

STRAIGHT TALKING

THE CRUISE

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Editing by Jo Bird

INTRODUCTION

Straight Talking, is a standalone novella which includes my catch-up on the boys from *The Cruise* series.

If you haven't read the full series, then [click here](#) to check it out.

ASH AND MATT

Matt was flirting again.

He was supposed to be getting drinks for them both but had ended up waylaid by a pretty face, or rather faces. Ash could see the drinks his boyfriend was supposed to have retrieved sitting in the shade of the small deck side bar. They were momentarily forgotten as Matt found himself caught up in an animated conversation with a group of girls who had approached the bar while he'd been waiting.

Christ, maybe taking *another* cruise vacation was as bad an idea as Ash had insisted.

The large man in the deck chair beside him stirred, and Ash glanced at him. Unlike Ash, Dalton was one of the original members of Matt's group of friends. The five of them had known each other since they were teens, having attended the same school. Of course, technically, Ash had known all of them for nearly as long. However, their relationship with him had been about as friendly as a pissed-off wolverine is with an intruder in its den.

Yet here he was, laying beside one of them as though they were the most intimate of friends and watching the

man he had once hated with simmering jealousy. Life was weird, something Ash had always known but had only really understood just over a year ago when he'd run into Matt again. After they graduated, he would have been perfectly content to never see his most hated rival again, not knowing that running into him would mean falling in love of all things.

His once hated rival, now boyfriend, had temporarily forgotten about him in the face of pleasant smiles and tiny bikinis.

God, he hated the tropics.

"Does it bother you?" Dalton asked softly.

Ash had only gotten to know Dalton in the past year, and other than Matt, he was the one of the original five Ash had grown to know best. He knew part of it was just their lives getting in the way. They all had their own lives and relationships to deal with, though the five friends tried to meet up whenever they could. The other part was that despite three of the five bringing someone new into the group through a budding relationship, Ash was an outlier.

Ash didn't blame them for looking askance at him, even if it did irritate the shit out of him at times. Once upon a time, he'd been antagonistic to all of them, and it had been returned in full. Now he was dating Matt, all of them had been trying to shift their original opinion of him to something more likable. Not that they were alone in that, Ash had years of unresolved anger and frustration with them to unpack, and it wasn't always easy to see new friends under the baggage of years of dislike.

Dalton, however, was the easiest of them. Even back in their school years, Dalton had always been the quiet and gentle one of the five. Adulthood hadn't changed him much. He was still the biggest of the five original friends, but he

was the quintessential gentle giant. Dalton had been the first to embrace Ash's inclusion in the group and the first to find a way to be welcoming. His boyfriend, and former best friend for life, Zane, another member of the original five, could still be found giving Ash strange looks as if he couldn't quite figure out how the hell Ash had become a part of them.

For his part, Ash wondered the same thing sometimes.

"Does what bother me?" Ash asked gruffly, glad he was wearing dark shades. That way, he could avert his eyes from Matt chatting animatedly with the girls without Dalton seeing.

Dalton chuckled softly. "I can see your eyes moving, you know. I'm sitting beside you, not in front of you."

Ash scowled, more annoyed at being busted than Dalton's seeming telepathy. "I'm just enjoying this wonderful weather."

Admittedly it *was* nice weather, even if he barely noticed as the sun warmed his skin or how the salty air brushed over it. They had, once again, paid an obscene amount of money to house themselves on a massive ship. Matt had been all for the idea when Zane presented it, both of them thinking it would be a great way to celebrate how their lives had changed a year before.

Personally, Ash thought it was a little cheesy, but considering how excited Matt had been at the idea, he couldn't bring himself to voice his opinion. Even he had to admit the cruise the year before, which had been a highly unusual few months long, had been life-changing for all of them. He wasn't sure what the statistical chance was of a group of five friends all managing to find a long-term partner on the same cruise, but it had to be low. Especially considering couples like Matt and himself, who should have

hated one another, or Dalton and Zane, who'd been straight.

Weird.

"Is the weather as good over at the bar?" Dalton asked, and Ash didn't have to look at him to know the man was smirking.

"I remember you being a lot less annoying," Ash grumbled, adjusting his sunglasses and the towel under him. "How the hell did sleeping with Zane make you more irritating when being friends with him for years didn't?"

"Gay osmosis."

"That's the stupidest fucking thing I've ever heard."

"You're changing the subject."

"Damn right I am," Ash said, leaning back and closing his eyes. He was probably going to regret getting so much sun later, but he couldn't be bothered to move.

"You know he doesn't mean anything by it," Dalton continued. "He's just...friendly."

Ash rolled his eyes. "I'm not sitting here being a jealous boyfriend, thanks. Christ, I'm never going to get used to calling him that."

And yes, he knew Dalton was right. In the past year, Matt had never given Ash a reason to doubt the man's loyalty. Maybe things had been a little shaky when they'd first started down this absurd path, but Ash knew it was as much his fault as it was Matt's. Neither of them had exactly been good at talking about shit, content to just let things happen, right up until things had almost ended in disaster.

Ash knew what he was getting into by dating someone like Matt. The man was good-looking and incredibly friendly. That he thrived in social settings just cemented the reality that he was very popular at gatherings or around other people. Most people, upon seeing the scowl that

usually resided on Ash's face, would quickly find somewhere else to be. Which worked just fine for him, Ash didn't want to deal with other people unless he had to, and small talk made him want to find the nearest balcony to jump off.

Matt, however, needed it, and Ash wasn't going to keep the man tied to his side just because he knew people were going to hit on him. As Ash had struggled to admit to himself, Matt was ridiculously good-looking. He kept himself in shape. He was tall with broad shoulders, and his bright hazel eyes contrasted with his almost black hair. The man was just too damned likable for his own good. Ash couldn't recall a time when people didn't enjoy a conversation with Matt. Another skill that made him incredibly alluring to other people.

The traits that once made Ash hate the man were now things he both loved and found himself exasperated over.

"It's okay to say it bothers you," Dalton continued, the teasing tone gone and replaced by something gentler.

"If I were bothered, I'd fucking say it," Ash said, trying to keep a scowl from reappearing on his face.

As much as the whole situation bothered him, Ash knew it wasn't Matt's fault. The man was sociable, and it wasn't his fault he attracted attention. He also knew, despite how it looked, Matt wasn't flirting with those girls. He might laugh and joke, maybe even pay a harmless compliment to one of them, but Matt wasn't one to stray.

Once, Ash might have sneered at the very idea. It wasn't exactly a secret that while single, Matt was on the slutty side. If anything, the thought of what Ash might have said to the man upon learning that *before* they'd started dating was enough to make him cringe. A great deal of their shared animosity had been born out of repeated

misunderstandings, fueled by their tempers and venomous words.

Dalton chuckled, patting Ash on the shoulder. "You know, barking and snarling at us isn't as intimidating or frustrating as it used to be."

"Well, it should be. I've taken out guys your size before," Ash said, not brushing away Dalton's hand.

"It's kind of hard to be intimidated by a guy when you've seen his lovey-dovey face."

"You need to spend less time around Zane. I do *not* make lovey-dovey faces."

"Right. Of course not. You just stop looking as angry and actually look happy when you're looking at Matt sometimes."

"I will happily throw you into the ocean."

"I don't know. You haven't been to the gym much lately, from what I've heard. You might not be able to pick me up."

Ash huffed, finally opening his eyes to glare at Dalton. "Where's your boyfriend?"

A bright and somewhat wry voice piped up from behind him. "Since when do you start looking for me?"

"You need to do something about Dalton," Ash told Zane, who stood there with a bottle of sunscreen clenched in his hand. Apparently, the smaller man burned even easier than Ash and carried the stuff with him religiously. "He's being a pest."

"Dalton doesn't know how to be a pest," Zane said, and Ash didn't have to look at him to know the man was giving him a dirty look. Before whatever weird sexual awakening Zane and Dalton had the year before, the two men had been incredibly close friends. They'd always been protective of each other, the more emotionally driven and slightly erratic

Zane more so than the calmer Dalton. "Unless you're being a dick."

"I think this is a great time to point out you guys have always called me a dick," Ash said, really wishing Matt would stop talking so he could have his drink.

"Because you were a dick," Zane pointed out.

"We were all dicks," Dalton said diplomatically.

"You weren't," Ash offered up. "The rest of these fuckers were, though, you're right."

"Dalt, why are you always the favorite?" Zane asked with both exasperation and fondness.

"Because he's not a dick," Ash told him with a grumble. "It's annoying. Especially when he's being a pest."

Zane stepped around Ash's deck chair to plop down on Dalton's instead. Ash didn't even have to look at them to know they were probably giving each other sloppy smiles. "Babe, are you being a pest?"

"Yeah," Dalton said contentedly. "He won't admit to being irritated that Matt is talking to a bunch of pretty girls."

Zane craned his neck around and smirked. "Well, he's talking. They're trying their best to get more than that."

"Clearly," Ash said, annoyed at the amount of venom in his voice.

Zane grinned devilishly at him. "Did you ever think you'd see the day you'd get jealous of Matt being hit on?"

"I'm not jealous," Ash insisted. "And now *you're* being a pest."

"Aww, he's got his extra grumpy face on today," Zane said with a laugh.

Ash's annoyance grew when a shadow fell over him. It didn't really matter if he should be avoiding sunlight. This was *his* sunlight, and he wanted to bask in it uninterrupted.

“Seriously?” Ash growled, yanking his sunglasses off and glaring up at...Matt.

The man smirked down at him, holding out a glass dripping with condensation. “Sorry to interrupt you burning yourself alive, but you looked like you were in sore need of a drink.”

“Did they have to go to the arctic to find the ice?” Ash grumbled as he took the offered drink.

“Hmm, someone seems crankier than when I left,” Matt said, eyeing the other two nearby. “You two wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“Us?” Zane asked in an innocent voice. “Don’t know nothin’.”

“Uh-huh,” Matt said slowly. “Dalton?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny your accusation,” Dalton said calmly.

Matt snorted. “Even politicians don’t get away with that.”

“Politicians aren’t this cute, though,” Zane said, prodding Dalton’s cheek until the man finally swatted at him to make him stop.

“Gross,” Ash muttered, taking a sip from his drink.

He was startled when the shadow returned, only for Matt to slide into his field of vision, a smirk on his face. It was the only warning Ash had before the feel of Matt’s warm lips, and the lingering sweetness of the drink they brought with them was pressed against his mouth. Ash flailed in surprise, slopping some of his drink onto his arm, but didn’t push Matt away. When his boyfriend pulled back, looking way too smug, Ash regretted not giving the man at least a little shove.

“Now he looks even grumpier,” Zane noted, standing up.

"That's his horny face," Matt said, smile widening when Ash choked on his drink.

"It is not!" Ash protested.

"Now *that's* gross," Zane said, wrinkling his nose. "C'mon, Dalton, these two are being weird. We're supposed to be meeting Bryce and Jesse."

"And what are you four up to?" Matt asked curiously.

"There's supposed to be this virtual aquarium or something. I don't know. Apparently, it's all projections and stage effects, but it makes you feel like you're in the water or something," Zane said with a shrug.

"Bryce looked like he was going to say no, but then Jesse piped up and said, 'It sounds interesting' and well...you know."

