



TRUST FUND

Baby



AN MPREG ROMANCE

AIDEN BATES & AUSTIN BATES

TRUST FUND BABY

FRAT BOYS BABY: BOOK 1

AIDEN BATES

AUSTIN BATES

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IMPORTANT INFORMATION...

This book, "Trust Fund Baby" is the First book in the Frat Boys Baby Series. However, this book and every other book in the series can be read as a stand-alone. Thus, it is not required to read the first book to understand the second (as so on). **Each book can be read by itself .**

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"I just got confirmation that your flowers were delivered," Vivian said, leaning around the door as Luke shoved the last of his files into his briefcase .

He grinned at her, grabbing his jacket with hands that wanted to shake with excitement. "Thanks. Is Henderson still out ?"

"Molly said that his wife called screaming earlier. I think he's going to be gone all day." The elevator dinged, and she straightened up, pulling her notepad closer and scribbling like her life depended on it .

Luke winced, waiting for the small crowd of interns to shuffle past like a herd of Blackberry-laden zombies. "She didn't find out about his mistress, did she ?"

"Which one?" she asked, smirking at him .

It had been meant as a bad joke, assigning her as his secretary when he made junior partner. She had only been with the company for a week, and her previous jobs had included data entry and reception. They'd worked together so well, though, that she'd stayed with him despite numerous better offers, and he was eternally grateful .

"Good point. If you see Grant, tell him that the appeal extension was filed, but we won't hear back about it for another week because Judge Fowler is on another golfing trip. Otherwise, have a good evening." Peeking around the corner, he scanned the hallway before dashing to the elevator .

"Happy Anniversary," she called after him, laughing into her hand at his antics .

He waved as the elevator closed, but his shoulders stayed tight until he stepped out into the cold silence of the utterly empty parking garage. Sighing in relief, he loosened his tie and tossed his briefcase into the back of his car .

His hand froze on the seat belt buckle when his phone shrieked. Slumping, he slowly pulled it out of his jacket pocket and thumbed it on. "Luke Carter ."

"Who the hell do you think you are ?"

Relief spread across his skin in a wave of goosebumps, and he laughed. "Hi, Cody ."

"I had to hear from someone else that you're bailing on us again?" The sound of boots on concrete echoed across the line. "You said you had the time off ."

"Does your team leader know that you're using your call time to harass me?" Luke asked, leaning back in the seat .

"I am the team leader, asshole," the omega growled .

"You're doing that thing with your biceps that makes Nikolai swoon, aren't you?" He grinned, thinking of the big Russian alpha who'd been chasing Cody ever since college .

"Quit changing the subject ."

Luke stuck his tongue out at his reflection in the rearview mirror. "It's my anniversary, Cody. I've got two tickets to Ireland in my briefcase ."

There was a long pause, the shouting in the background that was always present when Cody was on base fading slightly. "You're taking him to Ireland ."

"He's talked about going as long as I've known him," Luke said, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. "He even saved up a couple thousand dollars from his paintings toward the trip after his last show ."

Cody groaned. "Well, now I look like an asshole. No, Luke. You can't go on this totally romantic trip with your boyfriend because you have to come to New York and have dinner with your frat brothers ."

"To be fair," Luke said, "you always look like an asshole ."

"Oh, shut up. Fine. I'll give you a pass just this once. Tell Liam I said hi." There was a commotion in the background, and Cody

cursed. "No, you can't steal the damned phone. Give it back, Nikolai."
.

"You are needing to stop," Nikolai said, his accent heavy the way it was when he was trying to rile Cody up. "Is making the rest of us look bad." He was doing a remarkable job of ignoring the increasingly creative curses that the omega was slinging at him .

"I'll keep that in mind," Luke said. "So you drew the short straw and had to kidnap Cody for the dinner, huh ?"

"I volunteer," the Russian said proudly. "Pretty omega boy comes with Nikolai. Only curses a little ."

Listening to Cody wish pain and suffering on sensitive parts of Nikolai's anatomy, Luke hummed skeptically. "Right. Better you than me, man."
.

"I will tell everyone you are saying hello. Have wonderful trip. Maybe next year you can go to Russia. I will tell you all good bars in Moscow." Nikolai grunted, and the phone clattered against something hard .

"Give me the damned phone, you overgrown octopus." Cody was out of breath as he came back on the line. "Kristoff says you owe him a million chocolate chip cookies for missing dinner again."
.

Luke smiled. "I'll bring him a whole box for himself next time I see him ."

"I don't know. He's learning to count. You might have to bring him two. Get off me, dammit." Cody's voice faded out with a squeak .

