BONUS SCENES · MEN OF FAIRLAKE

Seeking Sanctuary



Romeo Alexander

Best read after you've finished the book.

BEFORE YOU START

Author's Notes

To start, here's a brief scene I had in mind for the book, but I had to cut it for space reasons. Honestly, it was just a little too long to work as a proper flashback in the middle of a chapter but not long enough to stand as a chapter on its own. And honestly, having got it out and looked it over, it would have just cluttered up the book, so in retrospect, I'm glad I left it out.

That said, I'm including it here, along with the other bonus scene. And yeah, I'll say it now, both scenes are from Chase's perspective. He was the one who got trimmed down the most. Not that I didn't consider him interesting enough to be showcased, but due to the way the story was going...well, Devin's journey had a lot of impact on the story's path.

Still, I love the giant grump that is Chase, so you get to have more of him!

SCENE 1

Chase

"What the fuck does *that* mean?" I demanded, turning around to face him, eyes widening.

Devin hunched, his chin pushing into his shoulder as he turned his gaze from mine. We'd been friends for too long for me not to recognize the gesture of shame, but the muscle in his jaw twitched, signaling that defiance was overshadowing any guilt. Sure enough, when his eyes finally met mine, the heat in them was unwavering, and I wondered if this might be one of those rare moments when his temper would leap out and bite me.

"It means I'm leaving," he said, tilting his chin up stubbornly as if only then realizing he had shrunk away from me. I didn't usually snap at him. I reserved that for the stupid people of the world, who made up the vast majority. I hated that he flinched whenever I raised my voice. I knew he didn't think I was a threat, but too many years of dealing with his prick of a father had etched the reaction into his mind.

No matter how much Devin knew I would never hurt him, his body told him that anger meant pain, and the only way to stop it was to look as small and meek as possible. I'd spent most of our childhood wishing I had the courage to kill the bastard and spare Devin any more of it, but it turned out I didn't have to. Someone

else had decided they'd had enough of his sadism because, of course, he hadn't kept it to just his son or his late wife. Instead, he'd spread it across the whole town.

I had never been sold on the idea of a benevolent God, but if he existed and had any sense of justice, then Devin's father was burning in the worst pit of hell.

"To go where?" I asked, shoving aside my guilt at accidentally triggering Devin's fear reflex. I didn't want to scare him, damn it, but this news was too much for me.

"California," he said, lips thinning.

"Christ," I muttered, wiping a hand down my face in a poor attempt to stay calm. It wasn't exactly on the other side of the country, but it wasn't just a couple of hours away either.

We'd never been that far apart before, not since we'd met as kids, anyway. It had always been the two of us against the world, as close as the far better-known duo, Bennett and Adam. Between his shitty father and my mom, who had to work her ass off to keep a roof over our heads and was barely home because of it, Devin and I had to rely on one another.

And now he was leaving? Now that his dad was finally gone, now that we were out of school and could do whatever we wanted like we'd always talked about, he was just going to leave me?

A thought occurred to me, and my face warmed. "This is because of him, isn't it?"

Devin tried to keep his expression neutral, but his hands clenched at his sides, betraying what he was holding back. “He has a name, and it’s David.”

“I know what his name is,” I snapped, balling my hands into fists, unconsciously mirroring his posture. “Considering you like to talk about him more than anything else.”

“I don’t know what your fucking problem is, but quit talking about him like that,” Devin snarled.

“Maybe I would if you tried to listen to me once in a while,” I threw back, crossing my arms over my chest. “But no, Devin knows what’s best. Devin isn’t going to listen to me for literally the first fucking time in our lives.”

“Maybe it has something to do with the fact that you’re being a bigger prick than usual,” he said, pushing himself up with a grunt.

True, I was being a bigger ass than usual when it came to David, but I had a damned good reason. Everything about the guy stank of sleaze, and he was a little too slick for my tastes. Devin might find David’s easy smile charming and his casual comments humorous, but I only saw someone who tried too damn hard to be liked. Admittedly, he was pretty good at it, but it felt fake, a mask he slipped on so no one thought to look past it.

