FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS

FINDING THE RIGHT BROTHER



ROMEO ALEXANDER

ROMEO ALEXANDER

Published by Books Unite People LLC, 2026.
Copyright © 2026 by Books Unite People
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. All resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Editing by Jo Bird

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Romeo Alexander lives in Michigan, USA, with his dog and two cats. As a certified night owl, coffee and a wicked sense of humor keep him going most days, as does playing with flavors in the kitchen.

As a gay man, he believes in writing about what you know whenever possible; his stories come from the heart and with a dose of humor thrown in. His characters grapple with relationships, emotions, and real-world issues, good and bad, using their hearts as a guiding compass to get their all-important happy ever after.

For more information and to stay updated about future releases, please sign up for Romeo's author newsletter here.

Connect with Romeo on Social Media
www.romeoalexander.com
alex@booksunitepeople.com

ABOUT THE BOOK...

I dated his son. He's twice my age. We shouldn't even be friends, let alone lovers.

My life is officially a mess. I'm barely over my breakup with Milo, and now I'm catching feelings for the one guy I absolutely shouldn't.

His dad.

Marshall is fifty, cautious, and thinks he's way too old for me. He sees the twenty-year age gap and panics. I see a guy with kind blue eyes and a soft dad bod I'm dying to hold. I'm a natural flirt, but Marshall puts up walls faster than I can tear them down. He thinks our history with his son makes this impossible.

Then trouble walks into my bar. Three terrified women need help hiding from a violent pimp, and Marshall steps up. He takes them into his home. He puts himself in the line of fire.

He might look soft, but he's tough as nails when it counts. Now I just need to survive the night so I can prove we're worth the risk.

RAF



Closing the hotel door behind me, I took a deep breath and immediately regretted it. The dirty little shit hole Milo had hidden away in did *not* have an accommodating smell. The cheap cleaner the housekeepers used, which I suspected they didn't use much of, did not mask the other smells. Right now, it was just mildew and mold, but there was the acidic smell of cheap weed lingering from somewhere, and I was pretty sure the sickeningly sweet smell I was assaulted with on the way down the hallway was something harder. At least it beat the smell of sweat and pee that had lingered in an empty door we'd passed, but that was like saying a club to the nose was better than having it shoved up your ass.

Beside me, Milo's older carbon copy gave me a knowing look and nodded toward the hallway. Thankfully, he nodded in the direction that would take us out of a side door rather than back to where the squinty-eyed front desk clerk was waiting. I'd give him credit; he did a good job of pretending he didn't give a fuck what happened in the motel, but the way he kept his attention on Marshall and me had made my skin crawl. It wasn't creepy, but I definitely felt like if we'd tried to

stay here and the clerk had noticed we had money, we'd find ourselves in trouble in the middle of the night.

Stepping out of the side door, I smirked when Marshall took a deep breath. "Didn't you say you'd stayed at worse places?"

"Not much worse," Marshall said with a shrug and a sheepish smile. "I didn't want to make Milo feel worse...but this place is a shit hole."

"Oh, I see, you let me play bad cop then?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

I eyed him. "Wow, you are like Milo...or is it the other way around?"

Marshall wrinkled his nose in thought, and I was struck, not for the first time, with dizzying deja vu. It was precisely the same way Milo scrunched up his face when giving something serious thought, down to the way the tip of his nose twisted slightly. Everyone had already done the point to death, but they really were eerily similar. Sure, I had joked that Milo's best friend turned boyfriend, Eli, resembled his father, as I was sure a lot of people did, but Milo and Marshall?

They had the same shade of blond hair, the same blue eyes, and the same face shape. Which made Milo look eternally boyish and innocent, even though he was anything but, and on Marshall... well, I guess there was a twenty-year difference between them, and it still made Marshall look young. Not boyish, but despite the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and a general, tired, almost worn-down aura about him, he still managed to look young.

It was something else, something that gave Marshall an 'old' feel, and I thought it was from a hard life, equally hard fought. I'd seen it enough times working in Cresson Point, but it worked for Marshall even if it was a little odd. He blended old and young, and right now, he looked like an old

man worn down by the state of his son. A son he had only just reconnected with, but had clearly developed an attachment to already.

"For you, it's me being like Milo. I might've come first, but he was first in your life," Marshall said, drawing a cigarette from his mouth and tapping it on a standing ashtray. "But I guess it doesn't matter which way or what order you put it in. We remind people of each other, so you're asking about semantics."

"All that thinking for you to say something simple," I said with a laugh. "Yeah, you're definitely his dad."

"I'm his father, his biological father," Marshall corrected softly, but I noticed the sharp undertone. "*Marcus* is his dad."

"Alright, alright," I said, raising my hands. "Sensitive topic?"

"No," he said, his soft tone losing its edge with that one word. "I don't think we need to linger here, though."

I glanced back at the motel, where Eli and Milo were working things out. God, I hoped they weren't fucking. I was still cranky that Milo had decided to have a secret relationship with his best friend without telling me, but...really, I just didn't think this was the kind of place anyone should fuck. Not unless they wanted to be patient zero for a new disease that evolved from this petri dish of human waste.

"Not worried about them then?" I asked.

"About them? No. Milo was flung so far out of orbit because he let himself disconnect from Eli, and now they're both here. Eli keeps Milo grounded, and Milo makes sure Eli doesn't drag the weight of the world behind him."

"Huh, for someone who's only just started to get to know Milo, you seem to know them pretty well."

"I've seen it before. I've been all over this country, seen all sorts of things, and some...patterns start to show up. People like Milo need people like Eli."

"Hmm," I said, suddenly curious about his view on something. "I remember hearing Milo complain that Eva had called Eli an anchor, an anchor for Milo once. He didn't say it to her because he's scared shitless of her."

"As he should be."

"Right? But he was grumbling about it for two days straight when he didn't think Eva could hear him...or Eli. Said that Eli wasn't an anchor, he didn't weigh people down."

"He's young," Marshall said with a smile that was pleased but sad at the same time. "He doesn't understand that a ship needs an anchor just like it needs to be free. Or that a ship loves an anchor the same way a fireplace loves a fire."

"He does," I said with a shrug. "Because that's him and Eli."

"His heart gets it," Marshall said, the unlit cigarette bouncing at the corner of his mouth. "But he's young, naive, and full of piss and vinegar. He's got to wait until his brain and his heart start working at the same pace. And I hope that takes more time."

"If you're going to smoke that thing, now's the time to light it because I don't let people smoke anything in my car," I told him.

He eyed me and then blinked at the cigarette and pulled it out of his mouth before tossing it with a laugh. "Oh, I quit years ago. Now I only smoke when I drink."

"So you...buy cigarettes to not smoke them?" I asked, and when he nodded, I gave it some thought and grunted. "Is it a way to flirt with the edge, to test yourself, or do you just like the taste of what little you can get out of an unlit cig?"

"Not a clue," he said and chuckled when he saw me roll my eyes. "Were you expecting some old man wisdom?"

"I was expecting something, but I wouldn't say it had to do with old," I told him as I slid into the driver's seat and waited for him to get in. "You're not old."

"I'm certainly not young," he said as he buckled himself in. "Sometimes I can't figure out if I feel old or young."

"Hmm, now that sounds old."

"Ah, good, living up to my self-given title then."

"Descriptor, but sure," I said as I swung the car out of the parking lot and homed in on a place I knew was nearby and would be open.

Marshall's brow shot up when I pulled into the parking lot. "Really?"

"Is there a sobriety thing I should be worried about?" I asked, you didn't work as a bartender without having to face the reality of alcoholism. Of course, on the job, I couldn't exactly deny people even when I knew they were ruining their lives. I desperately wanted a job at a place that would let me, but that didn't mean I had to ignore it in my personal life.

"I used to think so," he said with a snort, getting out to head into the bar. "I was wrong."

Well, that was a weird thing to say, but despite getting to know Marshall a bit over the past few days while we'd been dealing with the mess Milo and Eli had made, I'd at least learned that he said weird shit sometimes. It wasn't confusion or anything, or at least not every time, but it was like he tended to talk as if he'd left half his thoughts in his head and spoken the rest. It was like trying to put together a puzzle where half the pieces kept hiding.

"Alright, well, I'm buying," I told him as we stepped into the dingy bar that looked like it hadn't seen a clean rag in five years. Unlike the motel, though, the place just smelled like old beer with a hint of bleach, which made it acceptable. "But I'm not buying for an addict or someone who's looking to fall off the wagon."

"You're fine," he said with a smile. "You're not enabling."

"Alright," I said, taking his order to give to the heavyset

woman behind the bar who seemed to communicate exclusively in grunts. Taking our drinks to a table, I sat down. "So, if I'm not helping you tumble off the wagon, what was that about?"

"What?" he asked, seeming genuinely confused.

"You said you thought so, but you were wrong."

"Oh," he said, sinking into his seat and tensing, turning to frown at the back of the chair after it creaked ominously. Shaking his head, he leaned his elbows on the table instead. "I've had a...colorful life. Not really explaining it without going into detail, but we'll just say colorful."

"Festive," I said, knowing damn well I was poking, but I couldn't help but see how far I could go.

He snorted. "Don't I wish? Point is, there was a time when I was drowning myself in booze and a few other pharmaceuticals. Absolutely convinced I was having myself a good time and absolutely not drowning my problems and risking addiction. Nope, no addict here, no sir."

I eyed the rum and Coke in his hand. "Uh-huh."

"Turns out, lying to yourself is easier than lying to other people," he said as he took a sip of his drink and set it down after making a face.

Not that I would blame anyone else, I'd already sipped mine, and what the bartender lacked in basic communication, she made up for with the heaviest hand in the city. Still, for someone who apparently drank so much, it was weird to see an exceptionally strong drink turn him off. So either he really wasn't that much of a drinker anymore, or his poison of choice involved cans rather than bottles.

"I *was* drowning in all of it. You don't have to deal with your problems if you keep drowning them," he said with a snort. "I wish I could say it took one hard night, or week to realize how bad it was, but that would be lying."

"And at this table, we only lie to ourselves," I said.

"Exactly." He grinned. "It took a lot more hard knocks than it should have, and I ruined...well, I did a lot of damage to myself and people who were just trying to be there for me. Tried rehab a few times, didn't really take, so I said screw it and went on my own."

"I'm gonna be honest with you, Marshall, you've done a really shitty job at making me feel comfortable buying you a drink."

"Let me get there."

"Alright, well, if this story doesn't make me feel better by the time you get to the end, I reserve the right to dump that drink."

"Sure," he said, mouth twitching. "I was never this...mom-like at your age, let alone responsible."

"Do me a favor and try not to look at me like a starry-eyed kid fresh out of high school," I told him with a scoff. "I might not be middle-aged, but—"

"I suppose we all have our stories," he said thoughtfully. "Not really doing right by you if I turn around and assume yours."

"Speaking of stories—"

"Hmm...oh! Right," he said, giving a slight cough. "It was a bit hit and miss, but despite being told that going for sobriety on my own was asking for trouble, I managed it. Stuck with it for a while too," he said. "Got myself a job, a place to live, and then, well—"

"Bad day or a bad series of days?"

"Bad year."

"Ah."

"I lost the last of my family. I lost my job, and I was about to be kicked out of my place," he said with a shrug as if to say none of it really mattered. "But whatever happened, I walked down with the last bit of money I had, bought myself some liquor, and decided that if my life was going to go up in

flames, then I might as well be drunk. If I'd had the money, I probably would have grabbed something to go with it, but I didn't. Not that I hadn't been there before. A good, rip-roaring drink after your life starts collapsing around you is sometimes the only answer to deal with everything going wrong. Of course, I wasn't an addict who needed to be careful of those impulses. Just a guy who sometimes went searching for answers at the bottom of a bottle, like so many other people, but seldom found any. There were a few answers at the bottom of that bottle," he said as if reading my thoughts. "One of them was that hangovers after three years of sobriety weren't any better than when I was drunk."