"I am requesting two boxes of caramel cookies for myself," Nikolai said faintly. A loud crash made the line pop and then it went dead .

Luke stared at the phone for a minute, shaking his head. Most of his frat brothers had calmed down some over the years, but not those two .

It was unfortunate that he had to miss another dinner, though. His frat brothers were a close knit group, and he missed all of them, even Nikolai. Brendan was the oldest, a sports doctor for his husband Greg's ballet troupe in New York. Their sons, Nate and Kris, were everyone's favorites and completely spoiled. Teddy had a thriving architectural career, and their former president, Marcus, was a senior accountant for a Fortune 500 company. Kurt, their treasurer, was just as obsessed with stocks as ever. Cody travelled all over the world with his military response team. Only

Nikolai, Greg's best friend and honorary Sigma Alpha Omega member, seemed to know what he was up to half the time .

And then there was Luke, the youngest partner at his firm. He snorted. They were all a bunch of overachieving trust fund babies .

Tossing his phone into the back seat with his briefcase, he pulled out of the parking garage. He hadn't told anyone about the trip except Vivian, and talking about it made his skin prickle with anticipation. Two whole weeks of sightseeing and exploring Liam's Irish heritage. No phone calls during dinner. No late nights coming home to find Liam already in bed. No Saturday arguments about Luke going to work .

The highway was jammed, as always, but the spring day was bright and beautiful enough to make the wait pleasant. In the distance, a line of sparkling blue peeked through the buildings of downtown and made him long for a day lounging about listening to the waves .

Liam was going to be so surprised. It had been Liam's interest in Ireland that had drawn them together. They'd met briefly at a party held by one of Luke's clients, but he'd been so exhausted that he'd barely noticed the little redheaded omega. He'd spent most of the night staring at a painting in the living room, the geometric patches of blue and gray not to his usual tastes, but haunting. He'd been so taken by it that he'd asked the client about it at their last meeting a few weeks later .

They had been happy to give him Liam's information, and over drinks, the artist had explained that the painting was based on a story his papa had told him about Ireland. There had been such longing in his beautiful eyes that Luke hadn't been able to stop thinking about him. They'd started dating a month later .

Pulling off the highway, Luke tapped the steering wheel anxiously. The traffic in their neighborhood had gotten worse over the three years since he'd bought the house in the suburbs on a whim. His ex had just left him for an unemployed singer, and he'd driven into the quiet development by accident. Things had changed since then. He tried not to complain much since it also meant that the property value had skyrocketed, but today, he just couldn't stand the delay .

Until Liam had moved in, the house had been an inconvenience, rooms echoing with furniture that never got used. The omega really had gone out of his way to make it a home for them both, laughing at the state of his 'bachelor pad .' .

Pulling into the driveway, Luke left his phone and briefcase behind. He didn't need this moment interrupted .

“Liam? I'm home.” He threw the door open wide, grinning at the flower arrangement sitting on the hall table. “Did you like the flowers? I know lilies are your favorite, but the colors in this one remind me of your Mardi Gras painting .”

The house was empty and silent, and Luke shook his head, an affectionate smile curving his lips. Grabbing the mail stacked neatly on the table next to the flowers, he headed for the backyard. One of the reasons he'd chosen this particular property was that it had been a show house and office for the developer, the last building in four surrounding neighborhoods to be sold. Because of that, it had a huge corner lot with a professionally landscaped garden .

The garden shed at the back of the property had been his gift to Liam the day he'd agreed to move in. It was more than big enough to serve as a studio, full of light no matter what time of day. The builder had even run power, so it had been easy to hook up an air conditioner for the hottest California summers .

“Happy anniversary, sweetheart,” he called, opening the shed door just a crack. He hated to startle Liam when he was concentrating .

The shed was empty. Not just of Liam, but of everything. The paints and paintings that usually crammed every corner, the easel and the chair that Liam perched on, they were all gone. The only sign that they had ever been there was the concrete floor blotched and stained with layer upon layer of color .

Frowning, Luke tried to remember if there had been a show coming up that he had forgotten. He should have grabbed his phone. Maybe he should have texted Liam on the way home. He could have headed to whatever gallery was hosting Liam's work this time .

Flipping through the mail, he found a thick envelope with his name scrawled across it in Liam's broad print. Affection pushed his concern aside as he tore it open. It wasn't a card, just a stack of paper folded haphazardly. That was so very Liam, perfectionist to the core in his art, but everything else done with half a mind .

“Dear Luke, I'm sorry .”

Shock slithered up his spine like a poisonous snake, and his hands went numb. The pages tumbled to the ground, but the words were still burned

into his eyes .