"You can just say he's whipped," Ash said, still glaring in annoyance at Matt.

"True, especially since I'm familiar with the feeling," Zane said brightly, taking Dalton's hand and dragging him off.

"Same," Dalton said, waving at them before disappearing out of sight.

"Weirdos," Ash muttered, taking another drink. Only then did he realize Matt was still standing there, staring at him. "What?"

Matt chuckled. "There's a gym on board."

"And?"

"And, our lazy asses haven't been to the gym in weeks."

"We haven't been working out because we've been busy. But now we're on vacation, you want to go work out? The fuck kind of logic is that?"

"The kind where I know both me and my boyfriend really enjoy working out. And the idea of watching him get all sweaty is always a good one."

Ash rolled his eyes. "Pervert."

"That's not a no."

"It's not a yes either."

"We could always, uh, revisit our love of showers."

Ash hesitated before downing his drink. "Fine."



MATT KNEW there was something wrong with Ash. When the man was bitching, moaning, and growling his head off, it meant his mood was fine, and he was just being his usual self. It was when he looked irritated but kept his peace that Matt knew something was eating away at him. He also knew if Ash wasn't bringing up the problem, he was thinking through it or trying to deal with it on his own. Trying to address the problem right away would only irritate Ash further and possibly result in another argument, so he had to be tricky about it.

Which just so happened to involve having the man take out his aggressions on his own body using workout equipment. The gym on this cruise wasn't nearly as impressive as the one they'd taken the year before, but there was more than enough for Ash to throw himself at.

Over the course of the next couple of hours, Ash threw himself into the workout with impressive fervor. There weren't many other people in the gym and those that were kept to the treadmills. Everywhere else was just there for the two of them.

Matt worked at a more leisurely pace, which meant he could watch Ash for as long as he wished. It didn't matter how much time passed, watching Ash workout was something Matt always enjoyed. The man was an impressive specimen, and Matt watched his muscles strain against the

workout or admired the slight sheen of his arms and chest as he worked up a sweat. Sure, Ash's eyes continued to glare forward, his red hair sticking to his forehead, but honestly, Matt found it appealing.

It was funny how people reacted to Ash when first meeting him. On the one hand, there was this good-looking, well-built man, and on the other hand, he carried himself with all the approachability of a snarling tiger. People were often torn between being drawn to him and wondering if maybe they should just leave him alone.

"You're being lazy," Ash commented, breaking him out of his thoughts as he wiped his face with a towel.

Matt grinned from his position at the stair stepper. "Maybe I've just been enjoying the show."

Ash's already red face grew another shade darker. "God, you're such a freaking perv."

"And I have never tried to deny that," Matt said, making sure Ash was watching him as he checked out the man's ass. "But hey, when there's something worth watching..."

Ash rolled his eyes, but Matt wasn't fooled. Unlike the Ash he'd known before, there was no real heat or venom in the man's irritation or sarcasm. Matt believed Ash just... didn't know how to react to things, so he went through the motions. It didn't mean Ash *couldn't* be sweet or soft because Matt had most certainly seen plenty of evidence of it, but it wasn't Ash's standard operation.

"I could keep hitting on you, which for the record, I'm completely fine doing," Matt said with a grin. "Or you could tell me what Zane and Dalton were irritating you about."

When Ash looked around, Matt knew he had the man. Ash had worked out most of his aggression, and there was no one else around to hear him. This was about as safe and

calm as Ash got, save for those tender moments when they were alone in their room.

"They kept saying I was jealous," Ash muttered, grimacing in what Matt could see was discomfort.

"Jealous? About what?" Matt asked in genuine confusion.

Ash huffed, tossing his towel into a nearby bin. "It's nothing, Matt. They were just giving me shit. They do that. Fuck, *you* do that."

"Right," Matt said, hopping off his machine. "But I don't give you shit when I know it's something serious, and I get the feeling this is serious. *Were* you feeling jealous?"

He could see Ash struggling with himself, both wanting to avoid the topic while regretting even going this far but wanting to keep himself calm and communicate as well. Opening up was not in Ash's skill set, and it was a struggle for him to admit when things bothered him. The man despised feeling vulnerable, having convinced himself it was a show of weakness.

"Yeah, fine, fuck it," Ash huffed, snatching up his water bottle roughly. "I was being jealous. You were talking to those girls, and I could see how much they were trying to eye fuck you. I got pissed off, but it's not your fault, alright? I know it's my fault for being that way, and it's stupid."

It was, objectively speaking, an interesting shift in attitude from Ash. A year ago, Ash might have blamed Matt for his feelings. Being stuck with a bunch of strong emotions always left Ash feeling skittish and combative. Yet, over the past year, they'd managed to work through a few things, and this was a sign of progress.

"As you've pointed out, emotions can be kinda stupid," Matt said, reaching out and taking hold of Ash's wrist

gently. His boyfriend looked down at his hand but didn't pull away, another good sign. "Why were you jealous?"

Ash huffed, rolling his eyes. "Because I'm an idiot?"

"You're...blaming yourself for this?"

"What, I'm going to blame you? You were talking to them, Matt. You didn't even glance at their chests."

Matt raised a brow, looking down at Ash's barely covered chest. "What, when I had that waiting for me on a nearby chair?"

Ash's face colored again. "See? Like I said, it's not your fault, so just drop it."

Okay, so this was progress, but not as much as Matt hoped. The last thing he wanted was for Ash to start punishing himself just because he felt things that *could* be problematic.

"And if I can do something not to make you feel that way," Matt said, tugging gently on Ash's arm. "Then I want to know."

Ash gave him an exasperated look. "Like what, Matt? Stop talking to people? Stop being so good-looking? Stop being so likable?"

"Uhh, not quite sure what to do with that list," Matt said with a frown. "I'll be honest, I was kinda hoping for something I might be able to fix."

Ash gave him a dirty look. "It's not a problem you can fix. I was just being an asshole, and you didn't do anything wrong, alright? Just..."

"No," Matt said firmly, smiling gently.

Ash scowled. "What do you mean, no?"

"I mean, no, you weren't being an asshole. If you were being an asshole, you'd be taking it out on me despite standing right here admitting I wasn't doing anything wrong," Matt told him.

He thought it was kind of important to admit he hadn't done anything wrong. The girls had approached him while he'd waited for their drinks and started chatting. Matt had spent many years learning to read and gauge other people's interest, and there had been no question in his mind that they had wanted more than just conversation out of him.

In another time, in another place, he would have been sorely tempted and hard-pressed to pick just one of them. The girls had been friendly and good-looking, and the conversation had been lighthearted and playful. Nothing serious, nothing demanding, just the sort of thing that could carry on for a few hours over drinks in the warm afternoon sun.

And even if he had felt a moment of temptation to flirt or a twinge of regret that he was no longer single and care-free, all he would have had to do was glance over and see Ash. The girls looked good, but Matt couldn't think of anything or anyone who could hold his attention quite like Ash.

"You know what I like?" Matt began, trying to catch Ash's gaze.

"What?" Ash asked, sounding confused and grumpy.

"I like those moments when I'm not right at your side, and I'm off talking to someone or doing my own thing. And I'll think of you, take a look around, and there you are," Matt said, sliding his hand down to grip Ash's hand in his own. "You're usually standing in a corner or at a table, glaring at everything around you. But there you are, all the same."

"What, I'm supposed to talk to people? I'm pretty bad at that if you haven't noticed," Ash muttered.

Matt smiled, pulling Ash even closer. "And I know that even when you don't feel like going out for the night with

me, you're okay if I do. I know that if I want to show you off, you'll put up with it for a little while, just like you know I won't stay long when you'd rather be home. Just like I know that spot on your thighs that makes you lose your mind, or those two ribs that are *way* more ticklish than anything else on your body."

A complicated emotion set in on Ash's face, though it was overlapped by a frown. "If this is you trying to make me feel better about being a jealous idiot, it's not helping. I know you weren't doing anything wrong, and yeah, I trust you, okay?"

"I'm trying to say I do know that," Matt said, intertwining their fingers now. "I know you know I'm not going anywhere. And I know I won't because there's no one I want to turn around at a party to try to find more than you. There's no one I want waiting back at our place, grumpy and irritated because I'm a time blind moron who didn't realize how late it was getting more than you. I want you grumpy, annoyed, moaning, and demanding more, I want you soft and a little bashful, and I want you jealous. I want all those things. I want to know them too."

"Why the fuck would you want to know when I'm jealous?" Ash asked in disbelief. He hesitated, then scowled. "And since when am I bashful?"

"Do you want the real answer to that one or the jackass one?"

"I...I'm going to regret this, but I want to know both."

"It took you thirty seconds to come up with a five-word greeting to my mom when you met her."

"Okay, you're a dick."

"And the real answer is you get shy when I do shit like this or tell you how much I love you. The first time I told you I loved you, I thought you were going to clam up and

never speak again...and I don't think I've ever seen you turn that red before."

Ash gave him a push. "Asshole!"

Matt laughed, snagging Ash's other hand and pulling him close. "And maybe part of it is that I like knowing you're jealous because I feel special, so if it makes you feel better, you can blame it on my ego."

Ash snorted. "Yeah, but you're going to say something on top that's gonna ruin any chance of me doing that."

Matt smiled at him. "And I want to know because I love your grumpy ass, and I want to know what's going on in that head of yours. And because good or bad, I want to be a part of your life, even if it means having to tell you cute shit so you can be reassured."

"God, this feels like some corny speech in one of those teen books," Ash said with a huff. "I feel like the insecure girlfriend...boyfriend, whatever."

"Nah," Matt said, pulling Ash flush against him. "You felt a totally normal human emotion, dealt with it well, and now your boyfriend, who you love dearly, is totally up for making you feel better."

"You irritate me," Ash muttered.

"That's what I said."

Ash snorted before drawing Matt the last few inches closer and kissing him. It wasn't quite the hungry, demanding kiss he liked to give when he was riled up and ready to tear Matt's clothes off, but it was certainly pushy. There was a need to it that wasn't usually there, and Matt could only hope he was able to give Ash whatever it was he needed.

"Asshole," Ash muttered against his lips.

Matt smiled. "Yeah."

"But I love you. I know, I know."

"You do."

"I do."

"You wanna rinse off and go relax somewhere?"

"Can we have dinner in our room?"

Which Matt took as a sign Ash needed a break from being in public and just wanted to decompress. Not that he minded, some of his favorite moments with the other man were when it was just the two of them, completely secure from the eyes of other people. It was then Ash let his guard down, his face grew less annoyed, his shoulders eased, and he allowed himself to just...be him.

"We can definitely do that," Matt promised.

Something heated flashed in Ash's eyes, and his hand slid down. Matt's brow rose as Ash's finger hooked into the band of his shorts, giving them a couple of brief outward tugs.

"And you promised me a little bit of fun in a public shower," Ash said slowly, his entire expression shifting toward lust.

Matt grinned, always appreciating this playful side of Ash. Despite the man's absolute hatred of being around too many people for too long, he was paradoxically fond of getting the two of them naked in public places. "I do believe I did. But I checked it out earlier. The showers here aren't individual stalls."

"Then I guess we better try to be quiet and quick," Ash told him with a smirk, turning to walk off in a blatant invitation.