It also didn’t help that I would swear on at least a couple of my limbs that David was nothing but trouble. I had no proof, but something told me anyone involved

with David was on a path to destruction. Which terrified the living shit out of me when it came to Devin, who already walked a fine line through life. If my gut was right, it would be all too easy for Devin to find himself somewhere miserable, and now I wouldn't be around to pull him to safety.

"And you're being more stubborn than usual," I fired back, knowing damn well I wasn't helping my cause.

"You drop it on me that you're leaving and expect me to just…be okay with it? That you're leaving with the guy I keep telling you is nothing but trouble?"

Something flashed across his face, and my chest tightened at whatever emotion it was. It was gone before I could figure out precisely what I'd seen, leaving only his anger and my confusion.

"What, do you expect me to stay here in Fairlake just because you're here?" he asked, his voice rising.

"Jesus Christ, Chase, you should be happy I'm getting out of here. Fuck's sake, this whole town is filled with the most miserable memories a person can have, and now I have a chance to get away from it with someone that cares about me."

"I care about you!" I finally bellowed, giving in to the desperation growing steadily in my chest. "I've fucking cared about you, loved you, for years now! And now you're going to just…just leave?"

"It's not the same thing," he said quietly, looking away.

“You mean it’s not enough,” I snapped, unable to stop the anger from taking hold of me. “I’m not enough.”

He avoided my gaze. “No, you’re not. It’s not enough.”

The anger vanished with the sound of something breaking inside me as I stared at him listlessly. There was nothing I could say to that, not when it was easily the worst thing I’d ever heard come out of his mouth since the day he’d told me his mother had died.

“Devin,” I managed to croak, my arms falling to my sides.

“I’m sorry, Chase, I really am,” he said softly, his hand resting on the doorknob as he stared steadily at the ground. “Maybe if things—”

“What things?”

“It…just things.”

And then I knew for certain what I’d suspected for the past few years: Devin had been keeping a secret from me. Not just any secret, but one that mattered deeply to him, one he didn’t feel he could tell me. For whatever reason, something had come between us well before this moment, and now I couldn’t help but wonder just how large the gap had become without my noticing.

“We’re leaving tomorrow morning,” Devin said, adding another cut to the lacerations multiplying in my chest. “I…this is goodbye, for now anyway. I’ll call you

when we get settled, but…it'll be too hard if you're there when I leave, so please—"

"Devin," I whispered, hearing the pleading in my voice but unable to find anything else to say. I knew then that nothing I said would change what happened in the next few minutes—hell, the next day.

"Goodbye," he said so quietly I almost didn't hear it as he opened the door and stepped out.

I stood in my room, staring at my closed door, and flinched when I heard the front door shut behind Devin. My mom had another shift at the general store, leaving only the sound of my breathing and the clock ticking in the hallway just outside.

And I'd swear, under it all, there was the sound of my heart shattering into pieces to litter the floor at my feet.

SCENE 2

An Alternate Epilogue

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Now, this one is less a deleted scene and more...well, think of it like an alternative epilogue to the one in the actual book. I was genuinely torn between writing this more 'traditional' epilogue, albeit pared down from what it's at now, and the one I included.

I stand by the decision for the original epilogue. It honestly felt right for the two of them. As much as I was tempted to show them when they were already well-established and past their issues, something spoke to me about showing Devin coming back after his solo journey down the true path of healing. Even so, this alternative epilogue stuck with me, and I had to get it down on paper before it drove me crazy.

So here you go, a 'proper' epilogue for you guys to enjoy, to see them as a couple, as uncles as well, and an issue with a troublemaking Karen.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" I asked Devin quietly as I made the turn my phone told me to take.

"Chase," Devin said, his tone exasperated but calming. "Believe it or not, I'm more than okay with this. It's just a city."

"Denver isn't *just* a city for you," I grumbled, trying to choose my words carefully. Even my mother, who could spin any criticism into the gentlest statement that could *almost* be a compliment, had never called me tactful. Sure, with a little help from Devin, I'd learned, but it was still something no one looked to me for. Admittedly, I was more wary of speaking too openly with our passenger in the backseat.