"Probably not," I said with a snort.

"The other was that...I must not have been that much of a drunk. Three years before, I would have woken up hungover and gone on the hunt for the next shot of liquor. You know, a little hair of the dog, something to take the edge off."

"And then the edge was off, and the booze was flowing all nice and free, and you were having a better time, so why not a bit more?"

He squinted at me. "You sure it shouldn't be me that's worried about you drinking? You sound like you're familiar with it."

"I've been a bartender long enough that even if I didn't have a complicated relationship with alcohol, I would still be pretty familiar with it."

"Right, but...that day? The idea of drinking more, even if I did have the money, was enough to make me puke...the first time. I realized right then all I wanted was to pop something for the headache, try to nibble on something, and curl up in a shower hoping to die in peace."

"Clearly, the universe did not grant you the mercy of death."

"It did not." He grinned. "But when I stopped feeling like

death warmed over, I realized I didn't...want to drink anymore. Not just because the thought made my stomach hate me even more than it already did, but because it just wasn't there."

"Like your alcoholism disappeared?"

"I mean, don't get me wrong, I haven't tested the theory with anything stronger than booze," he said, eyes going wide as if the idea still scared him. "But at the time, I thought it was exactly that. Except that I'd been around long enough to see what addiction was like and what it was like for people who go dry. They don't just magically stop craving alcohol just because they were sober for three years. They choose sobriety every day, at so many turns that people don't understand even if they cared."

"Hmm." I thought about it and nodded. "So that would have to mean you were never an addict at all?"

"Oh, I am, but to those damn cancer sticks," he said with a wry shake of his head. "I can never go without craving one at least three times a day. But alcohol? I can sip on this for the next three hours and be fine. I could also slam down beers with you tonight, do a line of shots, and be fine. I'll feel like death tomorrow and the day after because no one told me that once you hit a certain age, hangovers don't just last hours, but days. But I won't be crawling out of bed tomorrow looking for a drink, or fighting off the urge to keep drinking the rest of the week."

"So...you weren't an addict, you were just some guy who went on a bender for a really long time because he wanted to get away from life?"

Marshall laughed, and my brow shot up at how bitter and self-deprecating it sounded. "Sorry, you don't know me well enough to know that's *exactly* like me. I've spent most of my life avoiding my problems, and I still don't know how to face most of them. But...yeah, I was doing all of that, even

convincing myself I was an addict when all I was was a man who didn't want to face his demons."

"I mean, knowing that is the first step, right?"

"That's the idea," he said with a sigh. "I'm trying to be better about them. Trying—"

"Is that why you came back into Milo's life?" I wondered, feeling a little guilty at the shame that flashed over Marshall's face.

He eyed me. "Is there something you want to say?"

"Mmm, just that I'm all for improving yourself, but I really hope you're trying to reconnect with Milo because it's what you want to do and not some... self-help attempt at making up for your mistakes. He's a person, not an experiment."

"If things were different, I'd be tempted to wonder what the hell Milo was doing that he couldn't see he had something wonderful right in front of him," Marshall said, looking at me with a sad, thoughtful expression. "But they are...unique. He essentially had another relationship while he was with you, and it doesn't matter what rules or exceptions you two had; as you said earlier, he should have known to say something to you. But here you are, showing up to drag him back into the real world, back to Eli, and now you're defending him."

"Milo is an idiot and a selfish asshole for trying to make choices for me, and for leaving me in the dark because he was too scared to face the truth," I told him with a shrug, not caring if it was his son I was talking about. "But all he's done is screw up, not fuck me over or step all over me. He's a good guy...just kind of dense."

"A rousing endorsement, I'm sure he'd love," Marshall said, then his face screwed up. "Actually, considering the state he's in at the moment, he might agree with you."

"No, he'd probably twist what I said to make himself out

to sound like an even worse person because he knows he screwed up, but he doesn't know how to have fucked up badly without turning himself into the bad guy. Good people fuck up all the time, and when he's done feeling sorry for himself, I'll yell at him some more," I said with a shrug.

Marshall surprised me by reaching across the table and squeezing my wrist. "You're a good man, Raf. I'm sorry things are like this. You deserve someone who can...well, I'm not saying Milo didn't understand what kind of person you are, or treated you badly—"

"But he's not the man for me," I said with a shrug. "I've made peace with it."

"Have you?"

"Yes."

I had.

"And you're okay with it?"

"Yep."

Absolutely the fuck not, but enough emotions had been flying around today that I wasn't going to heap mine on top. I didn't want to talk about the sense of loneliness that had followed me around since I was ten, or how even though I knew Milo wasn't for me and he was much better off with Eli because they clicked so beautifully...well, when was it going to be *my* turn to click? When was it going to be *my* turn to look forward to coming home to someone who, even if they didn't complete me or whatever romantic notions people still had, could at least love me completely?

Marshall squinted. "Are you lying to me?"

I thought about lying again and sighed. "Yes."

"Which part?"

"I have made peace with it."

"But you're not okay with it."

"No."

Marshall nodded. "I know the feeling, I really do."

"I believe it," I said, and I did. "But if it's all the same to you, I don't want to talk about what's wrong with me and my life."

"Can I at least ask why you have a complicated relationship with alcohol?"

I appreciated that even though he was within his rights to ask, he wasn't going to push. "Eh, fundamentalist parents and community. Sex bad, alcohol bad, modern world bad, anything that isn't from the community bad. Didn't matter that the adults were all doing what they wanted in private, including drinking. I got out, still hanging onto the feelings about things like sex and alcohol, and found out neither is as bad as they made out. Turns out, you can be okay having sex and drinking if you aren't constantly telling yourself it's a bad thing to do."

Marshall nodded slowly, looking wary. "But...not an easy trap to get out of, I bet."

I smirked. "And you would win that bet. Let's just say I wasn't doing too well figuring that out in the first few years. First time I let myself have sex with another guy, I was drunk as hell. Then puked in the toilet and wanted to keep praying and praying until it all went away. Then turned around a week later and did it again, got drunk, puked, but at least this time I didn't freak the guy out by muttering prayers for forgiveness. Then, drunk again, just nausea and no prayers, and well...it took a while. So I can drink, I can smoke, and I can fuck, but sometimes I still get this little voice in the back of my head telling me just how awful a son I am for what I'm doing."

Marshall opened his mouth, closed it, and cleared his throat. "And what do you say to that voice?"

"I tell it to shut up because I'm having fun," I said with a shrug.

"Really?"

"No."

"Okay," he said with a laugh. "Then...here's to telling the truth about lying."

"Not the worst toast I've heard," I said, knocking my glass against his and taking a drink.

Marshall looked down at his phone with a bewildered stare. "Milo says he and Eli are going to figure out what to do, but it's going to involve talking to the rest of his family."

"That makes sense," I said, wondering what could be so confusing about that.

"And he wants me at the family meeting."

"Ah. I can see how that would be...well, uh...actually, I don't know what that is. Will you?"

He sighed. "I can't exactly say I'm here to be part of his life if I turn my back on him when he asks for my help."

"You'll have to tell me about it," I said with a snort. "Because I'm betting Milo's going to be real weird about me for a while."

"Uh...sure," he said.

"In the meantime," I said, leaning forward. "I want to know what his mom was like when she was younger."

His eyes widened. "You want me to gossip about Marty?"

"You're goddamn right. And I'll buy the drinks until that happens."

"Hoo, boy, we're going to need a cab at that rate because I'm not drinking alone."

"Finish that one, and we can go to a bar where I can get an Uber. Or more like somewhere I feel I can leave my car after getting an Uber."

MARSHALL



I had faced down being arrested and robbed several times, and forced to endure the funeral of every family member except Milo. Yet I couldn't remember feeling so nervous and terror-filled as when I had walked down the hallway to meet Milo's family. Well, more like meet those I hadn't known, and remeet those I hadn't seen in years. I was absolutely drained by the time it was over, and I finally left.

"Thank you," Milo said as we stood in the lobby, and he wrapped his arms around my neck and squeezed.

"Pretty sure I should be thanking you," I told him as I hugged him back. "You're the only reason your mom didn't get up and tear me apart with her bare hands."

"Nah," he said, but he wasn't a good liar. I could see in his eyes that he was still worried about how angry she'd been at seeing me...and that was okay.

I didn't want him to understand the anger she had toward me, or fully grasp just how little she trusted me. Raf was right: Milo was a good-hearted person, and there were still parts of him that were innocent and naive. Life had been kind to him in ways that every parent hoped for their chil-

dren, or at least that's what I would have wished for him if I'd been thinking straight. There was some of that self-centeredness in him, too, but he had more than enough Marty in him to balance it out, and he had a family that could pull him back to the real world.

He didn't need to understand how unreliable I had been. Or how he had been old enough that the back-and-forth game I was playing with him and Marty had started to affect him. He had known enough to know I was important to him, and he knew I would sometimes disappear for a long time. Marty had been right to threaten me to stay away, but it wasn't a complete threat; it was a choice.

Choose to stay here and be a good father, or leave and never come back, so you can't truly break his heart with this one foot in and one foot out. I had made my choice, she had forced it, but she had done what any worthy parent would. Milo might understand why Marty had chased me off, but he didn't understand how she could still hate me because he'd never had to deal with a threat to someone he loved like she did when she saw how absent I was, and how hurt he could be over it. And I hoped he would never have to.

Let him make his own mistakes, and let them be gentler than mine.

"And you," I said once I pulled away from Milo and turned to Eli. He looked far better than before. There was still strain there, but that was to be expected. A lot had happened over the past couple of weeks, and I wouldn't expect that he would magically be better just because this night had gone better than either had dreamed it could. But the exhausted, haunted look in his eyes was gone, and his voice was strong, not cracked with pain and despair. He was smiling again, warmed by the man at his side and the love of his family.

"Going to tell me to be careful with him?" Eli asked wryly, ignoring Milo's indignant huff.

"I don't think that's necessary," I said with a shrug, reaching out and shaking his hand. He wasn't a hugger, not like Milo, but I could feel that he had no problem with me being there. He had been wary when I'd first appeared a few months ago, but if he still didn't trust me, he was doing a damn good job of hiding it. "Plus, if either of you needs a reality check, you have a whole family in there who will do it for you."

"You're family too," Milo said with a frown, and my heart warmed and hurt at his defense of me.

"Give it time," Eli said before I could think of how to correct him without upsetting him. "How long did it take Jace before he accepted it? And he's had a lot longer than Marshall to come around."

Milo's frustration melted like it had never been there. "Are you kidding? I think he *still* hasn't accepted it."

I thought of Jace, dark, brooding, angry-looking, and scowling at the table as he had said very little. He clearly had some form of antagonism with Mason, which didn't fit the idea that they were a happy couple. And yet...Jace rarely left Mason's side, and when he did, there seemed to be an invisible thread that kept them within orbit of one another.

"He wants to," I said, frowning when Milo shot me a curious look, and Eli barely hid a knowing smile as he glanced over his shoulder. "I don't think he knows how to."

"See?" Eli said, turning to face Milo. "Same thing."

"That's not what I—"

"Just takes time," Eli said with a smirk that reminded me that, for how laidback he was, there was a deviousness in him that would be a bad idea to underestimate.

"I guess," Milo said. "You sure you don't want to stay here?"

"No, I mean yes, I'm sure," I said quickly with a laugh. "Let's not push it, okay?"

"Yeah, I guess," Milo said. That acceptance was all I needed to know he at least understood that Marty wasn't just being protective of him; she genuinely nursed a grudge against me. "Text me when you get back safely?"