One Matt wouldn't turn down so long as he had a functioning body and brain. This cruise might have been booked in the spirit of celebrating when all of them had their lives changed forever. However, it was still meant to be a way for

each couple to enjoy their time together without life constantly getting in the way.

And if this was any indication of how the rest of the trip, and maybe even their lives, were going to go, Matt was looking forward to it.

JAXON AND TYLER

Despite the family-friendly setting, Jaxon could feel a familiar hand inching its way up his leg beneath the table. He pretended not to notice as he looked around the large platform set in the sand where several tables were placed. There was an enclosed area to one side where all the food and drinks were, and at the end nearest the water's edge, a large stage had been erected. He had to admit, the whole place looked as if it had been hastily set up by hand in a few hours, but he knew it had probably been built by professionals for when the crowds of tourists moved through.

It was a pretty good location, he'd give them that much. At night, with some cloud cover, it made everything outside the lit platform look pitch black. Lit torches hung on the pillars, which held up soft, fluttering canopies. The sound of the waves that occasionally sparkled in the firelight or glimpses of moonlight made the seating area look all that more appealing.

The hand, which was just above his knee, slid further up, fingers stroking along his inner thigh. Jaxon knew his boyfriend wasn't going to do much more than that but also

knew the point wasn't to grope him in public. No, Tyler was just trying to tease him and would be incredibly smug if he knew he was getting Jaxon even remotely riled up.

He was, of course, but Jaxon didn't think it was time to let him know just yet.

The table they sat at was meant for six people, though they were currently missing two of them. Across from Jaxon, one of his oldest friends, Bryce, sat with his eyes locked on the stage where they could see people moving about, preparing for the upcoming show. The man's usually serious expression was one of curiosity, and Jaxon would bet the man was trying to guess what each stagehand was trying to do. If there was something to be analyzed and broken down, Bryce was sure to try.

Jaxon wrinkled his nose, looking at the two empty chairs. "Where the hell did Zane and Dalton go, the moon? Zane was so goddamn excited to see this little dance routine."

"This 'dance routine' is meant to showcase local customs and history of the island," Bryce said dryly, not taking his eyes away from the stage.

Beside him, Jesse stirred and winked at Jaxon. "Yes, it's a *culturally important* song and dance."

Jesse was not exactly the person Jaxon would have pegged as someone's type. Not just because Bryce had managed to successfully hide the fact that he was gay from their entire group until last year but because Jesse was just... very not Bryce. Where Bryce was easily the most reserved and dignified group member, Jesse was outgoing and expressive. Where Bryce would observe, Jesse would interact. Where Bryce would think, Jesse would act. Even the man's outfits were typically colorful and often expressive of...well, Jaxon wasn't sure, but they expressed something alright.

Yet there was no denying Jesse had managed to settle into the group of friends quite comfortably, as there were plenty more outgoing people in the group to readily connect with him. But it was Bryce, where Jaxon was usually the most surprised. Bryce had never been what Jaxon considered a stick in the mud, but he was still serious. However, Jaxon had never seen him laugh quite as much as he had in the past year. Smiles came to him easier, and while his humor had always been dry, it was also more active.

Jesse might not have been what Jaxon expected, but he was clearly the person Bryce needed.

At his side, Tyler elbowed him. "Hey, Jaxon?"

Jaxon flashed him a smile. "Yes?"

"Remember how you told me it's okay to tell you when you're being an ass?"

"Well...yes...is this your way of..."

"Yeah, you're being kind of an ass."

Jaxon accepted with a look of confusion. "What'd I do?"

"This is important to the people who live here. And people who come here want to enjoy a little bit of culture," Tyler told him. "And it sounds like you're being dismissive by calling it a 'little' dance routine."

"Can I point out I make off-color jokes, and you don't say I'm being an ass," Jaxon stated.

Tyler squeezed his leg playfully. "You do, and *we* know you don't mean anything by it. But you could easily upset someone it's important to."

"Right," Jaxon said with a sigh. "Being an ass, got it."

Bryce sighed heavily. "Finally, we've found someone who can explain these things to you. I thought I'd have to sigh wearily for the rest of my life."

"Baby, you do that anyway...about everything," Jesse

told him, rubbing the top of Bryce's head and messing up his carefully arranged hair.

"I cannot possibly imagine *why*," Bryce said in an even tone, reaching up to adjust his hair absently.

"Also, my question has still not been answered," Jaxon pointed out, taking his glass of wine for a sip.

"They didn't mention where they were going," Bryce said, silently signaling a passing server for a refill of his own glass.

Jesse grinned. "No, but they were certainly over there whispering to one another for quite a while before they disappeared. It's a little hard to tell in this lighting and with his complexion, but I'm fairly sure Dalton was blushing."

"Oh, I definitely busted them misbehaving themselves while they were sitting there...well, Zane was," Tyler said with a snicker. "It was right after that they said they'd be back."

"Oh," Jaxon said as he realized what they were trying to tell him. "Well, there's an image I don't need."

Bryce waited to quietly thank the server for his drink before speaking. "Yes, Jaxon, how strange it is that two people clearly in love with one another also have a robust sex life."

"The horror," Tyler added with a glance toward Jaxon.

Jaxon flushed. "You don't find it weird to think about the sex lives of the rest of us?"

"Believe it or not, I'm neither haunted nor disturbed by it," Bryce said, his dark eyes glittering with amusement. "I'm fully capable of conceptualizing that my friends have active and healthy sex lives with their partners and, in fact, sincerely wish they would."

"Personally, I find it kind of hot to think about," Jesse

said, smirking when Bryce gave a slight cough as he took another drink.

Jaxon stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"What?" Jesse asked innocently. "I didn't grow up with any of you, so there's none of that 'brothers through life' stuff in my head. And let's be honest, there's not a bad-looking or unlikeable person in this group of yours, including the boyfriends."

"Hmm," Tyler hummed thoughtfully. "I can't really argue with his logic."

Jaxon's head snapped to his boyfriend, mouth falling open. "What? Tyler, please tell me you haven't thought about..."

Tyler stared at him, a small smile on his face. "I absolutely will tell you I haven't thought about your friends and their boyfriends having sex."

"Oh, thank..."

"But we also agreed not to lie to one another, so I feel slightly torn."

"What?" Jaxon's indignation was only emphasized by Jesse's delighted laughter and Bryce's weary sigh.

"See, this is why I never told you," Tyler said, taking a drink from his cocktail. "Because despite how open-minded you are, I knew you'd have a complete meltdown. It was just a few thoughts, sweetheart."

Jaxon dropped his voice to a whisper. "Please tell me you never thought about it, and then...came to find me."

"I absolutely have," Jesse piped up, apparently close enough to hear.

"Well, there's a lovely thought," Bryce said, eyeing his pleased boyfriend. "Anything else you'd like to share? Do you perhaps have a couple you prefer to think about in your spare time that you would like to share with us?"

Jesse turned his gaze toward Tyler, who was trying to hide his laughter. "Do you?"

"I have a really strong feeling we might end up saying the same one," Tyler said, failing to hold his laughter back.

Jesse grinned wickedly, and Jaxon wished the subject had been changed. "Hmmm...Matthew and Ash?"

"Yes," Tyler said, laughing harder at Jaxon's horrified squawk.

Bryce looked between Tyler and Jesse with a slightly raised brow and then finally to Jaxon. "I'm not sure if I should be disturbed that they do, in fact, have a favorite, horrified they chose the same one or slightly insulted Tyler didn't choose myself and Jesse."

"Now I'm questioning what the hell is wrong with every single one of you," Jaxon groaned, covering his face.

"What did I do wrong?" Bryce asked.

"That you would even consider being offended by *my boyfriend* not choosing you as his mental porn couple out of all of you."

"What? I'm not allowed to have some sort of pride?"

Jesse snickered, reaching over and rubbing Bryce's back. "Oh c'mon, you have to admit, there's a certain appeal. I mean, first of all, Ash is a redhead."

"I'm not dyeing my hair," Bryce grumbled, though Jaxon noticed he didn't pull away from the very public touch.

Jesse ignored him. "And with the history those two had? Oof, that's just prime sexy material right there. All that anger, all that passion, all bundled up into one. You know those two have broken a few pieces of furniture in their time."

Tyler shrugged, looking completely unapologetic.

“They’re probably the one couple who emphasizes the robust part Jesse mentioned.”

Jaxon frowned, glancing at Tyler, who was too busy exchanging conspiratorial looks with Jesse to notice. Was the other man not as satisfied with their sex life as Jaxon was? Jaxon had always thought the two of them did pretty well in that regard. Although it was difficult with their different schedules and Jaxon couldn’t always be around, he felt they had a pretty good thing going between them.

Not that it was just sex, although Jaxon often found himself thinking about that whenever he was away from Tyler for a week or more. Not that he’d heard a whisper of complaint from Tyler, who could be just as exuberant. Jaxon knew they were a pretty vanilla couple, save for the occasional quickie while on a hike. Then, there was the one incident that almost got them banned from using Uber.

If he really thought about it, their sex life could be seen as...not particularly active, even when they were around one another. Not that Jaxon didn’t desire Tyler, because he never lacked that, but because they’d always seemed pretty happy doing other things together. Whether it was finding a difficult new trail to hike, camping in a place far from civilization, some new thrill ride in a theme park, and any number of things really, Jaxon was perfectly happy to just have the man at his side.

Could he have possibly missed signs that Tyler wanted something more?

Before he could think how to broach the subject quietly, his thoughts were interrupted by the reappearance of both Dalton and Zane. Even in the flickering light of the torches, Zane’s light complexion was still flushed as he took his seat hurriedly, while the larger Dalton sat down more smoothly, a faint pleased expression on his face.

"Sorry," Zane said quickly, glancing at Dalton. "I got distracted on the way back."

Jesse smirked at him. "Oh, I'm sure you did."

Zane stared at him, blinking before sighing. "I don't want to know, do I?"

"We were just discussing how long it would take for the two of you to finish up your private time," Jesse said with just enough emphasis on the last two words to make his intentions obvious.

Both men in question gave each other a pained expression, and Jaxon could actually see a bit of color flush Dalton's face. From experience, he knew neither man was particularly shy about their relationship, especially Zane. Yet he'd managed to figure out that when it came to the more intimate aspects of their relationship, Dalton, much like with a great many other things, was far more reserved.

So it was Dalton who sighed heavily, glancing at Zane. "Told you it was too obvious."

Zane gave a huff. "Well, it's not *my* fault everyone's so nosy in this group."

"It's not as if you were subtle about the entire thing," Bryce said, giving Jesse a sidelong glance Jaxon himself had been on the receiving end a time or two before. It was plainly meant to tell his boyfriend to behave himself, or at least try.

Dalton sighed again. "Can we perhaps talk about whatever you were talking about before we walked up instead?"

"Can we not?" Jaxon asked with a heavy groan.

Zane sounded absolutely delighted when he spoke. "Ooh, if it's got Jaxon wanting to bow out, I *have* to know what it was."

"Jesse and I were talking about which couple from our group, outside of our own, we thought was the most

appealing to think about,” Tyler told him, glancing at Jaxon with a smirk.

“What?” Zane asked as Dalton shook his head, apparently not nearly as confused as Zane.