“Dear Luke, I'm sorry. I thought that the love I have for you was enough to make our lives together work, but it isn't. I can't sit at home wondering if I'm going to see you at all this week, or if our relationship is only going to be in texts and missed phone calls. I can't be with someone who loves their job and their ironclad routine more than they love me. I need spontaneity and creativity and laughter, and I can't live without that anymore. I'm so sorry to do this to you on our anniversary, but I've had an offer from a gallery in Taos. I love you, and I probably always will. Take care of yourself. Liam .”

Luke left the papers on the floor of the empty shed, rushing back into the house. The throw blanket was folded neatly on the couch, no longer keeping company with a ratty old quilt. The kitchen was empty of the ugly, mismatched dishes that he'd always teased Liam about, and the bathroom didn't overflow with half-empty bottles when he peeked in .

He didn't realize where he was going until he was standing in front of Liam's closet, two dress shirts that he'd stolen from Luke hanging alone in the corner along with dozens of empty hangers. The bed was soft as he collapsed onto it, the plush comforter releasing a puff of Liam's cologne into the air. It burned his eyes and made his chest clench tight until he wondered if he should call 911. Except his phone was in the car because he hadn't wanted any interruptions .

The first giggle that escaped didn't sound like him at all, high and horrified. He pressed his hand to his mouth and felt his lips jump as another followed. There was nothing to laugh about, but he couldn't stop. He fell backward onto the bed, the familiar smells making him laugh harder until tears were pouring down his face and his abs screamed louder than his heart .

This was irony. Or was it poetic justice? How did the song go? The thought set him off again, and his laughter rang through the empty house .

The sky was burning with sunset by the time he pulled himself together. Dragging his feet as he stumbled down the stairs, he didn't bother looking around again. There was nothing left .

“Noble Fine Furniture .”

Luke stared at the phone for a moment, trying to remember why he'd dialed. “Robert Noble, please. Tell him it's Luke.” His voice

was hoarse but calm. Not the voice of a man who was curled up in the front seat of his car, barefoot and shaking .

“Luke? What's up? You don't usually call the office.” The concern in his voice loosened the iron bands around Luke's control, and he stuffed his knuckle into his mouth to keep from sobbing out loud. “Is something wrong? I can be there in twenty minutes. Just say the word.”

The sound he made was less laugh than pure animal agony, and it opened the floodgates. His breathing shattered even as his eyes burned, swollen and dry. He wanted to ask if someone had invented a teleporter while he wasn't looking, but the firm determination in that familiar voice warmed him to the core. “Uncle Robert,” he gasped between shaking breaths, “I need a favor .”

“Anything,” he said. Luke forced back a sob as relief swamped him. This man, more his father than the man whose blood he shared, had never let him down. How he'd ended up best friends with Luke's father was anyone's guess .

“I'm going on vacation for a few days, and I need someone to clear out our... my house while I'm gone.” His voice cracked as he corrected himself, and he scrubbed a hand across his face. There were no tears, but everything was blurry, the hard edges of reality going soft .

“Of course,” Robert said after a moment, his voice too gentle. “I know that place was a great investment, but the suburbs?” he teased. “Really ?”

“You still have a condo downtown, right? Can I rent it from you till I find something?” Luke struggled to keep the whine out of his voice. He hadn't felt like this in years, calling his uncle and praying that he could make all the bad things go away .

“Definitely not,” Robert said. “I'm not going to charge my favorite nephew rent. Keep it. I'll send the title over tomorrow. And before you argue, I own six condos in that building .”

“Why six?” Luke asked, his breathing slowly steadying. There was a gaping hole in his chest, but he could ignore it for now .

“Why not? It was a good investment.” Luke could hear people rushing around in the background, orders being given in a velvet and steel voice. She wasn't his favorite person in the world, but Robert's niece

and head of design was a force to be reckoned with. "Do you want to come stay with me until your stuff is moved over?"

It was tempting, sleeping in the big guest bedroom with the sound of the waves from the private beach washing in his ears. He would have the run of the gourmet kitchen, could pour his heartache into cookies and brownies and entirely too much food. On the other hand, he'd have to deal with loving concern and gentle questions.

"No thank you, Uncle. The guys are meeting tomorrow, and I was on my way to the airport. I can get a flight to New York if I hurry." Even as he said the words, he realized that was exactly what he was going to do.

"That's great. Those boys are always good for you." He was muffled for a moment as the phone shifted. "You call if you need anything at all, okay? I'll let you know when the condo is ready for you."

"Thank you," Luke said again, his eyes burning. "I..." He gripped the wheel and stared at the house he'd always hated that had been home for two brief years. "I was going to take him to Ireland."

The silence stretched, and he could hear someone arguing over timetables. "I'm sorry, kiddo," Robert said, his voice rough.