"Of course," I said. It was still weird to 'check in' with someone, but Milo insisted. Every time I was reminded of the three-year-old boy looking up at me with big, trusting eyes that would have been right at home on a spaniel, pleading in his sweet voice to know when I was going to come back, and me, knowing I wasn't ever supposed to come back, trying to find a lie that would work.

So now I texted him every time.

"Good," Eli said, and I noticed his eyes linger on me. Sometimes he left me with the impression that he knew a lot more about me and my past than he let on, or that he could actually peer into my thoughts. Then he waited before leaning in. "And maybe call Raf?"

"Why?" I asked in surprise.

"Because you two got along, and are the odd men out in this whole mess," he said with a wince. "We're getting you in, and one day, we'll try to get Raf back in, but right now, he could probably use a friend. And you definitely could."

"Right," I said, not liking how quickly I agreed with him.

Raf...the man who was my son's age, making him half my age. Tall, built, handsome in a rough kind of way that was still charming and warm. A few tasteful tattoos, thick muscles, a wicked smile, and a story I thought was a lot darker and bittersweet than that of the two young men standing before me. A man who flirted as easily as he breathed and who, if he wasn't...well, if he wasn't my son's ex and half my age, I might be tempted to find out if his mouth really was as wicked as I thought.

So, yes, friends, that was... perfect.

"Please do," Milo said, and I fought the urge to glare at Eli,

who had stepped back to smirk at me. I didn't know what his game was, but it was evident that part of it was to get me to talk to Raf. "Seriously. I...both of you did so fucking much for us, and I feel like absolute shit because of how I dealt with things. And I want to make it up to him, or I don't know, be able to look at him without being tempted to play in traffic. But I don't want him to be like...alone or, I don't know. Like Eli said, you two get along, even if he flirts all the time...and you made that blowjob joke."

"It was a joke," I said quickly. "Don't worry."

"It's hard to tell with Raf sometimes," Milo said, and I could see right then and there that, even without Eli, he and Raf would never have worked out. I had spent less time with Raf than Milo had, but I could already see how Raf ticked. He was quick with a smile, always joking... but there was a seriousness to his jokes. It was how I could tell he'd been lying to me a week ago, because he had been quick to joke about something serious about himself, but he had been serious when talking about me. Milo had never learned that about him, and Raf...well, anyone so intent on using humor and sarcasm to shield themselves needed a partner who didn't get easily distracted by the left hand to know the right hand was up to something.

"He joked a lot less than you think," Eli said with a snort, snaking his arm through Milo's. "Come on, you, Mason promised us drinks for the rest of the night."

Milo frowned. "That's a trap, and you know it."

"Oh God, yeah," Eli said with a laugh. "But hey, free drinks, guaranteed to be stupidly delicious."

"True," Milo said, giving me a wave. "Don't forget!"

"Talk to Raf, text you when I get home, no matter what time it is," I recited dutifully.

"You got it," he said with a wink.

I watched them go, knowing it was time to get moving,

but finding my feet rooted to the spot. There was a big gap between the little boy he had been and the man he was growing into, but for a moment, I swore I saw both images overlaid. He had potentially just damaged his life, not just through his relationship with Eli and the way some people would treat it, but because he had been so quick to hide from the world and the people around him out of fear.

"Be better than me," I said, and smiled when he laughed at something Eli said. I finally found it was time for me to go, stepping out into the night and pulling my coat around me as I dialed one of the few numbers saved in my phone.

"Wow," Raf said, his voice muffled at first. "I told you to call me after the family meeting, and you actually did. It's a Christmas miracle...a late or early one depending on when you think Christmas miracles happen."

I smiled, thinking of my suspicion that he hid serious things behind his jokes. "You could just say you're glad I called, like I agreed I would. Doesn't have to be a performance."

"I'm on the clock," he said, and I heard the grin in his voice. "All I can do right now is perform."

"Shouldn't you be closing?" I asked.

"Closing, yes, closed? No," he said, and then I heard his voice rise. "You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here, so get your asses out of my bar before I give the bouncers the chance to use all that testosterone...ah! Not you, you still have a tab, get your fine ass back here before I take an inch out of your hide, and trust me, not the sexy way."

I chuckled. "I should have made sure you weren't working before I called. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said after a moment. "You're still at the hotel?"

"Just left, actually."

"On foot?"

"Yeah."

"I'm a few blocks down from you. Stop in."

"You don't need me underfoot."

"I'm sure you know how to control your cane, old man," he said and then chuckled. "At least, I hope you do. Be fun to find out."

"Uh-huh."

"It's not nearly as much fun to flirt with you if you don't respond, and Milo isn't there to squeal."

"I'm sorry to disappoint."

"Sure, sure, get your ass here, you can gossip with me."

"I...sure."

"Good, give them your name. And *you*, if I see you put your hands where they don't belong one more time when your drunk ass—"

The phone beeped in my ear, and I shook my head, tucking it away. I'm not sure how he managed to sound charming and sexy when he was chewing someone out, but he did. I probably should have begged off, but it wasn't late enough to go home. It didn't matter what time I went to bed or how exhausted I was; I didn't sleep more than four or five hours. Sure, it wasn't the healthiest thing in the world, but considering the way I'd treated my body in the past, a little insomnia was something I could handle.

Once I remembered which club he worked at, I made my way there. The outside was still lit up, but there was a foreboding feeling about the building. I'd always believed buildings could take on the emotions of their inhabitants, clubs and bars especially, and when it was time to close up, most gave the feeling that you should fuck right off.

"Closed," the bear-shaped man, hunched just in the doorway, growled.

"Uh, I'm Marshall," I said, looking around to make sure it was the right place. "Raf told me to—"

"Hold on," he grunted, then pushed me back, just in time to avoid the shape thrown through the doorway with a strangled cry of outrage, grunting hard as they hit the ground.

"I don't know how many times I have to fucking tell you to quit coming in here and messing with my people," I heard Raf snarl as he stomped out, giving the man on the ground a hard push with his foot. "Now get the hell out of here!"

"Filth and depravity," the tall, scrawny man on the ground hissed, snatching up bits of paper that had fallen from inside his jacket. "You peddle your poisons and call it good! Well, I see, I see—"

"See yourself the fuck down the street," Raf said, pointing. "Preach to your fucking converts, not to scared women and terrified gaybies. Or next time I'm letting Sax drag you into the alley and see who wants to have a go at you!"

The man continued to mutter, but his eyes were downcast as he clutched the papers to his chest. I grabbed a couple that had come loose to give them back to him, when I stared at the paper and sighed. They were religious tracts meant to tell a story that conveyed a spiritual lesson. I had seen enough in my lifetime, poorly drawn, horrible stories, spewing guilt and hate from every page as they condemned the very people the writers claimed to want to save.

Raf scowled and then saw me. "Oh, hey, Marshall. Sax didn't give you trouble, did he?"

"Sax?" I asked and blinked when the large man stared at me. "Uh...no. Saved me from the human ballistic missile thrown my way, actually."

"Oh," clapping Sax on the shoulder. "He's good like that. Come on in."

I followed him inside to find the dance floor illuminated brightly, while the booths along the wall had low lighting. There seemed to be people lingering who didn't work at the

club, but Raf ignored them, as did the rest of the staff who were sweeping or wiping down tables. At one booth, a trio of girls had their heads down as they talked, watching me carefully before they saw Raf and went back to their conversation. At another booth was a pack of young men, one of them, a waif of a man with smeared makeup and a gorgeous set of black curls, was crying into his hands.

"So, uh, not the type for conversion?" I asked when I sat at the bar and let him continue his cleanup.

"Have your faith and talk about it if you want, but don't come in here and start harassing people about their immortal souls," Raf grumbled. "Asshole tries to slip in here at least once a week. Funny how he always finds the ones who are hurting the most and makes them feel worse. Every time."

"The scared women," I said, swiveling my eyes quickly so I wasn't staring, looking at one booth, then another, then back to him. "And...gaybies?"

He snorted. "Gay babies. Usually young, new to the scene, or just plain new to being gay. The world might be better about being gay, but you still find newbies who come from shit, like I did. Harassed and bullied and made to feel like shit because they like their long legs, fat asses, and big chests attached to a body with a dick. Sorry, forgot about you, *exclusively* tied to a dick."

I smiled. "So you...swoop in and save them?"

He flinched. "I'm not saving anyone...I can't save them anyway. Those kids, they're just scared and looking for a place that feels safe. Still, they're going to find out that even if I can chase off the people who remind them of their pastors and fundie parents, I can't save them from the mean girls who will ruin their reputations because they're cute, or the guys that will use them up because they're still naive, or from the rest of this city that can still be cruel to a young gay kid who doesn't know his ass from his forehead. They'll have to

learn just like the rest of us, and maybe they'll be smarter than some of us and actually listen when someone older talks."

"And the women?"

"I-I'm pretty sure they're on the run from their pimp. They won't tell me, but it wouldn't matter if they did. There's not a whole lot I can do for them either. But if they're in here, they're off the street, and that's enough for now."

"I see," I said.

"Are you gonna tell me I'm wasting my time? Or that I should be doing more?" he asked.

I didn't answer right away, reading the tension and defensiveness in his voice. Considering what little he'd told me, I didn't think he was worried about whether I was judging him. I thought it was more likely that the man and his religious convictions were what had gotten under his skin. He might have gotten away from his family and community, but the scars they had etched under his skin weren't going anywhere. That, and maybe he wanted to be the one who could care or do more.

"No," I finally said. "It's easy to condemn someone for not doing enough, or sneer at them for caring too much. I think even the smallest kindness can make a difference. A candle might be a small flame, but even that can light another one, over and over again. But you can't set yourself on fire to keep another person warm. So do what you can, in the best way you can, and hope you can make even a small difference."

Raf stared at me for several heartbeats before grunting and setting a bottle down with a thoughtful frown. "Right—"

I watched as he continued wiping down bottles, lining them up on the bar so he could clean the rack. "You...okay?"

He looked up. "Oh. Yeah, sorry. I'm not mad at you."

"I hope not," I said, smiling nervously. "I'm not the nut job."

"I wish people like that were just nuts. I can deal with nuts," he said, shoulders slumping. "Sorry. Shit like that...gets to me."

"Mmm, considering what you told me about your past, I'm not surprised."

"Yeah," he muttered. "Anyway, how did the dinner go?"

"You mean other than them having to save me from Marty ripping my head off?"

"Hmm, bare hands or with like...a tool?"

"Oh, bare hands."

"Damn," he said with a laugh. "I mean, I always got the feeling she had a temper waiting under all that. She'd have to be scary to raise that crazy family, but bare hands?"

"There's...I deserve it."

"Do you, or are you being like Milo and willing to crucify yourself?"

"Weren't you the one who warned me that I shouldn't be around Milo just to make him into an experiment?"

He thought about that for a second. "That's just to be sure."

"Milo was never supposed to happen," I told him bluntly. "I wasn't ready for a kid, and I'm not ready for a kid now. Because I was never ready to deal with life, especially my own mess. I tried not to be a bad dad, but I was. I would show up for a while, then disappear for a while, then come back and tell myself I was going to do better, but I always ended up leaving. It drove Marty crazy, and can you blame her?"

"Hmm," Raf said, and it wasn't easy to tell if he was thinking about what I was saying or just withholding judgment.

"And then Milo was old enough that he noticed the guy he'd started to call daddy was also the guy who kept disappearing. I wasn't there when he got sick and needed to be

held at night. I wasn't there the first time he tried to ride a bike, or when he thought he was big enough to sled on his own and almost broke every bone in his body, and gave Marty a heart attack."

"That sounds like Milo," Raf said wryly. "Jesus, started young, huh?"