“Sexually,” Jaxon informed him in a pained voice. “They were talking about which couple probably had the hottest sex outside of theirs.”

“At least our own wasn’t included,” Bryce said with a glance toward Jesse, frowning. “I’m afraid of what this one would say.”

“Ohhhh, you know I’d pick us every time,” Jesse cooed at him, laughing when Bryce scowled at the cutesy tone he’d adopted.

“Why would you...wait,” Zane said, squinting at Tyler. “Please tell me you didn’t say me and Dalt. I really don’t need...”

“Ash and Matt,” Jaxon said, regretting his choice of wine and not something stronger.

Zane leaned back, eyes widening. “What? Ew!”

Jaxon wasn’t surprised by his reaction. Back in their school days, and until the previous year, Zane easily had the second biggest issue with Ash after Matt. They all knew Zane had struggled the most to welcome Ash into the group, and while he wasn’t obvious about his discomfort, there were little flashes here and there. Yet everyone, even Ash, gave the man credit for trying.

“Now you can see why I acted like that,” Jaxon told him.

“As fascinating as this entire discussion has been,” Bryce interrupted, cutting across Zane before he could do more than open his mouth. “I believe the show is about to start.”

Tyler leaned closer to Jaxon, keeping his voice low. "Walk with me after this is over."

Jaxon opened his mouth, then closed it when he saw someone approaching the front of the stage. He nodded, earning a smile from Tyler, the man's hand giving another squeeze of his leg.



THE SMELL of the sea was strong as they walked barefoot along the sand, the waves lapping gently at their ankles. Jaxon's hand was in his own, and Tyler kept his eyes locked on the sky. As much as Tyler had always loved bright and sunny days, he'd always felt there was a certain magic that hung around when there was nothing but the moon and stars overhead.

"Where exactly are you taking me right now?" Jaxon asked, curious but not worried.

"Is this you balking at the idea of an adventure?" Tyler teased.

Jaxon snorted. "Weren't you the one who told me we should keep the adrenaline junkie shenanigans to a minimum this vacation?"

"I believe what I said was we should try to relax and enjoy some quiet time on this trip."

"I still say base jumping is relaxing."

"No, it's intense, and we get a sense of euphoria from it, not the same thing."

"You're not taking me to that yoga class Jesse insisted you join him on."

Tyler laughed softly, reaching over and taking Jaxon's hand in his own. "I might dare to do many things, but trying to convince you to do meditative yoga isn't one of them."

Tyler could quite easily and happily say their shared lives were anything but boring. Even their tamest activities generally had some sense of danger, whether camped in the middle of nowhere or finding a high place to jump off. But for this trip, Tyler had wanted something calmer, a little more even-paced for them to enjoy. There would always be thrills waiting for them when they got back. He just wanted to take this chance for them both to be calm and enjoy the little things.

"Pretty sure the beach is about to end," Jaxon said, squinting as he looked ahead.

"Yeah, there's a bunch of rocks that separate this beach from the one on the other side of the island," Tyler told him, squeezing the other man's fingers reflexively. "I talked to someone at that little trinket store we stopped by earlier."

Jaxon snorted. "We're not stopping at the rocks, are we?"

"We are not."

"So, I'm not allowed to go base jumping, but you're going to have us climbing over some slippery rocks with only partial moonlight to guide us?"

Tyler chuckled. "Are you complaining or backing out?"

"I'm certainly not backing out. I'm just pointing out the inconsistency."

"Oh shush, there's supposed to be a really nice spot on the other side, and I want to see if they're right."

"And if they're not?"

"Then we climbed over a bunch of dangerous rocks for no good reason."

"Well, I can't exactly argue with logic like that, now can I?"

Tyler wasn't the least bit surprised that Jaxon was down for this little plan. From the moment they'd met on the

cruise the year before, the two of them had always been going on adventures. They weren't always adrenaline-fueled, but when a couple's first interaction was a race to see who was the fastest climber on a rock wall overlooking the ocean, it was hard for there not to be imprints left on their habits.

Yet their relationship wasn't all action and adventure. Some of Tyler's favorite memories involved the two of them simply at rest, soaking up one another's company in comfort. Others were like when Tyler had met Jaxon's parents and been charmed by his warmhearted, strong-willed mother, or when Jaxon had met Tyler's sister and been a little perplexed but pleased by the outspoken, boisterous woman Tyler had known his whole life.

Their lives wrapped and curled around one another, the threads growing tighter and closer together with every passing day. Jaxon's mother occasionally messaged him simply to see how he was doing, and Tyler's sister was always asking after Jaxon whenever the siblings saw one another. Tyler had been quickly and easily absorbed into his boyfriend's group of friends, the ease of which had been almost unnerving at first. Yet even then, he wasn't the only outsider to slowly get absorbed into the group, and he didn't have to feel like the odd man out.

"Good lord," Jaxon grumbled as he began to pull himself up. "Could these rocks be stacked any higher?"

"C'mon, slowpoke," Tyler teased as he pulled himself up, outpacing Jaxon in a matter of seconds. "Otherwise, you're going to lose another race."

"I know what you're doing, and it's not going to work," Jaxon said, though Tyler noticed how much the man picked up the pace.

"Sure it won't," Tyler said with a knowing grin, inten-

tionally speeding up even more, knowing it would goad Jaxon.

Which was easier said than done, considering the rocks were already dark and would have been impossible to see without the moonlight peeking through the clouds. But by feel and careful movement, Tyler was able to clamber up to the nearest peak of the rocks and gaze around. He could see the patch of sand further up and grinned.

"There it is," he said as he began to work his way down toward the spot. "Are you slowing down in your old age there, Jaxon? Or are you just trying not to keep up with me now? You too good for it?"

"I'm starting to wonder," Jaxon said with a grunt as he followed Tyler.

His grip nearly slipped on the next rock, forcing Tyler to scramble before getting a firm hold and pulling himself along. "Wait, what does that mean?"

"I...didn't mean to say that," Jaxon admitted, sounding pained as they moved.

"Well, you just said it," Tyler told him. He considered stopping to have this conversation, but if it was brought up while they were doing something, then they would keep having it while they kept moving. "You trying to say you're too good to compete with me?"

"No, I..." Jaxon trailed off, a faint twinge of frustration in his voice. It was nearly a minute later Jaxon finally found his words. "It was like that comment you made at the show earlier. It had me thinking."

"What comment?" Tyler asked, sliding down a particularly smooth rock and using his feet to stop at the bottom.

"The one about how 'robust' you think Matt and Ash's sex life is."

Tyler winced, scrambling over the next rock and

reaching for the one following it. "I wasn't trying to make you think I think about your friend's having sex and...jerk off. I don't think Jesse even meant that. I was just trying to tease you a little."

"It wasn't really that," Jaxon said, and a glance over his shoulder showed Tyler was moving just as steadily as he was. Apparently, neither of them was going to be stopped by their serious conversation. "It just had me thinking, or wondering, really. Is that the kind of sex life you wish we had?"

"What?" Tyler asked in surprise. "That's what you took from that?"

"Well...yes, actually, I did."

They were near the outcrop of sand, and Tyler closed his mouth as they scrambled over the rocks. He'd been expecting Jaxon to express discomfort at Tyler thinking about his friends having sex. Not that Tyler had ever given it *real* thought, but it was something Jesse had brought up in the past, so of course, Tyler couldn't help but consider the idea. The only reason Tyler had gone as far as he had in the conversation over drinks had been purely because watching Jaxon squirm had been funny.

He'd never considered Jaxon had been going an entirely different direction with the conversation.

It only took a couple more minutes until Tyler was able to hop down, his feet sinking into the wet sand. The spot was exactly as described to him, a patch of sand that sat amongst the towering piles of rocks around them. According to the store owner, places like this could be found around the island if someone was daring enough to go looking for them. They were isolated places, requiring a great deal of energy to find them.

What made them truly special, however, was the sand.

Rather than regular sand, the sand in this spot glittered like diamonds every time the moonlight pierced through the clouds. The store owner had mentioned casually that sites like this were said to be created by the spirits of the island for lovers to find and share a special moment to secure their futures together. Tyler thought it probably had more to do with the surrounding rocks being eroded away, creating the sparkling galaxy at their feet.

Romance would have to wait, however, he had bigger fish to fry at the moment.

He turned as Jaxon hopped down, an uncharacteristic trouble expression on his face. It wasn't often Jaxon had an issue. Still, the trouble was, Jaxon wasn't always very good at expressing himself when something *was* wrong. Admittedly, considering it had been Tyler who'd walked away from Jaxon the year before, maybe he didn't have a lot of room to speak.

"Hey," Tyler began, stepping closer and taking Jaxon's hands in his.

"This is really pretty," Jaxon said, looking at their feet. "I didn't mean to sour the surprise by bringing up...that."

Tyler chuckled, shaking his head. "No, it's kind of important I know you're thinking stuff like that. Just so I can turn around and tell you there's nothing to worry about."

Jaxon winced. "You sure?"

"Definitely," Tyler said with a smile, leaning closer to him. "I love when we make love, and I love when we fuck. I love that you're generally sweet but passionate, and I love that sometimes you get a little more focused on just being in me rather than anything slow and steady. I don't expect you to get into the rough and wild like I'm pretty sure Matt and Ash do because that's not our thing."

"Do you *want* it to be our thing?"

“Our ‘thing’? Probably not. But if it’s something you’d be interested in trying, I know damn well I trust you enough to have a go at it.”

“So you *do* want it.”

Tyler smiled, making sure not to laugh so Jaxon didn’t feel like he was mocking him. “Jaxon, I’m willing to try a lot of different things with you. I’ve never brought something like that up because...well, simply put, I’m extremely happy with the way things are. I’ve never felt a need to change how our relationship is, whether it’s the sexual aspect or the emotional side.”

Tyler had spent so much of his life on his own. It wasn’t necessarily that he liked being alone, but he was comfortable that way, and he’d always lived a pretty busy life. Between working to put himself through school, to taking on a lot of schoolwork, to traveling with the money he’d saved between semesters whenever he needed a break, there had never been a lot of time for other people.

Yet just as he’d finished school, taking one more extended trip before he threw himself into the professional world, he had met Jaxon. And while he’d stumbled and almost fallen, he had still come out the other side with Jaxon beside him. Tyler had never realized how much having a partner in crime could add to his life until he’d taken the time to let Jaxon in. Maybe it was just having someone there, but Tyler had always believed it was *who* was with you that was more important.

And for him, it was Jaxon, something that was proved to him time and time again.

“Well...if there’s something you want, I want you to promise you’ll tell me,” Jaxon said, squeezing Tyler’s hands. “Even if it’s something like wanting stuff a little rougher in the bedroom.”

Tyler chuckled. "And the same goes for you. Even if you think I might not like it or won't go along with it. You never know...and it's not like I'd think badly of you because you wanted to try like...fugu or...wanted to bring whips and chains into things."

Jaxon snorted, and Tyler felt his stress ease as the man laughed. "Whips and chains? Maybe we should start with some handcuffs and a little spanking before we try going full force."

"Not really something I've thought about, but if it's you?" Tyler screwed up his features and gave it a thought before nodding. He could definitely be on board with the idea of Jaxon tying him down and manhandling him however he wanted. "Fine, but we've got to get you in some leather chaps or something first."