Despite his flash of impatience, Devin's smile was genuine as he reached over to grip my knee. "You forget, I stayed here briefly before returning to Fairlake for good. I worked through my demons…mostly."

That much was true. He *had* returned, just as he'd promised, after taking weeks to deal with those demons. And he'd come back…not changed, but different at the same time. Maybe it was better to say he was more whole now, steadier, collected in a way he hadn't been in the months when we'd worked to get him clean.

Addiction was just one of his many demons, and while we both knew it would always be there inside him, seeking chances to take hold once more, I wasn't as worried as I'd been before he left for his journey of self-discovery. The Devin I knew now was much more like the Devin I'd known when we were teenagers and yet so different. Sure, there were days when he retreated into the darkness of his past, or when dreams that were more like memories haunted his sleep.

But things were better, *we* were better, and if having him in my life again had taught me anything, it was that sometimes that was all you could really ask for.

"I know," I said after a few minutes of silence, reaching down to take his hand and squeezing it. "I'm just…you know."

"You are," he said with a gentle smile. "Now stop it. We're supposed to be having a good day, so let's have one."

"Day!" our little passenger screamed from the car seat in the back.

"Yes," Devin said, peering into the rearview mirror to smile at Colin. "A good one."

"Good!" Colin shot back, and I didn't have to look in the mirror to know the kid was grinning from ear to ear as he filled my car with noise.

If it weren't for the fact that Colin wasn't remotely related to Bennett by blood, I'd swear he took after him in personality and volume. But no, even I had to admit the kid was the spitting image of Adam, just smaller. He had moments that reminded me of Adam, mostly when he grew quiet and seemed to watch everything calmly and thoughtfully. Other times, though, he dug down and found the genes his mother and uncle shared, namely the ones with plenty to say and no hesitation about saying it.

It had been Devin's idea to take Colin down to Denver to the art museum, where they were having some sort of event aimed at kids between two and five.

Personally, I would have been fine never spending a day responsible for a three-year-old, but my friends were right: I found it next to impossible to tell Devin no. And while I felt awkward and out of my element with kids, Devin had taken to being a 'step uncle,' as he liked to call it, without hesitation.

So long as Devin took responsibility for dealing with Colin on a social level, I was perfectly fine walking around and making sure the little goblin didn't hurt himself. That, of course, meant watching my language around him, as literally every other adult in his life kept reminding me, but that beat trying to figure out how to interact with him. The kid always looked at me like I was about to go full Jack and the Beanstalk giant and feast on his bones, so it was probably best if Devin was in charge.

Keeping my language under control while hunting for parking that wasn't three miles away was easier said than done in the mid-afternoon traffic. As tempting as it was to pull a few maneuvers that may or may not have been dangerous to snag a good space, I had to remind myself there was a small child in the car as well as the love of my life. The latter would happily rip me up one side and down the other if I did something idiotic like endangering our lives for a mere parking spot.

By the time I finally parked, my mood had soured, and from the sound of it, Colin was feeling more than a little restless himself. Once Devin finally freed him

from the car seat, he did his best to wriggle out of Devin's arms. Devin's mood wasn't much better, considering the attempt to wrestle a squirming toddler resulted in a Glasgow Handshake to the nose. There was no bleeding, thankfully, but he was still rubbing it by the time we made it to the museum entrance.

"Two adults," I informed the cheerful woman behind the front desk over Colin's enthusiastic squeal at a giant stuffed animal nearby. "And one creature from a hell dimension."

She at least smiled as she took my card and ran it while Devin corralled Colin before the kid managed to crawl up the thing, which was even taller than me. Having seen Colin in action, I had no doubt he could have scaled it if Devin hadn't been right behind him, scooping him up before he could make a solid attempt.

"You know, there are moments when I wonder if one day I might want a kid of my own," Devin told me once he'd managed to wrangle Colin, even if that meant carrying him under one arm. "And then I deal with being headbutted and retrieving a wannabe mountain climber, and I realize the hormones inside me need to get a grip."

I glanced at him, eyes widening. "You…you've thought about having kids?"

Devin stopped, looking surprised, then shrugged, jostling a now-giggling Colin. "I mean, I've thought about it, yeah. Not exactly something I'm ready for, but yeah, it's crossed my mind."