"He did," I said with a sad smile. "He always wanted me to read to him. Not Marty, not even Mason, who he loved to follow around. And then Marty put her foot down. Told me she wasn't going to make Milo live with half a father. Better to have none than one that couldn't keep a simple promise to be around. That me coming and going as I pleased was going to break his heart, and if I did that to him, she was going to break my spine."

"Violent."

"Actually, I think her exact threat was she was going to break my spine and rip it out through my asshole."

"Violent and evocative."

I smiled. "She was right. I was hurting him, and I loved that little boy, but...I couldn't stop running. I couldn't stop hiding. I couldn't be present. So I took off. I didn't even take anything with me. I knew if I did, even a picture or a drawing he made, I would always want to come back. Stupid of me though—"

"Because you still wanted to come back?"

"Yes," I said softly. "I always wanted to come back. But every time, I knew if I did, then it needed to be for good. That if...if he gave me the chance, then I needed to be sure I was going to live up to that chance. That I wasn't going to make a little boy cry again because he didn't know when his daddy was coming back. If I couldn't do that, then all I could do was hope he was too young to remember me, and never have to live with even that small memory."

Raf stared at me, no longer cleaning as he chewed on his lip. "He won't tell you the truth."

I smiled. "He didn't remember me, did he?"

"No," Raf said slowly. "I'm not sure if that's the answer you wanted, though."

"I never wanted him to remember me, like I said, if I never found it in myself to be better, it was better he didn't. And this...this is better. He didn't remember me. But he remembered his brothers and sister, he had his mother, and not too long after I left, he got to have Marcus...and Eli. He got the life I knew I couldn't give him, and so yeah, it was better that he didn't remember the selfish, deadbeat that couldn't be there for him like he deserved," I said, staring at the bar top. "And you can't—"

"I won't tell him," Raf said immediately. "I know I just got done getting on his ass about lying and hiding things, but...sometimes the kindest thing you can do for a person is hide the truth from them, or lie. But even if he had enough memories to be hurt by what you did...or didn't do...he'd still forgive you. It's Milo. He's thick, a little self-centered at times, and impulsive even with his emotions...but he'd forgive you."

"That says more about him than it does about whether or not I deserve it."

"Maybe...but you're here, right?"

"I am."

"And you said you wouldn't come back into his life unless you were sure you could stick around."

"Right."

"Then there you go," he said with a shrug. "Congrats, you were a douchebag, absent father. The world has plenty of those. But you made the least selfish choice by walking away when you knew you were too fucked up to be the parent he needed. You helped him with your absence, and there's

plenty of parents out there who could have done their kids a favor by doing the same. But now you're back, and you're trying. Hell, you stuck around to hunt his butt down even in some rundown motel that probably gave you flashbacks to your time as a drunk."

"Probably not as bad flashbacks as the ones you probably get listening to your latest friend spew religious insults at you," I shot back wryly.

He blinked and laughed. "I should be pissed that you threw that back in my face, but no, that was good. Don't let me be a bitch without consequence, please."

I smirked. "You get off on it."

"Wanna find out what else I get off on?" he asked, smoothly raising an eyebrow, making it somehow twitch suggestively.

"Don't start with me, we were having such a nice conversation," I said with a shake of my head.

Yes, I absolutely would have loved to have had that conversation, but it didn't feel like a particularly safe one at the moment. Mostly because I didn't think it was a good idea for either of us to go down that path together. He was good-looking, charming, and clearly confident, and I had seen enough vulnerability and genuine parts of him that I had a hard time ignoring him. Confidence was all well and good; I was just as attracted to it as the average person on the street. It was when I saw those parts of someone, the vulnerable and fragile parts, that I had trouble controlling myself.

I wasn't even against the idea of having a bit of fun, trying to get my life together, and my head on straight, didn't mean I couldn't get laid. It was different, though, when it wasn't some random person who hit you up in a bar, but someone you had the chance to get closer to. Especially someone you found yourself attracted to in a way that wasn't just thinking about what they looked like under their clothes.

When you were trying to fix vital parts of your life, it was a good idea to avoid people when you started wondering what they looked like when they rolled out of bed in the morning. What their face might look like in that slant of light, which only happened in the early morning as the sun rose and cast them in a warm glow, but they continued to sleep peacefully. Or how they looked hunched over a counter as they squinted at a bill that couldn't possibly be *that* high, or squatted, bitching at a screw that just wouldn't go in.

"Just for the record," Raf said, and I looked up, surprised to see his thoughtful expression. "I'm dead serious. I'd go home with you, or you with me."

"My genetic descendant caused you enough trouble; you really don't want to know what kind of trouble his progenitor is capable of," I said with a chuckle.

Raf stared at me. "That's not the first time you've tried to put distance between you and Milo."

"What?" I asked, confused. "I don't want distance between us. I mean, I'm still worried that I'm going to fuck everything up, but as I said, I came back because I had more confidence than ever that I wouldn't. So, I'm worried, but I don't want distance."

"You're allowed to call him your kid."

"But he's not."

"He is."

I gave a dry laugh. "He's my kid to the extent that I slept with his mother over a wild weekend that was never supposed to bring anything but fond memories. I'm a sperm donor at best. An absent deadbeat at worst."

"Really?"

I shrugged. "Marcus is his father, and I'm glad he is. Milo deserves a father who could be there from the moment he showed up, not someone who showed up when he could

figure out how to be a person. I'm not going to take that from him."

"You could start thinking about it as adding to his life rather than trying to take something away or replacing something," Raf said with a shake of his head. "God, is melodrama genetic too?"

I scowled. "This is a delicate balance for me, alright? I'm not trying to cause waves."

"Then you should have never come back," Raf shrugged. "Just coming back was enough to cause waves."

"Fine, more waves than necessary."

Raf sighed. "Alright, fine. I give up. If you want to sit around and feel sorry for yourself and feel like you have to tiptoe through life when you've got the chance to do more than be just okay, be my guest. I know when to give up."

I frowned. "Okay is the best I've ever hoped for, considering—"

"Considering how much of a disaster you've made of your life, I know. But there's a point where okay no longer cuts it. You can't get through life just being okay. Just as you can do little things to make other people's lives better, you can do little things to make your own life a lot better, too. All it takes is a little daring," he said. "Now, you can sit around here for a bit longer if you want, but I've got to go back and do some restocking."

"I may not live up to your standards, but I know how to take a hint," I said, pushing back my chair.

Raf rolled his eyes. "I'm not telling you to leave, I'm telling you I have a job to do."

"I can't keep up with you young people," I said with a sigh.

"Yeah, well, if you want me to prove you can keep up with me, you know my number," he said with a wink and walked off.

I knew he was serious about being interested, and again, I

decided the politest thing was to ignore it. Maybe there was some truth to his idea of doing something more than just...being okay.

"If you're not here when I get back, I won't take offense," Raf said. "And if you do any more thinking tonight, think about what you would be telling someone in your position if you were giving them advice. If you can't follow the advice you'd give to someone else, you should probably refrain from giving anyone advice again...just saying."

It was hard to argue with that, and based on his smug look as he walked away—and I totally wasn't watching his ass as he went—he knew I understood what he was trying to say and agreed. Then again, wasn't it the province of the old to advise the younger generations when they knew they themselves wouldn't follow? Wasn't it enough to try to warn them of the pitfalls you yourself had fallen into? Because clearly you were too old to have learned the lesson, so why not give someone else a chance to do better?

Alright, I wasn't old, I felt like it some days, especially in my soul, but I wasn't old...just older than probably everyone in this building.

I turned at a sniffle and saw that one of the women was looking down at her phone, her expression heart-wrenching. All three women looked like they hadn't seen a decent bed or meal in days, and I wondered when they'd last seen a friendly face. Raf was probably the first person to treat them even halfway decently. He had lit candles in their lives, but I doubted it would be much help, especially if he were right about the situation they were stuck in. The only thing that could get them out of trouble was a miracle and a whole lot of help on top.

I remembered being in that position several times. Well, not beholden to a pimp, if Raf was right, but I'd owed money to people who wouldn't let me get away with not paying, not

without limbs broken...and that was if I got lucky. The world was brutal most of the time, but if you were vulnerable or weak or tied to someone who didn't have your best interest at heart? Well, you could forget seeing too many of the good things in life and were left to grasp at whatever little flames were lit along your path and try to convince yourself that one day they would lead you to a real fire you could shelter by.

Except those things rarely happened. I might have gotten sober, and then realized I'd never been an addict at all, but I'd stayed sober through the lessons I'd learned from recovering addicts and trained therapists who had worked hard with me. I had money again, but only because there were still people willing to give me a chance to reconnect with my old life in the music industry. I had the potential for a normal life with normal people who cared for me because they'd found a place in their hearts for me to wiggle my way in.

Frowning, I leaned over the bar, smiling innocently at the staff member who eyed me warily. I held up the paper and pen I'd retrieved, making a point to wiggle it to show that this was all I was after before returning to my seat. The first was a note to Raf that I folded and left on the bar. It wasn't much, but it was a way to tell him that I understood what he was trying to tell me, and that I would give it a lot of thought, maybe more than thought. I also mentioned that I would keep in contact, maybe it was flirting with fire, or just plain flirting, but I could use a person, just one, where I didn't have to tread carefully or make sure I wasn't falling into bad habits around them. Yeah, he was definitely dangerous for my balancing act since he was interesting to me in more than just a platonic way, but that was a far less perilous fire than the one I was courting by trying to be a better version of myself for my...for Milo.

Sure, leaving a note was old-fashioned, but even if I knew

how to use modern technology, I was still allowed a few habits that just wouldn't die. I wrote his name on it, then took another piece of paper. That was quicker than the note I'd left for Raf, and with that done, I slipped the pad of paper and pen back over the bar and got up.

The women noticed I was heading for them, and I knew then they were in a bad place. You didn't have those kinds of instincts without a lot of practice, and I made sure to look as unthreatening as possible without looking meek. Looking too helpless would make them more suspicious, and I wasn't trying to intimidate them.

"Just in case," I said, sliding the paper onto the table. "No strings attached...not the ones you're used to."

They looked at the paper like it might bite them, but I walked away before they could get it in their heads that I might be a threat. Not only did I not want to cause a scene, but I wasn't trying to scare them off. This was the best I could do, and with that, I left the club, wondering if I was really doing a whole lot or just... doing pointless things again.

I made it a little bit down the street before I heard my phone and opened Raf's message.

Really? A handwritten note? If you're trying to make yourself seem old, that's a good place to start. Also, what did you say to those girls, cuz they were asking about you and wanted to know what kind of freak you were.

Laughing, I put my phone away and wondered, not for the first time, what I was doing.

I guess I'd find out.

RAF



"Here you are," the Uber driver said, and I glanced out the window toward the small apartment building. It didn't stand out; you could walk right past it and think it was another building with a stone facade, a few wooden beams thrown in for good measure that probably weren't real because of the wet weather. It was the address Marshall had given me, though, so I pulled my coat closer and prepared to get out.

"Thanks," I told the man who had been quiet throughout the trip across town. Considering my job required me to listen to and talk, I appreciated the silence. I added a healthy tip in the app as I stepped onto the sidewalk, walked toward the building, and squinted at the sign on the front. Since it didn't list the residents, I tested the door, and it opened. I let myself in and looked around the small, dim, but clean lobby.

I headed toward the back. There were only a couple of doors, and I looked at the numbers before freezing when I heard a female voice shout from the one I knew had to be Marshall's door. I knew he entertained both sexes when he wanted to get laid, but I didn't understand why he'd have company after messaging me.