"I...some what?"

"Sweetheart, with legs like yours, it would be a damn crime not to squeeze them into some leather pants."

"Are you...objectifying me right now?"

Tyler chuckled, standing on the tips of his toes to kiss Jaxon gently. "Only a little."

"I kind of like it," Jaxon told him, wrapping an arm around his waist and pulling him closer to him as he deepened the kiss.

Tyler sucked in a deep breath as he felt the press of Jaxon's arm against his back, taking in the salty sea air and the rich but faint scent of Jaxon's cologne. It was a smell Tyler could identify immediately and always associated with Jaxon. It was the smell of new adventures, a partner in crime, and someone to come home to no matter how long they were apart.

It was the smell of home.

JESSE AND BRYCE

“This is definitely the right place,” Jesse said with a laugh, looking around the room.

Bare wooden floor panels had been set down, lined by pillars draped in light, gossamer cloth. There was no ceiling, but there were light chains hung with small incense burners, filling the air with a strong scent he couldn’t immediately identify. The lighting was bright, the smell of the ocean strong, and there were plenty of places for a good-sized group to move around without bumping into one another.

“Fuck, it smells like one of those witch stores,” Ash grumbled from behind him, met by a snort from Matt.

At his side, Bryce gave him a sidelong glance. “And you invited these two...why?”

“Because Tyler was supposed to drag Jaxon along with him but canceled on us at the last second,” Jesse said with a light sniff of disapproval. “Apparently, Jaxon talked him into going...base jumping instead.”

“That sounds about right,” Matt said, perfectly happy to ignore the first part of their conversation. “Sometimes,

it's hard to tell which one of them is more wrapped around the other's finger. Dalton and Zane are like that too."

"No, it might be a bit more than the four of us, but Zane is more wrapped around Dalton's finger," Jesse noted as they stepped into the room to let more people in for the yoga class.

"Wait, who is it for us?" Matt asked in surprise.

"You around his," Bryce said, motioning from Matt to Ash.

Jesse was amused to watch both men glance at one another in surprise. Even funnier was the annoyed confusion that deepened on Ash's face when Matt gave a shrug, accepting it after a moment. Most people Jesse knew would be pleased or touched by the idea that their boyfriend was wrapped around their finger. Ash, though, looked both annoyed and troubled. Jesse wondered if perhaps the sense of responsibility that came with the idea was most prevalent in Ash's thoughts.

Matt glanced between Jesse and Bryce, narrowing his eyes. After a moment, he gestured to Bryce, then to Jesse. "And you're wrapped around his."

Bryce glanced at Jesse, rolling his eyes. "I like how he said that as though it were some grand revelation that should have shocked either of us."

"Perhaps he was expecting you to be offended by the idea," Jesse offered, smirking when Matt huffed. "Ah, there it is. I got it right."

Bryce continued to look unperturbed. "It is simply a statement of fact. Why should it bother me? It certainly didn't bother you."

Matt raised a brow. "Yeah, but you're Mr. Control Freak."

“Take out the control part, and you’re right,” Jesse said, laughing when Bryce shot him a dirty look.

The greatest irony was that Bryce honestly didn’t like being in control of everything in his life. It was simply something he’d integrated into his personality because of the unhealthy and controlling demands of his overbearing mother. Once upon a time, she had dictated everything in his life, save for his friends. That very same woman had been why Jesse had lost Bryce years ago and nearly lost him again the year they’d reconnected.

The truth was, Bryce almost preferred having someone willing and able to take the reins. Jesse sometimes wondered if that was part of the reason it took Bryce so long to finally break away from his mother, that part of him attached to the stability she offered. On the other hand, it meant with her gone, he could attach himself to more healthy sources. Jesse wasn’t ashamed to admit he was the primary one, but Bryce’s friends were definitely another.

Jesse bumped against Bryce, letting his fingers drift over the man’s bare arm before pulling away. Over two and a half decades of fearfully staying in the closet had left the already reserved Bryce wary of public displays of affection. Although he knew, logically, there was no reason to keep it hidden any longer, old instincts died with difficulty. Ironically, Bryce also greatly enjoyed physical affection, so Jesse tried to give him that while keeping them brief and discreet.

“Yes, yes, you’re absolutely hilarious,” Bryce told him dryly. However, Jesse didn’t miss the brief flash of amusement in his eyes as he watched the other people enter the room.

“Why does everyone keep looking at us?” Ash asked in annoyance, crossing his arms over his chest.

Jesse glanced at him and then at Bryce. "Should we tell him?"

"As if I could possibly stop you," Bryce said evenly, barely paying attention.

"Tell me what?" Ash asked with a scowl.

Jesse pointed at Ash and Matt. "You two are built like brick shithouses, and you tower over the rest of us."

"So?"

"So, you're also both good-looking, and if you look around, most of the people here are women. Statistically speaking, most of them are into men. And you're both supreme examples of the male species and catch the eye."

Ash looked around warily. "What?"

"And," Jesse continued motioning between himself and Bryce, "neither of us are exactly unattractive either."

"They may be simply drawn to the peacock disguising himself as my boyfriend," Bryce said, the corner of his mouth curling up faintly.

It was true. Jesse had woken up and had simply felt... colorful. There had been a salon on board with time to squeeze him in. He'd taken his normally dark hair and made it platinum blond, which stood out nicely against his tanned skin as well as the myriad of tattoos littering his upper body. He had also purchased a neon pink tank top, bright blue shorts and the gaudiest shade of striking green sunglasses.

"I'm an artist, darling," Jesse told Bryce, affecting a heavy accent. "What can you expect from me?"

"Why does he sound like Edna Mode?" Ash asked in confusion.

"Who?" Bryce asked, raising a brow.

Jesse eyed Ash in interest. "A character from a Pixar movie when we were young, actually. I'm surprised you even remember it."

Matt smiled affectionately. "He likes Pixar movies, and well, a lot of kid and family movies and shows. He's watched all the ones that have come out."

"Well," Jesse said, watching Ash shoot Matt a dirty look. "You learn something new every day."

"They're easy to fall asleep too," Ash huffed, glaring at a nearby pillar.

"You're allowed to say you enjoy them," Bryce told him evenly, but Jesse could see he was attempting to be gentle with the man. They all knew the volatile history Ash had shared with the group and how difficult a time Ash had with being vulnerable. "It's not as if this group isn't filled with people with odd idiosyncrasies. I believe Matt still keeps the stuffed animal he had as a boy."

"Hey," Matt protested, giving Bryce a friendly push. "You leave Mr. Nibbles out of this."

"Case in point," Bryce said dryly. "Jesse still has those abominations he had me attempt to draw for him years ago."

"They're uh...very unique," Jesse added as Bryce rolled his eyes at him.

"They're terrible, and I'm glad you've never shown them to anyone," Bryce grumbled.

They were pretty bad. Even Jesse couldn't deny that. But they were something Bryce had done for him when they'd dated the first time. Jesse was more than willing to admit he kept them out of pure sentimentality. Even after Bryce chose to end things between them, Jesse kept them. There was just something special about seeing those terrible pieces of art done at Jesse's behest and because Bryce loved him enough to try and risk making a fool of himself.

"What about you?" Ash asked, looking at Bryce with open curiosity.

Bryce turned, sensing he'd managed to engage Ash in a genuine conversation. "What about me?"

"You said everyone in the group has something. What about you?" Ash asked with a shrug.

Bryce hesitated, and Jesse could sense the trap the man had inadvertently walked into. Jesse already knew the answer and the reasons behind it. There wasn't much he could do but hope Bryce managed to ride out the reminder without trouble.

"I...do not have anything of the sort," Bryce told him, his voice casual. Still, Jesse could see him blinking rapidly as he said it, a sign he was trying to keep his emotions in check.

Ash wrinkled his nose. "Why the hell not? You literally just said the whole group has something."

"Because my life up to a certain point did not lend itself to sentimentality," Bryce told him, absently adjusting his shirt.

"Uh, is that just you telling me your mom wouldn't let you do something like keep shit from when you were a kid?" Ash asked in what Jesse recognized as the man's signature blunt style.

"That's precisely what I'm telling you," Bryce said, his gaze level. "All my childhood toys were thrown away once I reached a certain age, pictures were merely for presentation to the rest of the world, and she never saw the point in cartoons."

Ash snorted derisively. "Your mom is a real piece of work."

"That is certainly one way of putting it. Perhaps even a mild way of putting it."

"You really put up with her shit for that long?"

Bryce hesitated, and Jesse could see a brief flare of

worry flash over Matt's face. "She was...my mother. It was all I essentially knew growing up."

Ash shrugged. "Yeah, I guess I get that. I just meant after you grew up, you know?"

"Even then, she was still my mother."

"Yeah, fine, just...you could've saved yourself a fuck load of hassle if you'd done something sooner. You don't deserve to be put down like that, and no one should be telling you what you can or can't do, fuck that. It's good you told her to fuck off eventually, just seems like you lost even more shit because you didn't do it sooner."

It was, in Jesse's view, perhaps the single most succinct and haunting reminder that could be laid before Bryce. He knew the man had agonized over the things he'd missed out on and lost because of how long it took him to find his footing. Jesse also knew Bryce often liked to push those things from his mind, content to let them fester until he was forced to deal with them.

Such as when a brutally honest but well-meaning new friend forced it.

Bryce's face went blank, his back stiffening. "On the other hand, I don't think yoga is for me. There were a few other things I thought about looking into on my own. Jesse, will you be alright?"

"I'll be fine," Jesse told him with a soft smile. He knew damn well Bryce wanted to go off and lick his wounds in peace. It was only after he'd brooded for a while that he'd allow Jesse to find him and soothe him. "Go on. I'll catch you in our room later."

Bryce walked off without another word, not looking at any of them. Jesse sighed heavily as Matt winced, pulling Ash toward him. "Ash...that was not...not what should have been said."

Ash opened his mouth and frowned heavier than usual. "I wasn't trying to be an ass."

He sounded irritated, but if Jesse wasn't mistaken, there was barely hidden guilt in his words as well. Jesse reached out, patting Ash on his thick upper arm. "I know, and he knows it too."

Matt grimaced, clearly torn between trying to help his boyfriend understand he was a bit rough while also trying not to be too hard on him. Jesse felt for him. He knew what it was like to be willingly tangled up with someone who wasn't quite as good at dealing with their emotions as others. Ash was just more volatile than Bryce, who usually just shut down and became a brick wall when upset.

"Honestly, you said a lot of true things. Maybe not in the best way, but Bryce isn't going to hold that against you," Jesse told him. "But he's still sorting through all the things that happened to him."

"I know what that's like," Ash muttered, more to himself than anything.

"He just needs time, is all," Jesse assured him. "This isn't the first time he's done this, and maybe it was good for him."

Poorly timed, considering they were supposed to be on vacation and enjoying themselves, but he didn't think that was important to bring up. People couldn't really plan when their moments for growth or introspection were supposed to happen.

Jesse couldn't say whether or not this was one of those moments, but he knew it had been a little while since Bryce had dealt with his past. While he could have claimed it was a sign Bryce was moving to bigger and better things, he knew it wasn't that easy. Bryce had been under his mother's thumb his entire life until the previous year, and one whole

year did not undo the years of harm and bad habits Bryce had accrued.