Luke sat there as the sky faded to purple and then black. "Is it me? Am I just not good enough?"

"No, it's not you at all." He sounded exhausted all of a sudden. "I wish I could tell you why your dad is the way he is, or blame it all on Meredith. I don't have any more idea than you why he's never there for you. And as far as this guy of yours—what was his name? Lee? Leo? He's too dumb to see a good thing when he has it." He paused thoughtfully. "That could apply to your dad, too, now that I think about it."

"I should get to the airport," Luke said, staring at the stars. The world was getting sharp again, the edges slicing into him. "And you should get home."

"To what? A glass of scotch and reruns on TV. You're more important." There was a burst of static as he spoke to someone else. "No, no. Get rid of it. Pull some pieces out of the new line. You know the ones I'm talking about."

"I'm okay now." Luke was surprised to find he meant it. Liam was gone. Maybe he'd been gone for a lot longer than they both realized. "I'll call you when I land in New York ."

"You'd better," Robert said immediately. "Do you want me to tell your dad about the new address ?"

Luke snorted. "Why? So he can send me a birthday card? He thinks I still live in Connecticut." Robert sighed, and something in him snapped. "Fine. Tell him if you want, but I guarantee he's not going to care ."

"He cares. He's your dad. He's just really bad at that whole 'being present' thing ."

"Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?" Luke bit his tongue, guilt hot in his chest even as the words echoed against the windshield. "Look, I don't want to fight with anyone tonight. I really need to get to the airport. If Dad asks, my address isn't a secret. It never has been ."

"Have a good flight, kiddo," he said, his voice heavy enough to press Luke's shoulders against the leather seat. "Don't you worry about a thing, okay ?"

Luke let the call end and pressed his forehead against the steering wheel. One more thing and he could get on with his life. Ten minutes and sixteen versions later, he pressed send and headed for the airport .

"I wish I could say that I understand, but I don't. I wish you had told me, that we had worked on this together. I'm sorry that you thought my work came first. I love you. Taos isn't going to know what hit it. — Luke "

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"We're looking for something with a more realistic feel. Landscapes and portraits are very 'in' this year ."

Jay swallowed a groan and tried to look attentive. This was the eighth gallery that he'd interviewed with this month, and he was getting tired of business people running art shows. The woman in front of him, with her flawless hair and tailored business suit, was so much the opposite of an artist that he felt like someone was going to drag him out of her presence any second. She'd probably have preferred that. "I see ."

"Do you have any more pictures like this one?" she asked, pointing at a photo of the only painting he'd never been able to part with. It had taken him months to get the curl of the waves to match his memory .

"Not exactly, no," he said, baring his teeth in an attempt at a smile .

"Pity," she said, flipping to the next page .

Twenty minutes later, he smiled and nodded his way out of the gallery, waiting until he was out of sight of the big front window to slump. There weren't that many more galleries that he could interview with inside the city. He'd sold his car six months ago, and he couldn't afford the taxi fare to travel much further out .

Crossing to the bus stop, he pulled a messy, handwritten list out of his portfolio. The paper was crumpled and smudged, the ink bleeding through where he'd crossed his options off one by one. There were three names left on the list. Two of them he had skipped because there was no way he was getting into galleries that high-class, and the last one had a reputation for

skimming off the artist's commissions. The sign claimed it was under new ownership, but he hadn't heard anything good about the place. Pride wouldn't pay his rent, though. He was getting desperate enough to risk it .

He was still arguing with himself when he saw two buses turn the corner ahead. It was like a sign from the heavens. Neither bus was his, but they each stopped near one of his dream galleries. If he took the bus to another gallery and struck out, he'd be walking home. If he waited, headed home and went to sleep, his situation would be the same tomorrow as it was now .

The doors of the bus were starting to close when he made up his mind. Slipping aboard with a sheepish smile, he paid his last dollar and change and took a seat. The bus was hot, all the windows down to try and flush the smells of sweat and exhaustion from the air. The summer was just beginning, and it was already the hottest on record .

They barely made it a block before Jay was sweating, his skin sticking to the vinyl seats and the cheap plastic of his portfolio. All around him, the other riders had that jaded California look, minding their own business and not making eye contact. It was one of the things that had made him feel at home when he'd run away from New York, not like the curious stares he'd gotten all through the midwest .

One of his favorite things about riding the bus was people watching. He had dozens of sketchbooks full of gnarled hands, tired eyes, and teenagers with wild hair and confident smirks that spoke of lives unburdened by responsibility. He would have liked to sketch the older man asleep in the last row, his hands gripping a tattered paperback book, but he'd used up his last sketchbook months ago, even if he hadn't been too tired .