Opening the message to double-check I hadn't made a mistake, I saw the last two. He had been sporadic in his messages ever since I'd seen him a couple of weeks ago. So previous messages ran the gamut from someone he'd talked to, to a picture of a fat squirrel he'd found on one of his many walks, and then his last two, asking me if I could come over to help him with something important, and the address. When I'd tried to get details, I had been met with silence. He hadn't read the messages either, so I assumed whatever he needed help with was keeping him busy and that he wasn't outright ignoring me.

"Oh boy," I muttered as I tucked my phone away, then, at another shout, knocked on the door harder than I usually would.

A woman I thought I recognized but couldn't place jerked it open to glare at me. "Yeah? What do ya want?"

"I'm looking for Marshall," I said, raising a brow as she clicked her tongue like I was irritating her. "This is the address he sent me."

She rolled her eyes and spun around. "Marsh, that hot guy from the club is here for you!"

I stepped into the apartment, ignoring the sparse furniture, to see two more women standing in a doorway, arguing loudly. At the sight of them and the other one's words, I realized where I'd seen them before. It had been a couple of weeks since they'd come into the club, trying to find a place to hang out for a little while, but I hadn't seen them since. They didn't look as skinny, and they definitely looked like they had gotten more sleep. And from how loud the argument was, I guessed they felt a lot more comfortable here than in the bar.

Marshall appeared, looking more haggard than I'd seen him, but not exactly worn down. He pulled the rubber gloves

off, dropped them onto a small stack of boxes, and gave me a weary smile. "Good to see you."

"Mmm," I said, frowning as the argument reached a fever pitch. "Dare I ask?"

"Come on," he said, nodding toward the doorway he'd come through. "I was just cleaning up the bathroom. Jean?"

The girl who answered the door sighed. "What?"

"Clean the bathroom, please?" he asked as he walked off. I noticed the woman glance at the gloves before rolling her eyes and turning back to the TV.

"Uh...huh," I said as I followed him into the kitchen. It was clean, had enough space for a small table and a couple of chairs, and not much else other than the counters and appliances. When he opened the fridge, though, there was plenty of food and drinks. "You do realize she did not, in fact, go and do the bathroom, right?"

"I figured," he said with a heavy sigh. "Something to drink?"

"Sure, dealer's choice," I said as I leaned against the small table pushed against the kitchen wall. "So uh...what's up with these girls?"

He produced a bottle of root beer and handed it to me. "Was trying to take your advice...and mine."

"By bringing them to your house?" I asked, keeping my voice down and an eye on the hallway. The two had moved into the room where they'd been arguing, but the third, Jean, it seemed, was probably still out, and I wanted to keep an eye out for her shadow moving down the hallway. "Seriously?"

"Well, you were right, they were trying to hide from their pimp. So I offered for them to stay here," he said with a weary sigh, and I noticed his beer wasn't the root kind. "They've been here for a week and a half, and it's been—"

There was a screech and a crash.

"That."

"So, you took them in, and all they've done is take up space, dirty up the place, refuse to clean, and scream at each other?"

"They've certainly had large appetites too. I've been trying to keep alcohol out of the house."

"He says with a beer in his hand."

"They won't drink beer, but everything else? God, I know they're using me," he said, and now I could understand the weariness in his body.

"Then kick them out."

His eyes went wide. "Kick them out on the street where they're just going to get pulled in by the same bastard that beat the shit out of them?"

"Seriously?" I asked, gesturing toward the noise coming from the rest of the apartment. "That is not the sound of people who understand what you're doing for them. Weren't you the one who said you can't set yourself on fire to keep other people warm? Well, what the hell is that?"

"It's different when the people you're trying to help could get killed because you turned them out," he said miserably. "I...get that this doesn't look good."

I sighed, setting the root beer aside. "Look, I understand, alright? I get it. Those women were hurting, lost, and in need of help. And maybe they're acting like this because it's all they know, maybe this was all they saw growing up, or shit, maybe they're just getting their own fucked up feelings out. But...you said it yourself, you're trying to get your life back on track, trying to be a better person."

"And this felt like the first step," he said, and shook his head. "Well, maybe not the first step, but a good step."

"And it was," I said immediately. "It really was. You were willing to put yourself out there, take a risk, and help someone. Fuck, if it weren't for people like you, I would probably be dead by now."

He stared at me. "You were like them?"

"I wasn't a kid when I ran away, but I might as well have been. I didn't know shit about the real world," I told him softly. "And I didn't know anyone. I got taken advantage of, and I fell into some nasty shit. It took a year before I...well, I wasn't much better than these three. And I thought I could coast along like that. Giving my parents and their whole fucked up world the finger by doing whatever I wanted. Except I was burning bridges and hurting people every step of the way. And when I was on my last chance, the last person who gave me a chance, he took the shit I had with me and dumped it."

"Please tell me you mean drugs and liquor and not like...the bracelet you got from your grandmother."

I laughed ."Yeah, my drugs. And he dumped his liquor for good measure. Told me I could stay with him, but there weren't going to be drugs or alcohol. And I had two weeks to find a job. There were other things too, like if I didn't learn to speak with respect, I was going to find out my parents weren't the only ones with a mean backhand."

"Hmm," Marshall said, and I wasn't sure how he was taking that. "What did you say?"

"Something disrespectful. Mean actually. Bordering on cruel. And yeah, he slapped the fuck out of me for that."

Marshall winced. "I suppose he was a man of his word."

"And then he helped me get up, got me in the shower, and made dinner for me," I said with a small smile. "And when I got up the next day, feeling like shit, he had more food, some normal pills for me to take, and a bathroom to clean. It sucked. I was hooked enough that my body hated me for days, but not hooked enough that I needed the ER. Helped that he was an EMT, so he could keep an eye on me, but...I got that job, and I still have it. I got my shit together, not just

because someone was willing to take on my shit, but because he wouldn't put up with it."

Marshall stared at me, chewing his lip. "He's gone...isn't he?"

"Talked about him in the past tense, didn't I?" I said with a shrug. "Always gives it away."

"Nah, could have meant you didn't know where he was anymore, but that smile you gave while talking about him," he said, wagging a finger at me, with a sad smile of his own. "Only when you're hurting from losing them do you have a smile like that."

I heaved a sigh. "Yeah, he's gone. A few years ago, he was out on a call—car accident on the freeway. Wasn't anyone's fault; the roads were slick, and the fog was thick. The driver lost control and slammed into the back of the ambulance, and Derek...Derek was in the front. Got pinned and died on the way to the hospital. I visit his grave every time I need to talk to someone, and on his birthday...and mine. He'd have come back from the grave and beat me senseless if I went there on the day he died, always said that his life had enough gruesome, morbid shit without someone making his death even more morbid."

"I understand," Marshall said and left it at that. I knew he'd lost plenty as well, but that right there was all I needed to know it was true. He didn't feel the need to justify what happened to Derek, make me feel better, or even apologize. He just... got it; he got the heartache and sadness; he knew what it was like to have something happen in your life and want to turn around and call that person, only to remember... you can't.

Grief passed over me, and although it had been three years, it still rode through thick and heavy. There had been things Derek should have been there to see, things I'd wanted him to be there for, at my side. God, he would have loved to

hear the shenanigans after I dated Milo and what came next. He would have told me I was an idiot for not seeing it, said Milo was a prick for letting it happen...and then told me to bring Milo and Eli by for dinner when I was done being in my feelings about the breakup.

But it passed, or I suppose it never really passed, just fell silent, retreating to a corner of my heart where it would one day rise and take over me again. Those moments happened less often, but I didn't think they would ever go away. Just like the grief I felt losing a family that was still technically alive had never really left me. Grief when I heard "Auld Lang Syne" because my mother had loved to sing it in that clear, crystal voice of hers. Sorrow when I saw other gay men spend time with their fathers, who were there as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The smell of gun oil still caused a twinge. I couldn't use Dawn dish soap for years without remembering how I used to wash dishes with my mother as she told me stories of her childhood.

Ah, grief...this too will pass.

When I opened my eyes, Marshall was staring out the kitchen window, and I realized he was waiting for me. Not for me to be ready to hear him, but for my heart to stop feeling the squeeze of a pain he knew all too well. He once again had the look of someone older, but it made him look peaceful, almost relaxed and wise as he stood at the counter, gently wiggling his beer bottle back and forth.

I opened my mouth before slamming it shut when I heard a hard pounding on the door. Frowning, I held up a hand to Marshall. "I'll get it. Don't worry, you've got enough on your plate."

"Probably the landlord," he sighed. "Again."

I snorted. "Boy, I can't imagine what that could be about."

Marshall shook his head, and as I went to deal with this new development, I realized I was seriously considering

finding a way to put my foot down for him with these women. If he really was like Milo, then, with his soft heart, he didn't have a mean or violent bone in his body. The idea of turning these women out if they didn't get their shit together might be beyond his abilities.

The first girl, Jean, opened the door, and although all I could see was her back, I knew something was wrong. She shrieked with fear, trying to slam the door, which hit her face and sent her flying, collapsing on the living room floor with a cry of pain as two men came barreling into the living room. I barely understood what was being said, but I knew it was full of swearing, insults, and demands for the girls to move. The other two girls were fumbling around in the bedroom, and while I couldn't be sure, it sounded like they were trying to push something in front of the door.

Then the men spotted me.

"You?" the first man demanded, and I recognized him. The neighborhood the club was in was a decent one, but there were still plenty of lowlife scum. It came with the entertainment and nightlife business. This was one of the local dealers, and considering he was probably the one Jean had spotted and tried to hide from, that meant he was apparently dealing in hookers too. "You son of—"

He launched himself over the back of the couch, coming for me with a hissed promise to show me just what happens to people who fuck with his money and his girls. I was driven back into the wall, a gasp knocked out of me as I collapsed against the wall. I missed the first blow that sent my ear ringing and barely managed to save my face from the worst of the second, but the third made my head explode with pain even as I lashed out.

There was no fourth blow, and I slid along the wall, trying to keep upright. Eyes wide, I looked up, wondering what the hell he was going to grab for the next swing…and

froze. He wasn't close; he was stumbling away, holding the side of his face where blood leaked between his fingers.

Marshall ignored him, leaping over the back of the couch toward the second guy. I grimaced as he came down on the man's knee, a crack snapping through the room, but Marshall didn't stop there. Wrapping his hand around the second's head, he slammed it into the door, making the guy grunt and fold forward. Marshall shoved him back, sending him sprawling into the outer hallway, then spinning back to face the resident dealer and pimp.

"Out," Marshall said, and I realized he had a knife. Not a large chef's knife, but one from the kitchen, something smaller and easier to wield, and the blade didn't shake in his hand. "I won't ask again."

"Do you know who you're fuckin' with?" the idiot hissed because that's what he had to be, a goddamn idiot. There wasn't a shred of hesitation or fear in Marshall.

"You aren't the first gutter rat who thinks he's bigger and meaner than everyone around him. I've had dealings with the Marelli Family, been threatened by Los Muertos, and I've stared down a bomb someone strapped to my chest. So I don't think some piece of shit who wouldn't even get a printed Rest in Peace shirt in his honor is going to scare me. So get out. And if you come back, I'm going to do more than leave you something to remember me by, if you leave at all. Got it?"

The last was said with such chilling coldness, I had to seriously consider whether Marshall was a little too comfortable killing people. I wasn't the only one, because our former badass pimp and dealer was making his way to the door in haste, muttering under his breath. He barely got through the door before Marshall slammed it shut and...didn't lock it.

"Now you're just showing off," I said as I leaned on the back of the couch.

He looked me over, the soft understanding in his eyes from only seconds ago was gone, replaced by something sharper and more analytical. "You might want to sit down while I get these three together."

Jean was alright, shaken and eyeing Marshall with a somberness that probably felt strange and foreign to her. The other two girls were a little harder to convince to come out of the room. Clearly, they thought we'd all been beaten within an inch of our lives and that Marshall was being forced to trick them into coming out, even with Jean's help.