Ash looked like he'd bitten into something sour and a little bitter. "I should...probably talk to him, huh?"

Jesse smiled at this man, who was so rough around the edges but genuinely cared. He could see why Matt, so naturally warm and open, was so drawn to him, perhaps sensing the diamond in the rough. "Yes, but he's a bit like you when he gets upset. He needs to separate himself from the problem and deal with it on his own. Trying to push the issue now will be met with a stone wall."

"How did you know what..."

"Because I'm not just a pretty face, Ash, I've seen you get genuinely upset and walk away. Don't worry. I can send him your way later after he's had his time alone, and you can talk to him."

Ash squirmed, apparently not used to being on the other side of a 'separator' before. "Yeah, okay. Sure. Just... lemme know."

Jesse smiled as the instructor walked in, and he motioned to the other two men. "C'mon, let's get ourselves nice and relaxed. Plus, this can help with your flexibility."

Matt chuckled. "He's a lot more flexible than he looks."

"Matt!" Ash growled, giving the man a hard shove.

Matt laughed, taking hold of Ash's wrist and pulling him along. "C'mon, we can deal with our problems when it's time. In the meantime, let's look like idiots."



BRYCE KNEW he was being ridiculous, but that didn't stop him feeling sorry for himself. Just as he'd told the others, he had, in fact, tried to find something else to occupy

him. The problem was, no matter what he tried, he found himself lapsing into deep thought and doing what Jesse liked to playfully tease him about...brood.

So rather than walk around and be miserable in crowds of people, he retreated to his and Jesse's shared room. He didn't bother flipping on the lights as he entered, kicking off his deck shoes and moving over to the couch. With a sigh, he flopped down on it and closed his eyes, letting his mind drift over events.

He knew Ash hadn't meant anything cruel by his words. It was easy to see Ash had come a long way in the past year, and he had been working hard on letting go of not only his grudge toward all of them but working through his own anger issues in the process. If anything, Bryce had to admit Ash's comments were probably the most honest one of his friends had been since Jaxon sat him down the previous summer and laid out the truth.

A truth Bryce had always known deep down but had always pushed out of his mind. That his mother was unbelievably unhealthy and controlling, and her hold over his life was making him miserable and keeping him from reaching his true potential. Family wasn't something you were locked into but was something you could choose. Love and companionship beat supposed filial piety and duty. He could be himself, his true self, and still be loved and accepted.

But it also meant, as Ash had so bluntly pointed out, Bryce had spent far too many years wasting those chances. Those were opportunities he would never get back. He didn't know what to think about that or what he was supposed to do with the anxiety and despair of lost opportunities.

The soft click of the suite door opening jerked him out

of his thoughts. He waited for Jesse to say something or flip on the light. The light spilling in from the hallway stayed steady as Jesse stood there before disappearing as the door closed with a soft click. Bryce could hear Jesse moving gently through the room until he stopped at the couch.

Before Bryce could ask Jesse what he was doing, the couch shifted. A moment later, Bryce grunted as Jesse's weight pressed against his back, the man spreading himself out across him.

"What...are you doing?" Bryce asked, turning to frown. There wasn't a lot of light in the room for him to see, but he could sense Jesse smiling.

"Comforting you," Jesse told him.

"By using me as a bed?"

"We forgot your weighted blanket. I thought this might be a nice substitute."

Admittedly, now he was over the surprise of suddenly being laid upon, he realized the pressure of Jesse's weight and the warmth of his body was quite pleasant. Jesse shifted, so part of his weight was on the cushions of the back of the couch, allowing him to wrap an arm around Bryce's waist.

Bryce closed his eyes, breathing in the smell of sea air that clung to Jesse. The man's proximity was enough to remind him not everything was lost. He had come dangerously close to losing Jesse for good the year before, and the very possibility was enough to strike him with deep-seated fear. Moments like these, where it was just the two of them, where he could savor the feeling of his lover's presence, helped to soothe those unexpected terrors.

"I'm sorry," Bryce finally said, breaking the silence after several minutes. Jesse had not so much as stirred or tried to

prompt him, and Bryce thought he could fall in love with him all over again just for that.

Jesse *knew* Bryce needed time, time to be alone, to be miserable, time to get his thoughts together before he spoke. And the man had the patience and compassion to give him those things. Bryce just hoped he could give the same compassion and love back.

“For what?” Jesse asked him softly, his fingers rubbing small circles against Bryce’s stomach.

“For acting like that,” Bryce admitted, wincing. “I nearly lost my temper, and there was no reason for it.”

“There was a reason. What Ash said was upsetting, and you separated yourself rather than lose your temper. There’s nothing wrong with giving yourself space.”

“I want to be angry with him, but I know Ash wasn’t trying to be cruel.”

Jesse chuckled. “No, he could certainly do with a little more tact, but he has his own issues to work through, just as you do. But he’s getting there, and for the record, he wants to speak to you at some point.”

“He does?” Bryce asked, not hiding his surprise.

“He was quite...obvious in how guilty he felt for having upset you. I think he wants to make amends. I’m sure it’ll be awkward as he tries to explain how bad he feels, and you try to assure him he doesn’t need to be worried. Both of you fumbling over your feelings and words.”

Bryce snorted, elbowing Jesse. “You are absolutely terrible at comforting people.”

Jesse gave a soft snort of amusement. “I’ll have you know I’m fantastic at comforting people.”

His words were punctuated by the slightest shift of Jesse’s hand down toward Bryce’s waist. It was the subtlest of offers, and Bryce felt a faint stir of anticipation in his gut.

Jesse wasn't afraid to show his desire, but he was also conscious of not pushing. Though they had never said the words, Bryce knew the man was respecting Bryce's right to choose and giving it to him because he'd been denied that growing up.

Just the thought was enough to wash away Bryce's doubts and worries, giving in to the call of his lover's touch.

It was like so many times before, yet Bryce felt his body light up as their lips found one another, their hands searching each other's bodies. Clothes were pulled off, fingertips eagerly slipping along warm skin, mouths pressing and seeking the places that earned a gasp or a soft moan.

Jesse took his time with Bryce, not quite teasing but not rushing toward the end either. His touch was gentle and firm, and his lips against Bryce's body were heady. By the time Jesse helped him to his feet, pulling him toward the bedroom, Bryce was practically panting with overstimulated need.

Not that he was disappointed when they reached the bedroom. He found himself on his back, with Jesse perched over him as he slid gently into him. There was the brief burn of entry, but Jesse took his time, easing himself into Bryce until he was sheathed completely.

These were the moments where Bryce could be free from his thoughts, where he never worried about the past coming back to haunt him. There, with Jesse, holding him tightly and gasping softly as the man slid back into him, he was bound to the present. Pleasure rolled through him as their bodies rocked together, Jesse's thrusts deep and steady.

Bryce knew the other man was drawing it out, extending their pleasure and driving him just shy of crazy. Sweat broke out on both their bodies, and Bryce held tight

to the back of Jesse's head, keeping the man's lips close. When the end finally came, it was with waves of pleasure crashing through him, wiping his mind clean as he cried out Jesse's name and kissed him fiercely.

For several minutes afterward, they lay together in the silence of their dark bedroom. Their limbs tangled as their breathing slowly evened out, and Bryce felt his heart rate slow with the passing seconds.

This time it was Jesse who broke the silence, his fingers gently playing through Bryce's hair as he spoke. "Feeling a little calmer?"

Bryce chuckled softly. "I believe that's one word to describe how I feel, yes."

Absolutely satisfied, content beyond words, consumed by affection and love, and happier than he could describe all worked as well. Although he could still feel the worries from before, they were drained of their strength and held very little power over him. They would, of course, come back when he was in his usual state of mind, but here, now? No, he could still feel the lingering traces of Jesse inside him, could feel where their bodies still touched, and see the smile on his face in the soft light coming through the nearby curtains.

"Want to tell me what was going on in your head when I came in?" Jesse asked softly, pushing ever so slightly.

Bryce sighed, feeling the old, familiar urge to dismiss his troubles. It was a habit from the life he was trying to leave behind him, one he promised himself he didn't have to live anymore. Yet as relaxed and comfortable as he was, it was much easier to push the fearful impulse away, knowing it for what it was and refusing to give it power this time. Which was probably what Jesse had been hoping for, his choice as calculated as it was heartfelt.

Tricky bastard, God Bryce loved him.

"It just...stung was all," Bryce told him, running a finger back and forth over the flat plane of Jesse's stomach. "Ash was right, and I honestly had nothing I could say back...not at that moment."

"Just what was he right about?"

"I *did* waste my life before. It was one thing when I was a child, no one can control what happens to them as a child. But when I grew up? When I was able to see more of the world, with every chance to be an independent adult? He was right. I consistently tossed away the opportunities to do better."

"I think it's pretty fair to point out you did make that choice in the end."

"Sure, but I can't help thinking about all the things I missed by not doing it sooner. Not least of all..."

Jesse watched him, smiling gently at the hesitation. "Say it."

"I hurt you so much when I ended things years ago," Bryce said softly, words filled with regret. "I never wanted to hurt you, but I did. I ran away, scared, and let her run my life. I punished you for her sins and my cowardice, and I can't help but think about how things might have been different if I'd had the courage then to separate myself from her."

Jesse nodded in understanding. "Don't dismiss yourself from that too."

"What?"

"Bryce, you were hurting more than anyone during all that. Yes, it hurt, but just like I told you last year, I never truly blamed you for it. You were scared of losing everything, scared of going against the person who had done everything she could to control everything you said and did.

Don't dismiss your own suffering just because I was hurt as well."

"You hurting is a pretty important thing to me," Bryce told him.

"I know," Jesse said, rolling onto his side, bringing his face closer to Bryce's. "But yours matters to me, and I want it to matter to you too. And I want you to remember that even if it happened later than you think it should have, *you still did it*. You did something that can take some people two or three times as long, if they do it at all."

"I know I just..."

"Bryce, you're allowed to feel regret, and you're allowed to be upset with the past, but don't let it be the only thing that matters. You should also be proud of yourself because you've made the steps to being your own man, and you're still fighting to figure it out. You haven't given up, you haven't let yourself get dragged down, and you still accept the help and love of the people who truly care about you. By all means, acknowledge the bad, but never let that make you forget the good things you have, including your own stubborn persistence."

Bryce laughed softly, wrapping a hand around the back of Jesse's head and pulling him closer. "You're right. Nothing's gone exactly the way I would have chosen if I'd been thinking clearly, but that doesn't mean I have to keep feeling as though I'm alone. I'm not. I have a family now, a *real* family. And just as importantly, I have you."

It was nice to be reminded that he didn't *have* to keep himself at a distance from people. He no longer had the shadow of his mother over his life. He may no longer be a recognized member of his blood family, cast out by his mother because he refused to adhere to her strict rules for what should and shouldn't be done by family members, but

what did that matter? His mother had never shown him love, warmth was foreign to her, and sentimentality was anathema to her entire existence.

Yet, in losing that world, he was able to join that of his friends, no longer having to watch from a distance and feel the warmth from the edge. Jaxon's family had taken him in when Bryce had nowhere else to go, and his friends had stayed by his side the whole way through. Jesse had forgiven him for leaving him again, and now the man was forever by his side. All the money and recognition his family name had once brought were gone, but what took its place was infinitely more vital to him.