We had never discussed kids before. I thought I'd made up my mind a long time ago, and I'd assumed Devin had done the same. In truth, for Devin, kids would take a miracle, considering he'd never been with a woman. It might technically have been possible for me, since I'd never been all that choosy about the gender of my partners, but I'd ensured I would never have kids when I was twenty.

It had taken three different doctors before one finally agreed to let me have the vasectomy. Even then, they'd tried to give me shit at the hospital once they'd seen how young I was. No amount of cajoling was going to sway me, however much they swore up and down that one day I'd regret the choice if I met someone I wanted to have kids with. Never mind that the damn procedure could probably be reversed, and never mind that I might not be all that worried about kids, no matter who I was in love with.

"Oooh," Devin said loudly as we entered the exhibit. He glanced down at Colin, earning a copycat reaction from the three-year-old, though I suspected his own reaction was at least partly for himself. "Look at that!"

Not that I could blame him. The museum definitely hadn't scrimped to make the exhibit as interesting as possible. It was supposed to "engage children in play and socializing" through "interactive exhibits to encourage kinesthetic and social projects." An overly complicated way of saying they had places for kids to screw around and talk with other kids.

It was the second one that interested Colin's parents, as there weren't a lot of kids his age in Fairlake. They did their best to socialize him, but a public venue was the perfect place to drive it home. There were elaborate water wheels, a paint station that somehow didn't look like it had exploded despite the number of toddlers, and what had to be the most complicated playset I'd ever seen.

"How the hell did they manage to get paint in here without causing a disaster?" I wondered aloud.

"Someone didn't read the information on the packet, did they?" Devin asked Colin in a high voice, though Colin barely noticed as he stared wide-eyed at the crowd around us. I didn't blame him. There were an awful lot of people around and way too much noise for my liking. "Someone didn't see that they have special paints that only show up on special kinds of paper, huh?"

"I…skimmed it," I muttered.

"What do you wanna do?" Devin asked Colin, setting him on the ground.

Colin glanced around, a little uneasy, before looking up at us. His eyes lingered on me momentarily, and I hoped I wasn't suddenly expected to say something. It seemed like anytime I said anything, Colin shut up and stared at me like I'd just jumped out from the shadows and was trying to murder him. Fair enough. Full-grown adults commented on how scary they found me. Admittedly, I preferred adults afraid of me because it

meant they mostly didn't try to talk to me, but it bothered me a little that a kid felt the same way.

"There's no rush," Devin told him gently, and I felt a pang in my chest at his words. His earlier annoyance at Colin's behavior had vanished in an instant, set aside so he could show Colin the utmost patience and kindness while the three-year-old assessed the situation. I wondered if he thought of his father in moments like these, a man whose only language and emotions were impatience, anger, and cruelty.

"I dunno," Colin said, looking doubtfully at the pack of screaming kids.

"That's okay," Devin said soothingly, running a hand through his hair. "We can stand here and wait."

For a moment, it seemed like waiting was precisely what Colin was going to do. He took in the chaos of the play area, and I could practically see the tiny gears in his head whirring away furiously as he tried to make sense of it all. After a couple of minutes, he finally peered up at me, his eyes wide as saucers, before grabbing Devin's pant leg and pulling on it.

"We can go," Devin told him with a smile, earning one from Colin in return.

Permission was apparently all Colin needed at that point, and he charged off almost immediately, though not before glancing over his shoulder to make sure Devin was following. Devin looked at me, and I nodded toward the toddler, perfectly content to be left against

a wall where I wouldn't be forced to maneuver my bulk through the sea of tiny people.

Left to my own devices, I kept an eye on the two of them. Colin grew bolder as he played with what looked like a moving block puzzle, constantly checking to make sure he wasn't left alone. Then he moved on to the collection of water wheels, wandering away from Devin without a glance whenever something caught his interest. I couldn't help but chuckle as Devin quickly went from comforting adult to a tagalong that Colin occasionally consulted about something new or exciting.