The heat sapped what little strength that disappointment hadn't stolen, and he almost missed his stop. The driver gave him a disinterested look as he scrambled down to the sizzling pavement. The neighborhood was expensive, full of office buildings and condos that he couldn't have afforded in a million years. The kind of places he'd never given a second thought growing up .

The gallery was an imposing, historical building that sprawled along the corner. The brick facade loomed over its own parking lot. It was empty currently, but he'd seen it full of Porsches and limos for opening night galas. Staring up at the gilded sign, Jay tugged anxiously at his rumpled and

sweat-soaked button-up. Just looking at the place made him feel completely inadequate. There was no way he could go in there .

He made it half a block away before practicality reared its ugly head. He had to give it a try. Easier said than done, he was still staring at the pristine front window ten minutes later when his phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and sighed .

"Hi, Mom," he said, trying to keep the defeat out of his voice .

"Hello, sweetheart. How are you doing ?"

He had to cup the phone to his ear to hear her over the traffic. He knew better than to ask her to speak up. If she was whispering, his stepfather couldn't be far away. "I'm okay, Mom. I interviewed with a gallery today ."

"I'm sending you some money," she said as if he hadn't spoken. "I used the PO Box in downtown as your address, and Rosita said that she would drop it off at the post office today. It's not much, but I thought it might help. Rosita told me you were fired from the coffee shop ."

"Rosita needs to keep her mouth shut," he muttered. It was galling to admit that he needed the money, but the thought of buying groceries made him want to cry. "Thanks, Mom," he said, swallowing his pride .

"I wish you would come home." He could hear the crackle in her voice like she was going to cry, and his heart clenched. "You could still go to business school, get married to some nice girl from a good family, and have a real life ."

"It wouldn't be my life," he said, trying to keep his voice even .

"It would be so much better," she said. "Natalie Hanson's son just got divorced from his alpha, and he lost custody of his kids. He lost everything, and now he only gets to see the three of them on holidays ."

Jay only vaguely remembered Ben Hanson from birthday parties and neighborhood functions. He'd been a quiet boy who had stunned his family by eloping with an alpha he'd met while on vacation in Italy. Jay had admired his courage and been jealous when he'd seen how happy the other boy was .

Swallowing back the sour taste of bile, Jay ran his hand through his hair. "I don't know what you want me to say, Mom. I'm doing what I think is right, and I'm doing the best I can."

She sniffed. "You sound so much like your father. I just don't want to lose you, too." There was a faint commotion, and she gasped. "Victor's home," she said urgently. "I have to go. Keep an eye out for the money, and I'll try to call you for your birthday."

The line went dead, and Jay swallowed a curse. His birthday wasn't for three months.

"I love you, too, Mom." He rubbed his temples and tried to shove down the anger creeping through his tense muscles.

It wasn't that he was ungrateful. He appreciated every bit of help that his mother sent him, but Mary Collins-Danville was a shadow of the woman he remembered from his childhood. Sometimes he could still see her standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips, ready to tear into his father for letting him play in the mud. It had all been in good fun, and Jack Collins had scooped her up over his broad shoulder as she shrieked with laughter. It was one of his fondest memories, worn thin and soft like an old t-shirt.

The laughter had stopped the day his father enlisted, and when the uniformed soldiers delivered the flag, part of Mary just faded away.

None of which helped him with his current problems. Leaning against the sun hot brick of the gallery building, Jay flipped through the pictures in his portfolio. He shuffled them around listlessly, trying to guess which pictures would be most appealing for such an expensive location.

When he couldn't put it off any longer, he dragged himself around to the entrance. The inside of the gallery was positively frigid after the heat outside, and goosebumps sprang up on his arms as the sweat turned to ice. There was a professional-looking attendant behind a podium just inside the door, the spotlight highlighting her flawless appearance and spotless little black dress.

She smiled as he stepped inside, showing even white teeth. "Welcome to Three Nights Gallery," she said perkily. "Our current show is the landscapes of B. Miller. It will be running for the next two weeks. Please let me know if you see anything you like."

Jay had to admire how her expression stayed welcoming even as her eyes slid over his rumpled clothing. It helped to alleviate some of the panic

swirling in his gut as he stared at the immaculate canvases arranged in glowing pools around the dim interior. Each one was the very definition of realism, the gardens and forests so lifelike that he could almost smell them .

"If you have any questions," the attendant said cheerfully, "I'm happy to run upstairs and ask the artist ."

Ducking his head, Jay started to back out of the building, only to be blocked by another person coming in behind him. He apologized under his breath and shuffled further into the building. What had appeared to be one small room turned out to be a maze of winding white walls and dozens of spectacular, colorful paintings .