And this man, this wonderfully patient and understanding man beside him, was the perfect example of everything he'd gained. It was for Jesse, as well as himself that Bryce needed to remember just what good things he had in his life.

"I love you," Bryce whispered softly.

"And I love you," Jesse said, placing their foreheads together and closing his eyes.

It was all he would ever need to know.

ZANE AND DALTON

“Why does something so bad for me feel so good?” Zane asked with a low groan, stretching out on the towel. The sun was bad for him, but he couldn’t help basking in its glow.

He usually did his best to avoid long periods in direct sunlight. His fair skin was not made for too much sun, and he was bound to suffer for it later when he or Dalton were forced to lather his angry skin with aloe. But the public beach on the last island they stopped at during their two-week cruise had been far too appealing. Hiding under a large umbrella was no fun either, and the sun felt too good. So he sipped his drinks, slathered himself with sunblock, and prayed he didn’t end up roasting alive and having to spend too much time being miserable in their room.

Beside him, Dalton cracked open an eye from where he lay, also spread out over a towel. Admittedly, one that was far larger than the one Zane was on, but then again, Dalton was easily one of the biggest people Zane had ever known. Which was an impressive feat considering everyone in their group, save for Zane, had all pushed above six feet. It wasn’t

until Tyler joined their group that Zane found someone who wasn't a damn giant.

"Quit," Dalton rumbled at him with a frown before closing his eyes.

"But if I quit, I can't suffer in silence later," Zane told him with a smirk.

Dalton snorted, turning his head away. "Not what I meant."

Zane blinked. "What?"

"Shhh, I'm resting."

"Dalt!"

His boyfriend gave no response save to wave him off. Zane leaned over, extending an arm to jab Dalton between the ribs. He grinned, scrambling out of the way when Dalton jerked, his head snapping around to frown at Zane.

"Oh, sorry, are you ticklish there?" Zane asked innocently.

Dalton huffed, shoving sand over the edge of Zane's towel before rolling back over to face away from him.

"Hey!" Zane protested, swiping at the sand. "That's so rude."

"So are you," Dalton muttered, and Zane could tell the man was pleased with himself. "And a tease."

Zane's frantic swiping to get the sand off his towel stalled as the last part of Dalton's words settled in his head. He looked up in confusion, running the past couple of minutes through his head to figure out what he'd done. All he'd done was get a drink from the cooler, lay on the towel to get comfortable again and...groaned.

Zane grinned wickedly, giving up on the towel to inch closer. "Are you trying to tell me my 'oh I'm so comfortable' noise just turned you on, good buddy?"

"Go away. I'm resting," Dalton grumbled at him.

“I mean geez, Dalton, this whole being with another guy thing really turned you into a horndog,” Zane teased. Until the year before, Zane had occasionally wondered if Dalton felt any attraction to anyone. He’d known Dalton had been sexually active in the past, but it had always been something periphery, at the edges of his life.

Then again, up until their vacation the year before, Zane had also considered both he and Dalton to be straight as well. The two had been best friends long before meeting Jaxon, Bryce, and Matt in high school. They’d met when Dalton’s mother had come to work for Zane’s family as cleaning staff and then live-in staff. At the young age of eight, Zane hadn’t cared about any of that. All that mattered was another boy his age living in the house, and their friendship had blossomed.

After that, the two of them were pretty infamous at different schools and in other friend groups as they were stuck at one another’s sides. Zane had always loved Dalton’s calm, patient aura, and Dalton had always felt more at ease when Zane’s more outgoing and enthusiastic presence was around. They balanced one another nicely, and both could appreciate the other for who they were and who they weren’t.

Despite the years of jokes, neither of them had felt any inclination to be anything other than the best of friends. Even with their current friends, where they’d been outnumbered in sexuality, nothing had ever bubbled up. That was until a certain Karen prompted Dalton to kiss Zane in one of the few moments of spite the man ever felt.

Which had opened a door neither had been able to close.

Dalton continued to ignore him, which Zane knew

meant he was getting to Dalton. “Daaaalt, you can’t ignore me forever.”

Dalton grunted, continuing to block him out as best he could.

“Fine,” Zane said with a sigh, rolling onto his back. Which resulted in sand sticking to him, grinding against his skin uncomfortably. That was something he could ignore, however, as he was a man on a mission. “I guess I’ll just lay here, bored, and try to get comfortable again.”

He closed his eyes with a heavy sigh, adding just a little bit of rumble. Zane rolled his shoulders, wiggling slightly as he shifted the sand under the towel, so it wasn’t quite as lumpy. Once more, he stretched out with a low noise of pleasure as he felt his muscles ache in just the right way. When he heard movement to his side, he arched his back, lifting his shoulders slightly as he gave another noise of contentment.

When he looked over, a grin broke out over his face as he found Dalton, still on his stomach and facing him with an annoyed look. No doubt the man was staying face down because there was no way in hell he’d be able to hide his reaction to Zane’s teasing. If there was one thing Zane had difficulty adjusting to when their relationship had become sexual, it wasn’t learning to have sex with a guy specifically but more with someone like Dalton. That man was big *everywhere*, and it had taken ages before Zane wasn’t left with a distinct ache in his ass for hours afterward.

Of course, that didn’t stop him provoking Dalton, who, despite his passiveness, could be incredibly dominating and aggressive in bed. Sometimes that meant no matter how used to taking Dalton he was now, Zane still ended up sore. Yet just as the burn after a good workout could be pleasurable, so was the ache after a rowdy bout of sex with Dalton.

"I don't like you very much," Dalton told him, his low voice thick and rumbling with a hint of danger.

Zane hummed, rolling over onto his stomach, so his ass was on full display. "I don't know about that. I'm pretty sure you love me."

"Doesn't mean I have to like you. Not right now."

"That hurts my feelings, Dalton."

"Then why are you grinning?"

"It's my coping mechanism."

Footsteps grew close, and Zane looked up to find Jaxon and Tyler had returned from their trip to a nearby smoothie shack. They both stood over them, Styrofoam cups in hand as they peered down.

Tyler raised a brow with a smirk. "Why does Dalton have that look on his face?"

"What look?" Zane asked, widening his eyes in what he hoped was a sufficiently innocent expression.

Jaxon managed to look eerily like his boyfriend by mirroring his expression. "It looks like he wants to beat your ass."

Tyler looked between Zane and Dalton before shaking his head. "I'm going to say it's not beating he wants to do to his ass...unless that's what they're into."

"Do not ask if they are," Jaxon told him quickly, earning a snort from Tyler.

"You are no fun," Tyler told him affectionately.

"Fine, I was trying to seduce him. Are you happy?" Zane asked with a sigh.

"Not particularly," Jaxon said with a heavy sigh.

"Well, you two left us alone long enough unsupervised. You guys know we don't know how to behave."

"*You* don't know how to behave," Dalton corrected, still

giving him a dirty look. "I was just laying here minding my own business."

"You're the one who chided me for groaning just because I stretched."

"And you tried to make it worse."

"I think you mean better."

"No, that's what you're telling yourself because you don't want to admit you're a menace."

Tyler chuckled. "I know everyone says you guys have always been like this, but it's still really cute. It's like an old married couple."

It wasn't the first time they'd heard that, even when they'd just been friends. Of course, they had also been compared to two men who refused to stop being boys when they were around one another. Personally, Zane wouldn't have it any other way. He could happily say he was in love and had a great relationship with his best friend. In his mind, the fact that they were great friends and also boyfriends were equal, though he strongly believed their friendship was more important to him.

For as long as he could remember, Dalton had been there, and Zane couldn't imagine a world where he didn't have Dalton in his life. The time last year when Dalton had pulled away from him in fear of what they were doing had been the hardest time of Zane's life. He had known deep down that Dalton would come back around, whether to continue what had scared him off in the first place or as his friend, but Dalton was always going to return. It was just a matter of when.

As far as he was concerned, their lives were absolutely perfect. Now neither of them had to worry about someone else coming into their lives and putting space between them. No girlfriend or boyfriend would take their time, not

when they had one another. Zane honestly wouldn't have it any other way.

"So, I got talked into going paragliding," Jaxon said, clearly eager to change the subject. For a man who was far more experienced with gay sex than either Dalton or Zane, Jaxon could be remarkably squeamish about the subject.

"By me," Tyler added brightly.

"Aren't you afraid of heights?" Zane asked, wrinkling his nose.

"Eh, it's only a little bit of fear," Tyler said, waving his free hand dismissively. "Nothing I can't handle."

Jaxon chuckled, bumping Tyler gently with his hip. "This one believes if a fear can be reasonably confronted, then it should be."

"It's the only way you can get yourself over your fears," Tyler said with a shrug. "If you keep avoiding what you're afraid of, then you're always going to be afraid. It's only when you deal with it head-on you can learn it's not all that scary."

Zane thought about it for a moment before glancing at Dalton. "What do ya think?"

"I'd say that's more or less what I had to do for me to be stuck with your bedhogging butt in my bed every night," Dalton told him with a smile.

Zane laughed. "No! I meant going paragliding, up for a bit of fun?"

Dalton looked uncomfortable, and Zane already knew what answer was coming. He tried to hide his disappointment as the excitement of trying something new died a second later. Dalton could be incredibly reluctant to do things out of his comfort zone. It was something Zane had always known about the man and had long ago accepted,

but that didn't mean there weren't moments where it wasn't disappointing.

"I mean, we don't have to," Zane said quickly, trying to spare Dalton from saying it and conceal his reaction.

"You can go," Dalton said slowly, glancing up at Jaxon and Tyler. "I'm sure they can keep you out of trouble."

"I don't need a babysitter," Zane said with a roll of his eyes. "Plus, this is supposed to be a vacation for us to do stuff together, so I'm going to do stuff with you."

He might have been tempted to go with the pair if it didn't mean leaving Dalton on his own in a strange environment. Dalton didn't have an aversion to public places like Ash did, but he was definitely uncomfortable. Zane wouldn't leave the man on the beach, not when he knew Dalton would be far happier with someone else around.

Dalton watched him, and Zane could see his boyfriend was trying to tell him to just go. Zane shook his head because they both knew he wasn't going to leave Dalton on his own. Dalton sighed, showing his discomfort with the entire affair, and Zane waved him off, trying to tell him he worried too much.

"Lord, I hate when you guys do that," Jaxon snorted. "It's the weirdest thing."

"I think it's cute," Tyler said.

"What are you two on about?" Zane asked, frowning up at them.

"You guys can communicate without saying a word," Tyler informed him, then glanced up at Jaxon. "And you know damn well that if we could do that, you'd think it was sweet too."

"Well, yes, because it's us," Jaxon said fondly. There was no question in Zane's mind that his friend was head over heels

in love with the man beside him. "But you haven't dealt with these two for years, watching them have a whole conversation while you're right there and having no idea what's going on."

"Maybe you're just nosy," Tyler said, leaning in and taking Jaxon's hand in his. "C'mon, handsome, let's go put ourselves way too high in the air and see if I freak out."