Watching the two of them pulled at something in my chest, and I wondered if maybe my firm decision never to have children, no matter the partner, had been a little too hasty. Back then, I hadn't considered that I might have a partner like Devin with me, someone who managed to make me feel…well, not like an absolute disaster. Someone I could actually picture raising kids properly, even knowing Devin was probably half terrified at the idea. Terrified that all his problems, the ones that came from his family, might leak into a child.

Yet the more I watched him with Colin, the more convinced I became that any child, blood or adopted, would be damned lucky to have a parent like Devin. I couldn't say I would ever be comfortable being responsible for a kid. Still, I knew that if Devin truly wanted to give it a shot, he'd have no doubt I was capable of it too. His opinion of me had always been the

one I trusted the most, and if he believed in me without hesitation, then I was inclined to believe him.

A voice piped up beside me. “Which one’s yours?”

Surprised, I tensed and glanced over to find a woman at my side, peering up at me. I blinked before clearing my throat. “What?”

She nodded toward the collection of energetic children. “Which kid is yours?”

“Oh…none of them,” I said, wondering why this random woman had chosen to talk to me. Most of the time, my face and sheer size were enough to put people off, especially women who only came up to my chest. “I’m just the…supervisor for the day.”

“Friend of the family?”

“Sorta.”

“Well, you have to be important if you’re being trusted with their child,” she said, voice tinged with a condescension that made me immediately dislike her.

My brow furrowed. “I’m a friend of one of the parents. That make you happy?”

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” she said with a smile that did nothing to assuage my annoyance. “And I sure hope it’s not the mother.”

“It’s not,” I said, hoping the overly simple answer would put her off.

No such luck. “Because with a man like you around, I’m sure her husband would be more than a little nervous.”

“I’m not her friend. I’m a friend of one of his dads,” I said irritably.

“Dads,” she repeated slowly, her brow furrowing. “Plural?”

“Yes,” I confirmed, now watching her closely. “My friend is the stepdad.”

“Where’s their mother?”

“Back home, where his dads are.”

“And you don’t see an issue with that?” she asked carefully.

“Is it the divorce, the clearly gay relationship, or the fact that the mom doesn’t care that’s bothering you here?”

“Well, I’m a very modern woman,” she said with a laugh that told me she was lying through her teeth. “But a child raised in that kind of environment is surely going to struggle.”

“Lady, the only thing that kid is going to struggle with is having one too many people in his life to love and eventually embarrass him when he gets older,” I said, scowling. “That and whatever crap might still be left over from idiots like you who are going to give him shit over something stupid like the relationship between his dads.”

She took half a step back, looking affronted. “Well, clearly, you can’t see why something like that would be confusing to a child.”

“About as confusing as it was for someone like my friend, who grew up in a straight world and still ended

up gay as a rainbow," I snapped, losing my patience along with my temper. "And about as confusing as it was for me and my boyfriend, who had to do the same thing. The only thing that confuses me is why you even give a shit and are still talking to me."

"Y-your boyfriend?"

The disbelief made me roll my eyes. "Yeah, my boyfriend. Now, could you peddle your bullshit somewhere else? I was enjoying being left the fuck alone, thanks."

If I wasn't so pissed, the outrage on her face would have made me laugh. She stepped away from me and marched off, the kind of woman who'd have been clutching her string of pearls if she'd been wearing any. I had only a moment of faint relief that she was gone before I saw another woman approaching, glancing at the first one before stopping.

"Jesus," I huffed. "What?"

This one smiled in a way that didn't make me want to punch a wall. "Sorry about her, and sorry for letting it happen."

I frowned. "What?"

"I just…" She glanced over her shoulder toward the small group of women she'd been standing with a moment before. "We're familiar with her. She comes with our mom group on occasion to do things. Most of us can't stand her, and just from the way you started that conversation off, I had a feeling you were going to upset her."

I scowled. “So you used me to piss someone off you don’t like?”

“Pretty much,” she said, completely unabashed.

I grunted, respecting the fact that she owned up to it. “Fine, apology accepted.”

Her eyes shifted to the kids, and I didn’t miss where they’d stopped. “I caught a glimpse of you two earlier. That the boyfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s very good with them.”

I watched as Devin managed to carry on a conversation with Colin and two other kids, a little redheaded girl and a grinning blond boy. “He’s good with people, even little people.”