"Oh, for the love of…" I huffed. "If we were lying to you and that fucker was still here, he could just shoot the door open. Where are you going to run then? It's a windowless room."

The corner of Marshall's mouth twitched as we heard furniture being moved. "I should have thought of that."

Once they were out and realized we were fine, they immediately collapsed onto Jean, checking her over and breaking into controlled tears. I found myself with a few pain relievers in my hand, a glass of water in the other, and an ice pack against my face where I'd taken a blow.

"We should probably get you to the hospital and get you checked out," Marshall said with pursed lips.

"I should be fine, I've taken harder knocks," I said, frowning. "I've been in fights too, but you wouldn't know it from how easily I got my ass handed to me."

"People don't expect to get ambushed in someone else's home like that," Marshall said.

"Except you, it seems."

"Yes, well, I did say I'd had a colorful life."

"I'll say, but I'm—"

"You're going," he said firmly, and I sighed, knowing I was

indeed going to end up getting checked out today. "But give me a second. I need to set some things straight."

I blinked but said nothing as Marshall moved to check on Jean. She had a nasty cut on her face, and she shook her head when he mentioned the clinic.

"You're going too," he said, then narrowed his eyes when she and another of the girls protested. "You're not going to stay here if you can't take care of yourself. Raf and I didn't go through this just for you to die because you were too scared to leave the apartment."

"That's twice now he's saved you," I pointed out, unable to help myself. "So take a page out of my book, and shut up and listen to what he says."

"And if you're going to live here for a while, you're going to start doing more," he said. "You've been here for a couple of weeks and done nothing but eat my food, dirty the place up, and refuse to take care of yourselves. So you're going to start doing your part. If you can't figure out how to split chores between the three of you, I'll do it. If you don't know how to do something, ask me, and I'll teach you. I don't have a problem with that."

He knelt so he could peer up at them, "But what I do have a problem with is continuing to let you run around this place like it's nothing. I want to help you, but you're not kids. So you're going to do your part, or you're going to have to find somewhere else, alright?"

They stared at him and nodded.

"Good," he said, pointing at Jean. "You, come with me. You and Raf are going to the clinic a couple of blocks over, and you're getting looked at. You can think about what I said until we get back. Then we'll figure out how we're going to handle things, got it?"

I sighed, texting the bar owner to let him know I could be late. When I got back a questioning emoji, I told him I'd

explain later, but that I wasn't dying in the street somewhere. I knew Jimmy would still be concerned until he talked to me and found out what happened, and that I really was okay, but he trusted me enough to know I wasn't going to hide anything from him if it was serious. He had always been the gentler of the two, out of him and Derek, and Jimmy liked to hover over the 'flock' as he liked to call the guys he and Derek had helped over the years.

"And don't take anything and run," I told one girl when Marshall left to get his coat.

Her expression soured. "Fuck you, I ain't—"

I pointed at the track marks on her arm and pulled up the sleeve of my shirt to show the only old scar I had left from years ago, "Yours is fresher than mine, and I know what it's like when shit goes tits up, and you want to score to make it better. I wasn't accusing, I was reminding you. You've got a good thing going here."

She didn't look any happier, but she did look a lot less pissed as I stood up when Marshall came back, looking between Jean and me. "Ready?"

MARSHALL



"Well, that was a good use of the taxpayers' dollars," I heard Raf mutter as we left the clinic. "And four hours of our lives."

"Why'd it smell like that in there?" Jean asked.

"It smelt like someone had rubbed a rotten mango in a shitty diaper," Raf noted, and I shook my head as Jean made a noise of disgust.

"That was the paint on the walls," she said with a laugh.

"And the staff were very nice and professional," I reminded them, but they both rolled their eyes as Jean pulled out her cracked phone to show Raf a picture of someone she'd spotted standing outside while we'd been waiting in the lobby.

They had been stiff and uncomfortable around each other, which I found a little odd. It wasn't like Raf hadn't given them the booth in the club to hide away, but apparently, it was different when you went a step further. Then again, he had already proven he could be quite...protective, considering how harshly he'd come down on Milo for abandoning everyone to sink into an isolated pit of misery on the

other side of the city. So perhaps it made sense that he was uncomfortable with what I'd been doing with these girls because it had put me in a rough spot.

"God, he does look like Pennywise," I heard Raf say as we stopped at the crosswalk.

"Who?" she asked.

"Jesus, I'm sure your pimp didn't let you experience anything close to culture, but c'mon, you don't know who the clown generations of people are traumatized by is?"

"Now, who the fuck would be scared of a clown?"

"Clearly not you after those stories about some of those tricks you were turning."

"Boy!" she said, but despite her angry tone, she was laughing and giving him a hard shove as we walked.

Their banter continued as we walked back toward the building, and I let them. I honestly didn't know what I was going to do with these women now I was staring down the barrel of reality and what it meant to have them staying with me. Not that I didn't think their pimp wouldn't come looking for them at some point, but it never occurred to me that he would find me half a city away, so quickly.

And now he knew where I was, which meant I needed to keep an eye out for a while. I knew damn well I'd hurt him, his pride too, and scared him. The thing was, with small-time trash like that, pride was usually all they had. If he was the type whose fear of me wouldn't override his wounded pride, then the only thing to make him stop was if I disappeared from Cresson Point or he wasn't alive to worry about his pride...or I wasn't.

I thought of Milo and I... no, I wasn't leaving Cresson Point.

Getting back to the apartment building, I was glad to find only a note stuck to the door from the office. I would need to

talk to the landlord in the morning to make sure he didn't boot us all out on our asses. I could only hope there wouldn't be more trouble while I was living here...I liked it. The neighbors kept to themselves, even more so since I'd brought the three women into my place, but they were all respectful, didn't pry, and were nice enough to wave if I saw them in the hallway.

Opening the door, I blinked as the smell of lemon-scented cleaner washed over me and tried to understand what I was looking at.

"Y'all better have saved me something to do," Jean snapped as she stepped over the threshold. "I'm pullin' my weight around here or so help all of y'all."

Another of the girls, Clare, appeared and rolled her eyes. "You can clean the bathroom since you went and stunk it up earlier."

"We *just* got back," Raf called before voices could be raised, closing the door behind him. "And the place looks amazing."

They hadn't just cleaned, they'd unpacked the stuff from the boxes I'd left mostly untouched around the apartment. Even though I intended to stay in the city for as long as I could, the rest of my life even, unpacking my things had seemed like a step too far. I unpacked everything necessary, and if there was something I wanted, I could always root through the boxes.

They had put together the shelving unit and unpacked stuff for it. I walked up to it, running my hand over the picture of me with my siblings and parents. It was an old one; I was around ten, beaming at the camera behind reddened cheeks. All of us were red-cheeked and grinning at the camera, wearing puffed-up coats as we sat before a snowy hill lined with fir trees. Beside it was the only picture

I had of my brother and sister, where we were all still relatively happy, sober, and not damaged in some horrible way, my arm around my brother's neck while he hugged my sister from behind. She had her secret smile, and he was grinning that grin he always had until...well, it was nice to see them again, and the girls had even cleaned the inside of the glass and put everything back neatly.

"Thank you," I said softly, pressing my fingers gently against the glass and feeling that familiar squeeze of pain and happiness in my chest.

"You were real cute back in the day," I heard, and turned to see Trisha standing in the hallway, oven mitts on. She looked thoughtful. "Real cute now too. Wouldn't have complained if I had more lookin' like you coming through them motel doors."

"He don't swing that way," Jean said, jerking her head toward Raf. "Obviously."

"He's bi," Raf said. "So he does."

"Oh, see?" Trisha exclaimed, her voice rising as she went back into the kitchen, and I heard the oven door open. "I could have had a chance."

"With a face like that and an…" Clare began, and I turned to see her turning around, "ass like that, he wouldn't need to pay."

Raf burst into laughter as I felt my face warm. "Holy shit. Amazing."

"I couldn't do nothin' about that hole," Clare said as she came back, holding a basket of laundry. "I don't do that."

"I can teach you," Raf said, and when I looked at him, he shrugged. "What? It's a handy skill to have."

"And how do you know how?"

"My dad was a carpenter by trade."

"I...see."

"Get that look off your face."

Jean looked up from her phone. "What's wrong with that?"

My lips twitched. "Raf here comes from a...religious family. And he's the son of a carpenter. There's a joke in there somewhere."

"I'm not Jesus," Raf said with a roll of his eyes. "But I can definitely see about making you call his name if you want."

"Ha!" Jean cackled as I sighed again. "I'm gonna have to remember that one."

"Jean!"

"What?"

"Are you dyin', on bed rest?"

"No!"

"Then get your big ass in here and help set up, dinner's done."

"Girl, if you don't stop bossing me around, I'm gonna rip the last of your sense out with your hair," Jean growled as she got up off the couch.

Neither Raf nor I said anything as they continued to bicker, the sound making me smile. It no longer sounded like two women preparing to rip each other's hair out over one bad look, but...sisters. Actually, I could remember far enough back to know that siblings could sound like either, depending on the day.

"I guess you had an effect," Raf said when I joined him on the couch, not wanting to be in the way now the smell of something rich and meaty was filling the air.

"I guess," I said with a snort.

"You guess," Raf said wryly. "You took them in when you didn't have to, put up with their shit, and then turned around and saved their asses, and mine by the way, but we'll loop back to that later, and then were nice as hell while you laid down the law. Yeah, I think you activated the sleeper agent

code in their head that made them realize they need to get their shit together."

"That was certainly...something," I said, though that didn't begin to cover having two men break into your house to kidnap three women you were trying to help. Well, kidnap and who knew what else, I doubted he was going to drag them back to wherever and give them a firm lecture. They might have been lucky to get through the night alive.

"Something? You went John Wick on their asses," he said with a snort, bumping me with his elbow, sending a jolt of warmth through me at the touch.

I choked back a laugh. "I did not."

"Okay, sure," he snorted. "Maybe not John Wick because there wasn't a tragic puppy incident and a pencil, but c'mon. You were...well, you were just there, and the next thing, they're not there anymore. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

He was remembering things through a better lens than I deserved. My heart had been in my throat when I'd heard the sounds coming from the living room, knowing something awful was about to happen. The knife had been in my hand in a second; I'd made sure it was good enough to use the next second, and then I had moved to find out what was happening.

The first thing I'd found was Raf being driven back into the wall, his forehead bleeding, and then his head had gone into the drywall with a hard thump. I had been in enough scrapes to know the only way to beat someone bigger than you, like this guy, and when you were outnumbered, which I was, was to run or surprise them. Running wasn't an option because other people in the apartment needed help.

That was all it had been, not being stronger or better at fighting, just catching them by surprise and being meaner than

they expected. The first guy, the one I suspected was the pimp, hadn't expected the blow to the side or the knife across his face. And his friend hadn't been expecting me to come directly for him before he had a chance to understand what was happening.

"As I said, colorful past," I said with a shrug.

"Not your first fight," he said with a smile.

"No," I shrugged.

"And the other stuff?"

"Oh, the Family thing and all that?"

"Yeah."

"It's true. I've made a lot of stupid ass choices in my life, and it's a miracle I'm alive. There's too many times when I shouldn't have walked away in the state I did. Sometimes I did because I learned how to be meaner than the people I fought, or because they didn't expect me to be."

He lounged back on the couch, and my eyes were pulled to his torso. I saw a flash of stomach as his shirt rode up, and realized, of course, he had a tattoo that dipped under his jeans. "Yeah, well, count me as one of those people?"

"What?" I asked in confusion, jerking my attention away from his skin.