Deep in the bowels of the building, far enough from the entrance that he wasn't sure he could find his way back, Jay flipped through his portfolio again. Nothing he had even come close to this level of quality, and it showed in every cheap printout in the cheap black folder. He shuffled the pages around again, debating with himself about whether to even approach the gallery owner. It was such a waste of time, but then his time wasn't so valuable right now that he could afford to miss this opportunity .

He was so lost in thought that he didn't hear the click of heels approaching until someone said, "You must be Bonnie's appointment ."

He almost jumped out of his skin. This attendant was just as professional-looking as the other one, but with glowing blonde hair piled on top of her head where the other had been a brunette. "No, I'm ..."

"I'll let her know you're here," she said, holding out her hand. Jay stared at it until it dawned on him that she was waiting for his portfolio .

"I don't have an appointment." His hands were slick with sweat despite the comfortable temperature in the room. "I'm not actually here to see anyone ."

She gave him a skeptical look. "Are you sure? Do you carry your portfolio with you everywhere?" He would have been offended, but she sounded genuinely curious like she had seen enough artistic eccentricity to have rolled with it if that was the case .

"I had an interview," he said .

Pursing her lips, she considered that. "I'm pretty sure Bonnie's appointment isn't going to show. I can see if she'll take a look at your stuff

instead, if you'd like. You have to be dependable, though. Are you dependable ?"

Was he dependable? It probably depended on who they were asking. His landlord certainly wouldn't find him dependable at all, given the state of his rent. He'd never been fired from a job for being flaky, though, not like some of the artists he knew. "I think so ."

"Great." She slid the portfolio out of his numb hands and tucked it under her arm. "Wait here. This will only take a moment." Before he could stop her, she disappeared through a nearby panel that swung soundlessly open to reveal a flight of stairs .

Shock rooted Jay to the spot, his hands grasping air. If she hadn't taken his portfolio, he would have been halfway down the block by now. Even though the cheap printouts and black folder had cost less than \$15, he couldn't afford to replace them if he wanted to eat. Repeating that to himself, Jay tried to keep his panic from showing on his face .

The longer he waited, the more adrenaline made Jay's limbs twitch with the need to move. He paced a few steps away, staring unseeing at one of the paintings on the wall. He was half expecting the attendant to come back and tell him that the owner had taken one look at his portfolio and decided not to see him .

The click of heels on the stairs made him flinch. The woman who emerged was just as flawless and put together as the attendants. Jay bit back a groan. She towered over him in her perilously tall heels, her tailored suit making him feel even more like a slob .

"Christine tells me that you are dependable." She looked him up and down, the lines on her face set in a skeptical frown .

Jay squirmed under her sharp eyes, only the fact that his portfolio was nowhere to be seen kept him from taking off at a run. "I like to think of myself as dependable, yes," he said. The acoustic qualities of the gallery made his voice sound small and hollow .

She crossed her arms, tapping one foot on the floor. Jay stuck his hands into his pockets to keep from twisting his fingers together, time ticking by slow as molasses. His pulse thundered in his ears as he studied her out of the corner of his eye. She was younger than she looked at first glance, a thick coat of makeup only emphasizing the deep lines of her face. Her hair was dark and glossy in the glow of the spotlights, pulled back into a dramatic style without a hair out of place. The sparkle of a pair of diamond

studs in her ears drew his eye to a thick smear of green paint hidden in the shadow of her neck, and he did a double take .

"You're an artist," he blurted .

She slowly raised one perfectly groomed eyebrow at him. "Do you have a problem with female artists?" she asked .

Jay could have laughed. "No," he said, some of his giddiness escaping in a wide grin. "It's a relief, to be honest." She didn't smile. "Not the female thing," he clarified, "but the artist thing ."

"Only an idiot," she said, rolling her eyes, "would try to run an art gallery without a background in art. This city is full of idiots." She stuck her hand out. "My name is Bonnie Miller. You can call me Bonnie ."

"These are your paintings." He gaped at her. "They're incredible ."

Bonnie snorted. "They're not bad. I've done worse, but I've done better, too." She motioned for him to follow her up the stairs. "I prefer to paint nudes, but they don't sell as well. I hope you're as dependable as you like to think you are." She paused in front of a calendar at the top of the stairs. "I've had two artists cancel on me in the last week. What's your availability like ?"

Caught off guard, Jay could only stutter. "Wide open. Wide, wide open ."

She smiled, the lines of her face softening and making her look ten years younger. "Next month, then? How many pieces can you get me by the 15th ?"

The sound that came out of his mouth would have been humiliating if he'd had the brainpower left to care. "You're giving me a show ?"