“And you’re…not.”

“Clearly.”

She laughed, tucking a strand of dark hair behind one ear. “I guess someone as charming as you would need someone…well, actually charming to balance you out.”

“You only say that because you haven’t seen him pissed off,” I said with a smirk. It was genuinely one of my favorite things about Devin, watching people who only knew the sweet man see him suddenly grow claws and fangs, not afraid to make someone bleed. In fact, as funny as it would have been to watch Devin give the woman a piece of his mind, I was glad he wasn’t around to hear her.

Coming to understand my bisexuality had been a complicated process, but once I'd realized I was into other guys, I'd dealt with it pretty smoothly. Unfortunately, Devin had been the complete opposite. He'd known fairly early that he was gay, but finding peace with it had been hard. His father had met anything resembling an offense to masculinity with vitriol, deriding, scorning, and punishing it relentlessly.

Devin had never told his father he was gay, but he hadn't needed to. All the man could see was that his son was on the small side, quieter and gentler than other people, and that was enough for him. As much as Devin acted as though people's nasty opinions about homosexuality didn't bother him, I wasn't convinced. The woman's ignorance might have pissed me off, but I was sure it would have stung Devin.

"You two been together long?" she asked.

I wasn't quite sure why we were still having a conversation, but I shrugged. "Since we were kids."

"Oh? How long have you been dating?"

"About a year?"

"That sounded like a question, not an answer."

"The question is why we're still talking."

"Because it beats talking about the latest update in child psychology, the newest article about child raising, aching boobs, and sore nipples."

"Uh…sore nipples?"

She glanced sidelong at me, smirking. "I guess you haven't ever had kids of your own."

"No, never wanted them."

Her eyes drifted back toward Devin. "Well, you might want to be careful then."

"Why?" I asked, bewildered.

"Because that one looks like someone who might want one…or two. Always go for two if you can."

"Uhhh, I'm an only child."

"Yeah, and look at what a wonderful specimen of social charm you are."

I snorted. "That's fair."

Her brow furrowed. "Oh shit."

I didn't have to ask what she meant as I watched the original woman march through the crowd of children, her shoulders back and eyes blazing. I only had to look at Devin and Colin, who were now interacting with a little girl with soft brown hair full of curls, to realize who her target was.

"Excuse me," I said through gritted teeth.

"Abigail, no!" the second woman shouted, but her voice was lost in the din of the children playing.

Mindful of all the little legs and hands around me, I watched where I stepped as I headed toward Devin and Colin. The woman, Abigail apparently, reached her daughter and pulled her back, her lips thinning as she said something to Devin I couldn't hear. I caught the way some of the color left Devin's face before his eyes lit with familiar anger. I couldn't hear what he said to her, but she looked like she'd been slapped as she jabbed a finger toward him, her voice rising.

Worse yet, the ever-aware Colin was watching them, his face scrunched up, fists pulled up under his chin and arms squeezed against his chest. I reached them just as Colin gave a wail of dismay, and Devin turned around, surprise and unhappiness on his face.

"I see you met the local Karen," I growled as I approached, glaring at the woman. She turned, her purse smacking into Devin as she drew herself up to face me. I set my hand on Devin's lower back, feeling him lean into the touch even as his posture remained tense.

"Charming," Devin said through clenched teeth, trying to run his hand through Colin's hair. "Lady, please go away. You're upsetting him."

She ignored him. "Why this museum tolerates this, I'll never know."

Her gaze was locked on where I was touching Devin, and I rolled my eyes. "Are you really that stupid, lady? You're in the wrong city for this kinda crap. It's Denver, you might as well be in San Francisco for how okay with this shit it is."

Before I could say anything further, I felt a tug on my hand and looked down into Colin's tear-stained face. His eyes were big as he gave my hand another tug, and I immediately realized what he was doing, having seen him do it before with Bennett and Adam. Bewildered, I crouched carefully to pick him up and then started when he wrapped his arms tightly around my neck, burying his face in my chest.

“Go. Away,” I told her in a low voice, mindful not to start snarling with a terrified toddler burrowing into my chest. “Or I’ll gladly get security over here.”