"I didn't think you had it in you to do anything hard or mean, and then you turned around and scared the shit out of those guys and saved all our asses," he said with a laugh. "That's literally the opposite of what I had been thinking about you. So yeah, count me wrong, and my bad."

"Don't apologize," I snorted, wanting to reach out to tug his shirt down so I didn't keep getting distracted, but that meant touching him.

"Fine, but thanks."

"And don't thank me."

"Yeah, well, someone saves your ass, you thank them. And that's what you did, so I'm thanking you."

I sighed. "Sure. Glad you looped back to it before you tried to come up with some speech."

"Speech? God no, when I said I was going to loop back to it, I meant I was going to wait until they were asleep or something, and really thank you," he said, leaning back on the arm of the couch.

"Raf," I sighed. "That's...not a good idea."

"If you're not interested, just say so," he said with a shrug, making his shirt rise more. "But the last couple of times we saw each other, I'd swear you were eye fucking me and then trying not to. So either I'm reading things wrong, or something is going on."

"I'm twice your age."

"I'm thirty."

"Huh?"

"I'm thirty."

I squinted at him. "You're...nine years older than Milo?"

He gave me a deadpan stare. "You said that with the tone someone uses when they find out the twenty-four-year-old is dating a high school junior."

"No," I said quickly, eyes going wide. "I just...didn't realize you were that much older than him."

He rolled his eyes. "So unless you somehow hit sixty, you're not twice my age."

"Still," I said, uncomfortable. "Plus there's the whole thing with you and Milo."

"If you're weirded out that I was with Milo, that's fine, I get it. If you're worried about *me* because of my relationship with Milo, then you can forget that real quick," he said with a shake of his head. "I already had your son worrying about my feelings so much that he was an idiot about the whole thing. I don't need you doing it too. And no, it's not weird to think his dad is hot either, or that he's funny, or sweet, or that I like spending time with him."

"Dinner!" came a call, and I jerked when Clare rolled into the living room with two plates. "Here's a fork, here's a napkin, don't make a mess because I just vacuumed."

"First time doing housework since they got here, and they're already getting bossy," Raf said with a chuckle as we heard the other two behind her. He leaned in closer, "Just give it some thought, Marshall. I've got the night off because my head went through your wall, and if you say no after dinner and movies, then I'll Uber back to my place, and friends we'll stay, no biggie."

It didn't *feel* like no biggie, but I wasn't going to argue now all three women had joined us in the living room, bringing with them a dose of reality and happy chatter. Trisha turned out to be pretty good in the kitchen and had made a decent pot pie out of what I'd had in the fridge, and everyone agreed it was delicious...if a little soggy in the crust.

What couldn't be decided on right away was what we were going to watch. By the time the first argument about the merits and flaws of romance movies had wrapped up, I was halfway through my first bit of pie. By the time they settled on a period piece because Raf wanted them to have exposure to something else, I was up, getting a second helping.

It turned out that a 'bit of culture' as Raf had teasingly described it, hadn't been a bad idea and all of us found ourselves wrapped up in the storyline. Raf and I were in the same spot throughout the movie, which had been just fine while we were eating. That had changed when the plates had been taken away, and we were left to get comfortable.

At one point, Raf's knee bumped mine as he spread out a little to get more comfortable. I glanced at him and saw that he wasn't paying attention to me, but to the movie. I scolded myself for being paranoid. He wasn't trying to make a move on me, he was caught up in the movie...and well, he was

leaving it up to me to decide if I wanted anything else out of this night besides some good company.

It was just as tempting as it had been before he'd said he wanted more. Of course, what did more mean? God, I hoped he wasn't trying to start anything serious because, holy hell, I knew he'd said that he had made some bad decisions of his own, but he made it sound like that behavior was in the past. Trying to get together with someone like me, for something more serious than a roll in the sack? That was the definition of a bad decision.

And yeah, he was right, I was a little wary because...hell, he had been with Milo. That probably would have been a lot weirder if I'd been around while Milo was growing up, but it was still definitely weird. It made me feel like the creepy dad who slept with his son's girlfriend or fiancée. Except they were broken up, and not because of anything I'd done but because...well, I didn't want to say it was Milo's fault, but it was basically Milo's fault.

"Now somethin' trashy," Clare proclaimed as the movie ended, and she selected another.

"We don't have to do the exact opposite of the last movie," Raf said with a laugh.

Clare grinned. "We could use some culture, but you could use some trash."

"I work at a club...a gay club, the stories I could tell you."

"Oh, I know. I worked not far from there. I heard some of the stuff y'all get up to. Some of ya are worse than us, and we were getting paid for it."

"If you're good at something, never do it for free."

"Then I guess you gay boys ain't very good at it."

"I have no way to prove that, so I'm going to admit defeat," he said with a sigh, giving me a smile that could only be called lopsided, and sent a dart of desire straight to my groin.

Oh God, I was actually considering it.

The next movie started, and it was a lot funnier than the one Raf had chosen, and it was exactly what I needed after the day I'd had. I wiggled into the cushions and froze when my arm brushed against his and he...didn't move away. Of course, I didn't move away either, so I was left to sit there and feel our skin against one another. It was just our forearms, but it was still enough to distract me from the movie, and I began losing track of the plot and the jokes.

My breath shivered as I felt my fingers move, and I looked down at our arms. Slowly, I reached out and brushed my fingertips against the back of his hand. He never looked away from the screen, but his hand twisted, lying flat in an obvious invitation.

That was the moment, and though there was no one paying attention, I glanced around before sliding my fingers along his palm and put our hands together. His fingers closed around mine, threading them together and giving a squeeze. It was a harmless, innocent gesture, and yet I could feel myself growing hard in an instant, torn between the gentle touch and being aroused by it.

We lost Jean at the start of the next movie, claiming she needed sleep, and she slipped into the second bedroom I had made up for them last week. I was barely paying attention as I found myself picking my legs up and twisting so I could slide them into his lap. His hand came down, clamping over my calf and pulling my legs further into his lap without looking at me.

His other hand stayed wrapped around mine, and I lay there, thinking about what I was doing, wondering if it was a good idea, wondering if it was too late to pull out of what I had already kick-started, and wondering if I really gave a damn about what came next. I had been trying my best to get my life together for so long that it was nice to...go with something. To not think…well, okay, I was thinking really

hard about it all and driving myself crazy, but I wasn't stopping either. It was nice to... do something, enjoy something, and maybe not feel bad about it the next day.

Behind me, Clare laughed softly. "Lost Trisha too. Get up, girl, that can't be comfortable."

I heard them talking softly as they said good night, the third movie moving toward its closing act. I stayed there with Raf a little longer, my heart thumping harder now we were alone. Yet Raf never moved, except to take my hand and draw it up to his mouth and kiss the back. Which only made the sweet but lustful feeling inside me come back all over again, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do.

When the credits began, he paused the movie and smiled. "By the way, when I said all that earlier, I also meant that you can just...enjoy this and nothing else."

I scoffed. "Sure."

He frowned. "No, fuck you, I mean that. I'm not some horny boy trying to egg you into sleeping with me just because you cuddled with me and held my hand. I'm not going to whine that you got me hard and teased me without doing anything. You can tell me right now that you want me to go to bed with you, but clothes stay on, and you want to spoon, and I will."

"Why?" I asked because I needed to know, forgetting that knowing could be freeing, but also dangerous.

"I don't know, because I like doing that for people. I've had people who took me home, and then all they want is to cuddle, or all they want is to cry about their last boyfriend or some other jerk who broke their heart. Sometimes they want to fuck, and sometimes people just want to feel like someone out there actually gives a shit, even if it's some stranger willing to hold them for the night and pretend to be someone special," he said with a shrug. "It's nice...and I've been that person before. And well, I like you. Kinda hard to say how or

in what way, but I do. Enough to like tonight, enough to want to sleep with you, and enough to want to sleep with you and be here in the morning. But I don't have to sleep with you, or I guess, you don't have to sleep with me."

So I pulled him close to kiss him, because yeah, sometimes knowing really was dangerous. He expected nothing, demanded nothing, and that was enough because it meant I didn't have to do anything, and so I wanted to do everything.

RAF



He was still kissing me as he led me to the other end of the apartment, opposite where I'd seen so far. There wasn't much in his bedroom, just another small stack of boxes, a bedside table, and a bed big enough for two if they were close together. Apparently, the girls had been willing to paw through his stuff to unpack for him, but not if that meant going into his room.

They were starting to grow on me.

I was pulled from my thoughts as I pushed the door closed behind me and watched as he sat on the edge of the bed, a frown stitched on his forehead. He leaned over and took a couple of things out of the table and stared at them. I didn't pay much attention because I recognized a bottle when I saw one, and the shine of a foil wrapper. More importantly, I could see he was lapsing back into his thoughts, and if my casual observation from movie time had shown anything, he could get lost in those thoughts, ending up in circles and obsessive spirals.

Kind of like someone else I knew.

"You're still allowed to say no," I told him, unbuttoning my shirt and pulling it off. I genuinely meant he could tell me no, but that didn't mean I wasn't going to tempt him at least a little. Mostly because I didn't think he truly wanted to tell me no, but because, just like the past few conversations we'd had about his life, I thought he was holding himself back unnecessarily.

His attention snapped to my body, and I didn't care that I probably looked arrogant when I smirked. I knew my body was in good shape, and I knew people liked to see it, and personally? I liked it when people enjoyed seeing it.

Getting between his legs, I cupped his face as his hands came up to rest on my stomach, and I kissed him again, sliding my tongue over his. Chuckling, I reached down and took hold of the bottom of his shirt, dragging it up over his arms. Only for the stupid thing to get stuck, so I ended up smacking myself in the face with my hand on the wounded side, and I had to pause as I saw stars.

"Fuck," he grunted, reaching for me, then drawing back.

"I'm okay," I said with a snort, reaching out and pushing him onto his back as I looked at him. There was some softness to his body as opposed to the hardness I tried to maintain, but if he was self-conscious, he didn't show it as he looked up at me as I slid over his body and pressed my lips to his stomach. If anything, he seemed more self-conscious when my lips and my fingers found puckered scars. I didn't know what they were, but they were obviously pictures in the book of his apparently colorful life.

I caught his lips with mine again, and he undid my pants with hands that shook only slightly. Shaky or not, they didn't hesitate to reach out and take hold of me, wrapping around me and drawing me out of my underwear with a soft noise of appreciation.

I let out a little laugh of surprise when he flipped me onto my back so he could crawl down my body and take me into his mouth. I groaned as he wrapped his lips around me and took my cock down his throat. His hand gripped the base as he began to bob up and down, jerking me off in tandem with the suction of his mouth. My fingers gripped the bedspread as pleasure whipped through me, curling down to my toes and making me lightheaded.

It was like looking down and seeing Milo, and yet...it wasn't. I could see the difference, even as the similarities remained eerie. It wasn't something I could put my finger on, but I could see the differences between them as I looked down. Funny that I finally realized that when my dick was in his mouth, but I wasn't going to worry. Not when the wet sounds of his mouth were driving me almost as crazy as the rest of what he was doing.

"I think I've decided," he said as he pulled off to run his tongue from head to base and back to the head again.

"Have you now?" I asked in amusement.

"Yes," he said, standing up to shimmy out of his clothes and kick them to the side. "Fuck me, cuddle me, stay the night, and I'll make you breakfast."

"Deal," I said, raising my hips from the bed to shove my pants and underwear to the floor, snatching the foil package and bottle from the bedside table.

Only to have them taken from me as he slipped a bit of the cool lube over my cock to create a fine layer of shining liquid before rolling the condom over it and clambering up my body. I caught his mouth again, pressing against his lower back and holding him as I rutted against him, shoving my cock along his ass, teasing his hole. His breathing was coming in little pants as he gripped the side of my neck, deepening the kiss.

