told him.

Skye didn’t realize how badly he wanted to hear those words. He had no idea if the other Sins felt this way. If they thought about actual marriage and what came after all this. But he realized he didn’t want to live his life in some sort of faded echo of their own.

He wanted to walk his own path. And Rami was part of it. He leaned in and took a small, quiet kiss. “I love you.”

Rami laughed. “Yes. I know. You tell me every day.” He kissed back. “I like it. Never stop.”

Skye pulled back and met his gaze. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I never will.”