It was telling that Devin said nothing, simply glowering at her as she huffed once more. I could feel him practically coiling up beside me, and this woman had no idea how dangerous the usually soft-mannered man could be. Just to be sure he remembered we were still surrounded by kids, I hooked my fingers around his waist, pulling him closer and away from her.

“Fine,” she hissed, bending over to pick her daughter up, her purse smacking into Devin again and getting caught. She didn’t seem to notice, and since Devin only shifted his weight anxiously, I focused on her. When she stood up, it was with daggers in her eyes as she marched off, her daughter protesting at being dragged away.

“C’mon,” I said gently, pulling Devin with me. “Let’s calm him down a little.”

“He’s already calmed down,” Devin said tightly, but he let me steer him into one of the other rooms, where the noise of the kids was muffled. “You already talked to her?”

“Yeah,” I said, looking down at Colin. His face was red, and his eyes were watery, but other than a few sniffles, he was back under control. “That was fast. You okay?”

He peered up at me with his big eyes. “Okay. Fanks.”

Startled, I let out a little laugh. “You’re welcome. You want me to put you down?”

“Stay hew,” he mumbled, laying his head on my shoulder.

“Uhh, sure,” I said, blinking in confusion.

Devin caught the expression on my face and laughed. “I’ve been telling you he likes you.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever believed you,” I admitted, unsure what to do with this change.

“It’s because he and I have something in common,” Devin said, resting one hand on my elbow while the other came around to my hip.

“What’s that?” I asked, just as something in his hand pressed against my side.

“You make us feel safe,” Devin told me softly, standing on his toes to steal a quick kiss. “That’s why he went to you when he was scared. And that’s why it will always be you for me, because you’re safe…you’re home.”

I would swear, if it were possible to melt into a vaguely human-shaped puddle, I would have done so on the spot. “Thanks. Wow, that was a terrible response.”

Devin laughed, and my chest tightened. “It’s alright. You’re you, so I know what you meant.”

“That’s good,” I said, then frowned as I got jabbed again. “What is that poking me?”

“Oh,” Devin said, and my brow rose at the evil glint in his eyes. “Not much.”

I heard a jingling before he raised his hand, wiggling a keyring between us. At a glance, I didn't recognize them, and I was the one who had the keys in the first place.

"Where did…oh, God," I said in sudden realization. "Are those that woman's keys?"

"They might be," he said with a chuckle.

"And uh, how did you get them?"

"Baby, did you forget I pretty much lived on the street for a few years? Taking stuff out of some rich bitch's purse is like, child's play." And before I could say anything, he turned and chucked them into a nearby wastebasket.

"You little shit," I said, unable to stop my laugh. "She's going to be pissed."

"Yeah, well, I guess she shouldn't be such a terrible person," Devin said, looking extremely pleased with himself.

"Have I ever mentioned I love you?" I asked him, stealing a kiss of my own.

"Here and there, but feel free to mention it more," he said with a grin.

"Well, I love you," I said with a laugh, pulling him close.

"And I love you," he said, then tilted his head so he could catch Colin's eye. "You ready to play more, or you wanna go?"

Colin lifted his head so fast he nearly smacked himself on the underside of my chin. "Play!"

“He says, with literally zero hesitation,” Devin said with a chuckle.

“Well, the man in charge has spoken, so I guess we’re going to have to listen, now won’t we?” I asked with a small laugh.

“Bennett’s right,” Devin said. “You really are a big pushover.”

“Ohhhh,” I growled, giving his ass a slap as he turned to walk off, smirking when he yelped. “You wait until I get you alone later. You’re going to regret that.”

“If I know the tone of the growl I just got, I’m going to do anything but regret it,” he said with a chuckle, rubbing his ass.

I was startled back into the moment when Colin decided to laugh along with Devin, reminding me he was there. Then the little brat gave me the biggest grin imaginable when he caught my eye, and I felt a familiar happy twist in my stomach. Glancing at Devin, who lingered by the doorway, his expression soft as he watched us approach, I found myself wondering if maybe we could pull something like this off.

It was something for us to talk about down the road. And we had all the time in the world.

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