"It's been a minute," he said as he reached behind him to lube me up and grip the base. "Can't promise I'll last."

"I'm not worried," I said as I felt him shift, pressing the head of my cock against his hole. "Just watching you come will be good enough for me, I can tell you that."

He hissed when the head punched through, and he hovered there. Knowing it would help him because he was being impatient, I reached out and took hold of his dick, amused to find that I wasn't going to need lube to stroke him. Giving him a few pumps, I let him feel the pleasure with the ache he was feeling as he eased himself back a little more.

"Fuck," he grunted, leaning forward to kiss me, the motion sloppy as his body fought between what I was doing to him and what he was taking. He groaned, and I waited, knowing he was going to go at his own pace and trusting that he knew what he was doing.

"It's been a while since you were with a guy, huh?" I guessed once he was seated on my dick completely, and the incredible heat of his insides was burning through the condom.

"Am I *that* out of practice? Damn, I'm not shy about using toys," he said with a little laugh.

"Toys?" I asked, my interest piqued as I held him and rolled my hips, making him hiss in a way that told me he was loosening up and enjoying himself. "Should have told me, I love watching guys almost come on a toy before I fuck them stupid and then let them come again."

"Next time," he groaned as my hips rolled again.

"Next time," I repeated, because you know what? I was goddamn alright with another time.

But my attention needed to be on *this* time, and I gripped his hips, raising him so I could push up into him again, feeling the grip around my dick loosen its death grip but still holding

on nicely. Pulling him down, I rolled him on his back, shoving forward so I was entirely buried inside him, his legs forced to each side of my hips as I hovered over him. Once again, I kissed him, smirking when I flexed a little to make my dick jump inside him and pull a low groan from him.

"So much better than a toy," he said in a strained voice.

"I've barely fucked you."

"Don't care, better."

"Good," I grunted as I dragged my teeth down his neck and his collarbone and started thrusting.

Although I was pretty sure the girls wouldn't have cared if they heard us, they clearly knew we were into guys, and well...fuck knew what kind of things they'd seen and heard in their time as hookers. I still tried not to make too much noise. The bed frame was cheap, and it squeaked heavily from the slightest movement, so I couldn't thrust without making a porno out of the entire thing.

What I could do, though, was hold my hand under his hips so I could roll mine. The motion was more than enough to smoothly push as deep into him as I could before drawing back and doing it all over again. He seemed to be thinking as much as I was about being careful because his gasps were quiet and his groans were muted. I imagined how good he would sound when we could let loose.

But damned if he didn't look as good as he sounded and felt. The line on his forehead was gone, his eyes were wide and empty of anything but pleasure, and his body taut against mine, going a little bit harder as I continued to fuck him. He wasn't so lost that he couldn't catch me off guard here and there by flexing and making himself tighter around me, making me wish I could lose all control and plow him into the mattress.

Another time, because I was going to make sure this

gorgeous, interesting, kind, slightly dangerous, wonderful man got at least a few good orgasms out of me.

"Oh shit," he gasped when I reached down and began stroking his dick again. "Raf, Raf—"

I didn't stop, stroking him in tandem with my rolling hips and feeling him twitch in my grasp. His breathing began to hitch and catch, while I never faltered. His eyes were locked onto mine, and I smiled down into his blissful face as I continued, feeling him tighten up. His head tilted back, and I kissed him, letting him moan as much as he wanted into my mouth as his body went wire-tight. His ass gripped me tightly as his cock jerked in my hand, splattering us both in the warmth of his cum as I ground against him, making him whimper before I drew out.

I had to admit, looking down and seeing him lying there, blissful and trying to get his thoughts back together, covered in his own cum, yet still managing to eye my dick with hunger as I pulled the condom off to jerk off certainly helped things along. My hips twitched as I stroked myself. Sucking in a breath, I let it hiss out into a low growl as my orgasm hit, adding my load to the mess covering his stomach and chest, bending forward as I groaned slightly, letting his name flow from my lips before it was over.

Lying beside him, I reached down and took his hand in mine. It was a good sign that he wasn't about to get up and bolt for the hills when his fingers closed around mine, though he kept his eyes closed, his chest slowing as he took deep breaths.

"Should probably tell me where I can get something to clean you up," I said with a snort. "Otherwise you're going to end up sticky and gross."

"Yeah," he said with a laugh, getting up and reaching into the drawer where he pulled out wipes. "What?"

I was staring. "Oh, you're...very prepared."

"What? Just because most of my orgasms over the past few months have been by myself doesn't mean I don't want to clean up afterward," he said with a snort, tossing the wipes in the trash. "Gone are the days when I'm okay with rolling over into a puddle of jizz. Speaking of, get up so we can use a different blanket, I'm exhausted and well fucked, and I'd like to get some sleep."

I snorted. "And I thought you were going to pull some post-nut clarity bullshit on me."

"Too tired," he said with a yawn as we swapped out the top blanket and lay down. "Haven't been this tired in ages."

It turned out he was a big spoon sort of person because he didn't waste a moment in rolling over and wrapping his arms around my waist to draw me close. Not that I minded, I might have my preference about the fucking part, but cuddling? There were no role assignments in cuddling.

It was still a little early for me to sleep, so I lay there listening to his breathing. He hadn't been kidding about being tired because his breathing deepened quickly and evened out. The poor guy must have been exhausted, but then again, he'd had a long day and an even longer week. I could only hope he got some good sleep; he needed it.

Actually, he'd probably needed exactly this sort of thing. Well, not just me fucking him and then sleeping with him, but the whole night with the girls. He had been stretched so thin after being with them, and they had...well, they had taken advantage of his good-natured ways. To have them show they could be better, and spend time with him, taking care of him after he'd taken care of them...well, hopefully that showed him he hadn't been wrong to trust in the goodness of people again.

I realized I was no longer being cuddled; in fact, I was alone. Confused, I patted the bed, looked out the window, and saw it was still dark. It didn't feel like I'd fallen asleep,

but I clearly had, long enough for Marshall to have woken up and slipped out of bed. His spot was still slightly warm, but cool enough for me to realize he had probably been up longer than a minute or two.

I pulled on my jeans and left the rest of my clothes on the floor as I went on a hunt. I discovered on the way to the kitchen that one of the girls was definitely a snorer, which meant the other two were probably hard sleepers.

I found Marshall sitting at the small kitchen table, a cup of tea in front of him, and a faraway look in his eyes. When I moved, he blinked and looked over, guilt crossing his face. "Sorry, hope I didn't wake you."

"I shouldn't have been asleep yet anyway, so I'm pretty sure that was just a nap," I said with a shrug as I sat across from him. "Probably the knock on my head."

"Sorry."

"Why? You didn't do it."

"Well, it happened because they were here and I brought them here."

"Oh noooo, you did a good thing for people in need of help, you terrible person."

"And I'm the reason you came over."

"Oh noooo, you texted someone you thought you could trust to come over and help you, you terrible person."

"I don't know who told you sarcasm was cute, but it's not."

I grinned. "It's not the first time I've taken a knock to the head, and it's probably not going to be the last."

Marshall frowned, curling his hand around his tea and blowing on it. "I don't regret tonight."

"That's good, I was going to start worrying that I somehow got bad at it," I said with a wink.

"God no," he said with a little laugh. "You were great."

"But?"

He winced. "But...I don't know. I've been trying to figure

out what the but is the whole time, and I can't get my head around it."

I leaned forward. "Maybe I could have a guess?"

"Sure?"

"I think maybe you're trying to wrap your head around your life constantly, trying to make sure all the dots and crosses are on your letters, that everything is tied up in a neat little bow. You're so worried about making sure your life doesn't fall apart at the first real pressure that you're not sure what to do with things that aren't guaranteed. I think you like me, and I think you know I like you."

He grimaced. "Which is a terrible idea."

"Not the worst," I said with a shrug. When he opened his mouth, I rolled my eyes. "Marshall. I'm not proposing marriage. I'm not even proposing that we go on a real date or anything. I mean, for fuck's sake, I just got out of a relationship that I have...complicated feelings about."

"A relationship with my son," he said, wincing. "Which makes what you just said even more complicated."

I stared at him. "Hey."

"What?"

"You just called Milo your son."

He stared at me, blinked, and leaned back. "I did."

I let that sink in for a moment before letting out a snicker. "Heh, you've been working your butt off so hard to make sure no one calls him your son, and when you weren't thinking, you called him that."

"Don't tell Marty," he said with a sigh.

"Look, you're thinking too hard about this. You care about him, and you love him. Hell, you loved him enough to make the better choice for him when he was a kid. And now you're back, trying to be a part of his life...and have him be part of yours," I told him softly, reaching over and wrapping my fingers around his wrist. "He cares about you, and one

day, he's going to love you. You might not be father and son in the way most people think, but it's not wrong for you to think of him as your son. I liked Marty, I really did, and she has every right to be pissy about what you did, but that was then, and this is now. Milo's an adult, and you've been working hard to get your shit together. You two get to decide what kind of relationship you're going to have, not her, not me, not anyone else. Don't be so caught up trying not to fuck things up that you fuck things up."

Marshall stared at our hands. "Aren't I supposed to be the one handing out advice?"

"Nah, you don't get the automatic wisdom card until at least sixty, so you've got time. But I'm a bartender; listening to problems and handing out advice is half the job. It's like twenty percent making drinks."

"You're missing thirty percent."

"Clean up and dealing with drunken idiots."

"Ah."

I smiled. "And you're overthinking whatever is going on between us too. We get along, we like being around each other, we think each other is hot, and we've found out the sex can be pretty damn good."

"It was good," he said, relenting.

"And next time, I'm taking you to my place so I can fuck you through the mattress and into the floor," I promised him. "Unless you think you're too old for that kind of treatment."

"I'm not," he said with a laugh and then sobered up. "I just—"

"Marshall," I said, squeezing his wrist. "You're allowed to have fun. Everything won't fall apart with Milo because you decided to think of him as your son. And you're not going to invite war and bloodshed because you decided the cute bartender friend might be someone you want to hang out with more and sleep with."

"You're the one inviting trouble by involving yourself more with me," he said, shaking his head.

"Again, not trying to make a boyfriend out of you, or move you in," I said with a shrug. "Maybe one day we might wake up and realize that, yeah, we could make something of this. Or maybe we could find out that we don't and stick to friends. Or maybe you fall apart, and we never speak again, or I get hit by a bus after leaving in the morning."

"God," he shuddered. "Don't."

I WAS GENTLE THIS TIME. "My point is that I'm not making promises, and I'm not asking for any. I'm saying you have something that could be fun, enjoyable, and relaxing. I'm not demanding anything, and I know you're still getting your shit together. But I know we can have a good time together, whether it's fucking, watching stupid movies, talking about what it's like to lose people, and...I don't know. A friend, a friend with benefits, but a friend."

"I know you've already said it, but...I can't make promises," he said, looking up from the countertop. "Except that I'll do my best. Except I'll try to be honest with you and do my best."

"That's all anyone can ever promise," I said with a snort. "And even then, it's not always a good promise. But fuck it. How have you got through the past couple of years?"

"One day at a time."

"Then, with whatever we have going on, we do the same thing. Fuck it."

"Fuck it," he repeated with a shake of his head. "One day at a time."

"Step by step," I muttered. "Day by day."

He wrinkled his nose. "Really?"

"Sorry, I spent too much time around Milo and started

picking up his habit of making associations with songs and jingles."

Marshall laughed, the worry dissolving from his face as he interlaced our fingers. "Fine. Day by day."

"Good," I said, looking up. "Hey, look, dawn."

"Isn't that your bedtime?"

"It is indeed."

"Want to go back to bed?"

"Absolutely."