Shrugging, she scribbled something on the calendar. "Why not? Your work isn't the worst I've ever seen, and if you can stick to a schedule, you'll be a better investment than an empty gallery for a couple weeks. I haven't had an abstract show in here in months. Everything is realism right now, so you'll make a nice change of pace." She ducked through one of the three doors that he could see, reemerging with his portfolio and a sheet of paper. "Write down your studio address. The gallery has its

own trucks, and my team will be by to pick up the paintings a week before the show. Send whatever you have, we'll make it fit ."

The sheet of paper turned out to be a fairly standard contract outlining the sales commission and dates he was being promised. He could barely read the details as the words ran together. Lightheaded, he took a steadying breath and forced himself to focus on the terms of the contract. They were surprisingly generous, with a minimal cut for the gallery on each sale .

His mind was racing, counting up his pieces in his head and trying to envision them displayed in the space. If he was very frugal, he could stretch the money his mother sent him for the next six weeks. With a two-week gallery show, he only had to sell a piece or two a week, and he'd be set. He signed the contract with a messy scrawl, his trembling hand smudging the ink across the page .

Bonnie disappeared into the office to make him a copy of the contract, and Jay tried not to get his hopes up. A gallery show wasn't a guarantee, and he couldn't bank on selling anything. His pulse was racing, thundering in his ears, and he couldn't help but imagine all his paintings hanging with little sold signs. The very thought of the money he could bring in made him shiver .

He strode out of the gallery with his head high, his copy of the contract tucked safely away in the back of his portfolio. The sun was lower in the sky than he had expected, and his stomach grumbled, reminding him that he had skipped lunch. Even the three-mile walk to his apartment couldn't put a damper on his spirits, and to celebrate, he stopped into his favorite Chinese restaurant for takeout .

The smell of hot grease made his mouth water all the way up to his seventh-floor apartment, but his good mood congealed as he exited the stairwell. Halfway down the hall, in front of his door, a pile of clothes and personal items had been tossed on top of the dirty mattress he'd been using as a bed .

Staring at the eviction notice taped to his door, the urge to scream or punch something was almost overwhelming. He'd been so close. The weight that had been lifted by the promise of a gallery show came crashing back, crushing him until his back was hunched like a ninety-year-old man. He wanted to rage against the unfairness, but he was so tired .

He picked through the pile, gathering up the most important items. Using his clothing as padding, he stuffed as much as he could into the

backpack and duffel bag that had been with him since New York. Anything that didn't fit, he left for the scavengers .

By the time he made it back to ground level, he was barely holding it together. Unable to bear the thought of walking another three miles to his studio, he hailed a cab and used his precious credit card to pay the fare. Sitting in the back with all of his worldly possessions, Jay did his best not to think. He tried to focus on the positives, thankful that anything important was kept at the studio. He'd prepaid the rent when he'd first arrived, and made sure to add more whenever he had an opportunity. By his calculations, he was still several months ahead on the little space .

If this show didn't go well, he would have to go home and throw himself on the mercy of his stepfather. His stomach churned at the thought, aggravated by the scent of the greasy Chinese food sitting on the seat next to him. Staring at the brown paper bag, it was impossible to fathom the optimism that had filled him when he bought it not even an hour before .

His studio was in a converted warehouse with a dozen other artist spaces, but when the taxi pulled up, the building was dark. Jay dragged himself up the front steps and fumbled his way through the two security doors. The units were billed as well ventilated, which translated to drafty at the best of times and frigid in the winter .

He'd splurged on a corner room, with windows that caught the morning light. Even now that sunset was blushing the western sky, the room was warm with the heat of the day. Grateful despite the sweat that slicked his brow, he dropped his bags just inside the door. Sliding to the bare wood floor, he took a moment just to breathe .

Eventually, the demands of his stomach overruled his swirling thoughts, and he dug into his lukewarm food. He set aside the leftovers for the morning, and with nothing else to do, spread out his blanket on the floor and went to sleep .

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"What do you mean you're in California?" Luke tucked the phone against his neck and handed the stack of folders to his secretary. Covering the phone with one hand, he whispered, "You look exhausted. Go home ."

"You first, Mr. Carter," she said, tucking the folders against her hip. Even her brightly colored eyeshadow couldn't disguise the bruised hollows of her eyes .

"I'm on my way out the door," he promised, crossing his fingers under his desk. She just raised an eyebrow at him as she shut the door behind her .

"I can hear you," his frat brother, Kurt, said dryly. "You've missed the last three meetings. Marcus was getting worried ."