Jaxon brightened even further at the gesture, and Zane winked at him as he allowed himself to be dragged off. He remembered Jaxon mentioned Tyler had always been wary of public displays of affection. Neither of them had said exactly why, but from what Zane had gathered, it was something to do with events in Tyler's past. Whatever the case, it seemed Tyler was starting to move beyond it if the seemingly subconscious and unabashed gesture was any indication.

Zane sighed, flopping down onto the towel. "I don't know about you, but they completely ruined the mood I was trying to set."

"Uh-huh," Dalton said with a shake of his head.

"I mean, unless you're still in the mood. I can show you some more of my moves," Zane offered suggestively, wiggling his hips and brow.

Dalton groaned, rolling away from Zane once more.

"You'll come around eventually," Zane promised him.

Dalton grunted once, which only made Zane laugh.



DALTON'S EYES were locked on the screen before him, watching the characters carefully. His swordsman bounced out of the way as Zane's archer attempted to snipe him from a fair distance. Dalton's fingers snapped rapidly against the

buttons on the Switch, rolling out of the way as Zane's character lobbed a bomb.

Their physical bodies were curled up on the couch, leaning against opposite arms of the chair. Dalton, however, was long enough that his legs intruded into Zane's space, who was using his extended legs as a place to rest his own. They had both retreated to their shared room after the outing to the beach, and neither of them had any real desire to leave now they were comfortable.

"I'm going to fucking get you this time," Zane promised him, fingers flicking all over his device. "I know you haven't been playing as much as me lately. You're going to get your ass kicked."

"You always say that," Dalton told him, laser-focused on the action.

Video games had always been one of their favorite things to do together. Considering Dalton wasn't a very social person, it was something they could do in the privacy of their own space. Of course, back when they'd been children, they'd frequented several arcades. Dalton had always loved going to arcades before, cherishing what little time he could spend there with the money his mother could spare. Yet, with Zane in his life, a man who didn't take no for an answer when it came to generosity, their trips to arcades had become much longer.

Of course, that had ended up backfiring ever so slightly on Zane. Despite his skills and experience with games, Dalton frequently gave him a run for his money. Even knowing that, Zane still felt the urge to challenge him to a duel now and again, even with the game they were playing now, one Dalton frequently dominated.

Then again, in the past year, Zane had been doing it more often and offering up stipulations that the loser had to

give whatever the winner wanted. That the giving was frequently sexual made Dalton suspicious his boyfriend was trying to use his losing streak as a way to get laid.

Not that Dalton was complaining.

“Don’t you do it,” Zane warned him as Dalton’s character darted toward him. “You’ve only got one life left!”

“So do you,” Dalton told him as he swirled the control stick around, knowing what Zane would try next.

“Prepare to suffer then,” Zane told him grimly, his character flashing as he prepared to spend all his built-up energy on one final attack.

Which was precisely what Dalton had been waiting for, having intentionally goaded Zane into using the bulk of his power on that one move. With a flick of his thumb and the press of a button, the mirror-like barrier popped up around his character.

“You...” Zane began, but it was too late. His character fired off the energy round, only for it to bounce off Dalton’s barrier, rebounding back onto his character. Their screens lit up with a flash of color as Zane’s character soared off the screen with a cry, exploding, “absolute bastard!”

“I keep telling you,” Dalton said with a chuckle, setting the system aside. “You get way too aggressive, and it’s really easy to take advantage of.”

Zane groaned. “Yeah, but I’ve been practicing! I’ve been getting better about it.”

“Really? You must get that way when you’re playing with me then because that was classic overly aggressive Zane,” Dalton said with a smirk.

“One of these days,” Zane vowed, letting his system drop onto the couch with a grunt, “I’m going to get the better of you. And then I will keep beating your ass.”

"And one day pigs will fly, and jello will rain from the sky," Dalton shot back.

"You know," Zane began, narrowing his eyes. "I used to find that smug attitude you get after kicking my ass to be kinda funny but annoying."

"And now?"

"Now I get to add 'kinda hot' to the list."

A slightly surprised laugh burst out of Dalton. Sometimes he forgot he and Zane were an actual couple, and there was a genuine sexual connection between them. For the most part, their lives together hadn't changed all that much when transitioning from friends to boyfriends. They'd always spent most of their time together, played games, watched movies, or just hung out in private. They had always been fairly affectionate and weren't afraid to touch the other person.

Now those things had something else attached to them, something *heated*. Dalton had never really been interested in sex before, though he'd enjoyed his few times with it. Yet, with Zane, it was something else entirely. It was as though somehow he'd managed to light a fire in him he'd never known was possible.

Sometimes all it took was for Zane to stretch out casually, his shirt riding up and showing the barest flash of skin. Or walk across the room and bend over slightly to look at something, or walk through a room still wet from a shower, a towel around his waist as he'd done hundreds of times before around Dalton. Except now, those things grabbed Dalton's attention and refused to let go, and sometimes the heat that built up in his gut was too intense for Dalton to ignore.

"Want to have another go?" Dalton asked, picking up his system and wiggling it in the air.

"Absolutely not," Zane told him with a huff. "I'm not looking to get my ego bruised so soon after the last round."

"Alright, then what do you want to do?"

"I dunno, I'm feeling a little restless."

As if to give more strength to his words, Zane spun around so his legs were draped over the back of the couch, his head dangling over the other end above the floor. Sitting still had never been one of Zane's strong suits unless he was focused on something. It usually resulted in the man taking up a seemingly strange position. This was one Dalton had seen several times before.

He usually wouldn't notice when Zane was feeling restless, but this time it churned guilt up in his gut. If it hadn't been for his reluctance earlier, Zane might have had a good time with Jaxon and Tyler. It wasn't the first time Zane had decided to forgo doing something Dalton could tell he wanted to do, all for his friend's sake. Still, he did on occasion go off and do his own thing without Dalton in tow, but those moments had slowly begun to dwindle off over the past year. Dalton couldn't help but feel it was his fault because if it wasn't for his reluctance to leave his comfort zone, Zane would probably have a lot more fun with other people.

"Do you think Tyler and Jaxon had fun with the paragliding?" Dalton asked, hoping to use it as a segue to talk to Zane. He knew talking about his problems wasn't a skill set he possessed, even with Zane. But he'd also been trying to work on being better at it because it was those same reservations that had almost caused him to push away Zane for good a year before.

Zane snorted, now bobbing his feet over the back of the couch. "Hmm, knowing them, probably. You know how those two are. If it involves a bit of danger, they're all for it.

Which probably means Tyler had the time of his life considering the guy is scared of going up ladders.”

That much was true. Each of the couples in the expanded group of friends had things they enjoyed doing together. Matt and Ash were consistent about working out. However, Dalton suspected their shared workout routine involved something other than gym equipment. Jesse and Bryce were both fans of the arts, especially considering Jesse was an artist himself. Both were fond of going to art shows, movies, and concerts. Jaxon and Tyler had their ‘adventures’ out in the wild or relatively unexplored places. While he and Zane had their love of video games and cheesy movies.

All little things they could share together, but important all the same. Yet there was overlap between the couples as well. Ash turned out to be surprisingly good at shooting games, Tyler enjoyed some of the art shows, and Zane was known to love a thrilling new experience now and again. Except when he felt he had to stay by Dalton’s side to keep him company.

“Do you think...you would have enjoyed it too?” Dalton asked.

Zane hummed, now rocking his head back and forth. “I mean, it would have been interesting for sure. I’ve never done something like that before, but it’s not like it’s an island-specific thing, ya know? I’m sure I can find another time to do it.”

Dalton squirmed uncomfortably, realizing he would have to address the problem head-on since Zane was being incredibly laidback. “It...did it bother you when...when you stayed? When you felt like you had to stay?”

Zane’s fitful movements stilled immediately, and he peered up at Dalton. Whatever he spotted in Dalton’s face

brought a frown to his own, and he pushed himself upright. "Dalt..."

Dalton shrugged at the soft tone. "I just...I don't want you to feel like you *have* to stick around with me. I would have been okay on the beach."

A little out of his element, but if it had meant Zane could go off and have fun, then Dalton would have willingly given up some comfort. Honestly, if he'd thought Zane would hang back if Dalton had, he would have just agreed to go in the first place.

"You know," Zane began, scooting across the couch to kneel between Dalton's legs. "Believe it or not, but me and you dating didn't suddenly change how much I like spending time with you. I still want to be around you a lot."

"I know," Dalton said because he did. "But it feels like you cancel a lot more than you used to. I don't want you to give up doing stuff just because I don't want to do it. And sometimes I feel like you're not doing things just because you *think* I won't want to do it."

Zane opened his mouth, and Dalton watched the denial die on his lips and then a heavy sigh. "Okay, okay, yeah, you've got me there. I have done that, and maybe I should say something instead of just deciding what I think you'll say."

"I should also try doing more stuff with you," Dalton admitted quietly.

"Dalton, you don't have to push yourself if you're not comfortable. I don't want you to do that."

"And I don't want you to stop doing things just because you think I don't want to be left alone." Dalton's tone was sharper than he'd meant, and he immediately winced. "I'm sorry, that's not how I meant it. I *meant* I don't want you to be afraid I'm going to be upset or scared because you're not

there. Just knowing you're enjoying yourself is enough, Zane. It always has been. And I've been noticing how much you don't go out like you used to, and it worries me. I want you to have more than just me in your life."

It was a testament to their friendship and Zane's understanding nature that allowed Dalton to get the whole stumbling explanation out. But that was Zane. He knew Dalton struggled to say the right things, the things he meant sometimes, and he was willing to give him the time he needed to get it out.

Zane watched him for several heartbeats before nodding. "Look, I don't always do those things because I don't want to leave you alone, but...you're right, I do do that, and I shouldn't. You're not fragile or frail, and I shouldn't treat you that way."

"You don't," Dalton told him quickly. "You just worry."

"I do," Zane leaned in closer, looping his arms around the back of Dalton's neck. "But I also stay home more often nowadays because *you* are there. Because watching you nap on the couch, hearing the sound of you humming to yourself when you're doing housework, all the little things, those are things I love to see. I love watching your eyes light up when something funny happens in a movie or that smirk you get when you're winning a game or kicking my ass."

Dalton's heart thumped harder as he took the cue and rested his hands on Zane's waist. He knew exactly what the man meant because it was the same with him. Zane's laughter bounced all over their shared apartment, filling it with life. He liked to dance when he was cleaning or cooking, and he had the funniest snore when he slept a certain way. Little things had always been there but now had a new dimension to them, a different feeling layered atop everything they'd had before.

“So yeah,” Zane said softly, inching his face closer. “I want to be there a lot more than I was before. And I promise I’ll stop making decisions for you and...worrying so much if I have to leave you alone. But I stay around because I love you, Dalton, and I want to be around so I can soak up so much of the time we have together, to soak up being around *you*.”

Dalton had never been very good with words, but he had the ones that mattered. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Zane told him softly, finally breaking the tension and kissing him.

And there, among the feelings of warmth and happiness he’d always associated with Zane, was the heat flaring up in his gut and the dizzying sensation that came with loving him. They’d had each other for most of their lives already, and now their lives were even more entwined. This man was his best friend, his partner, his lover, his boyfriend, and maybe once Dalton found the courage in the future, his husband.

As he sank back, surrounded by Zane’s love, Dalton had to admit his friends had been right. They had all needed this vacation.