Luke winced. "It's been a madhouse all summer because of the Faraday lawsuit, but I just filed the last of the paperwork. The settlement is being processed next week, and then I'll be free ."

"Till the next case," Kurt muttered .

"Don't you have better things to do? Isn't the Tokyo market open?" Luke snapped. The line went quiet. "Fuck. I'm sorry ."

Kurt gave a strained laugh. "I would love to defend myself, but I'm staring at a stock ticker even as we speak ."

"I'm pretty sure they make a 12 step program for that." He slid a pile of scrap paper into the industrial shredder in the corner of his office. It purred to life with the gentle hum that had cost him two months'

salary. He still found it worth every penny. "We should get together for a drink sometime. Since you're here," he said to fill the guilty silence .

"I know just the place," Kurt replied immediately. "I'll pick you up tomorrow at six ."

Luke pulled the phone away from his ear and glared at it. "I walked into that, didn't I?" Sighing, he rubbed at the pounding behind his right eye. Scanning the glistening wood and bookshelves of his expensive office, he tried to convince himself that the walls weren't actually closing in. "I'll check my agenda," he said, getting out of his seat and going to stand in front of the window .

The city was a field of lights, the office buildings all around reflecting the glow of cars and signs. All the offices in view were empty, and people were going home to their spouses and families. He didn't even have a houseplant anymore .

"Your secretary says you're free," Kurt said. "Pretty lady. Mind if I invite her to go with us ?"

Gaping at his reflection for a moment, Luke spun around. The tiny sliver of Vivian's desk that he could see was neat and orderly the way it only was when she left for the evening. "Where are you ?"

"Walking her to her car. I was going to kidnap you out of your office, but since I'll definitely be seeing you tomorrow, I can wait. I'm patient." In the background, Vivian giggled, and Luke let his head thump against the cold glass, rattling the window .

"And if I don't show up, you'll just kidnap me tomorrow," he said, staring at the cheap acoustic tile ceiling. It always amused him that his corner office had mahogany bookshelves and the same one dollar ceiling panels as his old summer job at the furniture store .

"I'll snatch you right out of court if I have to. I brought a ski mask." People were always astounded by how relaxed and cheerful Kurt was, but Luke had seen his frat brother help take a campus bus apart piece by piece so that they could reassemble it in the Chancellor's office. "Your choice," he added cheerfully. If he said he was going to do something, even if it seemed like a joke at the time, God help anyone who got in his way .

"I'll be out front," Luke said, bowing to the inevitable. "Can you at least tell me if I need to change into jeans?" He

hadn't forgotten the paintballing incident their first year out of college .

"Your suit will be fine." The line went dead before Luke could reply .

"Why me?" Looking around, Luke grabbed his briefcase and headed for the door. His eyes were burning, and he was going to need a full night's sleep to keep up with Kurt tomorrow .

His condo wasn't far, and the walk in the cool night air cleared up the fog that had been filling his head. He hit the button for the elevator, but a burst of energy made him take the stairs .

Halfway to the sixth floor, his phone rang .

"Sorry to call you so late, kiddo ."

"It's fine, Uncle Robert," he said, leaning against the wall to catch his breath. He made a mental note to work out more. "I just left the office. What's wrong ?"

The older man sighed. "You work too hard. You should take some time to relax. Enjoy your life while you can. Go on some dates. Meet some nice omegas ."

Groaning, he took the last flight two at a time. "I'd rather not, thanks ."

"Okay, maybe not a date, but you should at least take a vacation ."

"When was the last time you went on a vacation?" he asked .

"Every day is a vacation if you do it right. I'm in Costa Rica right now, and I can see the ocean from my balcony. I walked on the beach at sunset today. I bet you can't even tell me what you ate ."

"Takeout," Luke guessed as he unlocked his door .

"Just like your father," Robert said .

Bristling, Luke tossed his keys into the bowl on the long table next to the door and blurted, "I'm going out with Kurt for drinks tomorrow." He missed, the keys rattling against the ugly vase that had been part of the designer's vision for the space. He left them there with a grimace .

He hung up his suit jacket and sorted through his junk mail, listening to his uncle process that information. "...That's good ."

Luke threw himself down on the couch. "It's not that much of a surprise ."

"It really is." The line crackled slightly. "But I didn't call to bug you about your love life ."

"Again."

Ignoring him, Robert continued, "I called to see if you've gotten the invitation to Harry's charity benefit. He's doing a bachelor auction this year, and I told him you would be perfect. Last year, they raised almost a quarter of a million ."

"No." Luke got to his feet, pacing across the living room .

"Oh. Well, keep an eye out for it, would you? It should be arriving soon. Harry said he sent it ."

"I got the invitation," Luke said, staring at the heavy cream envelope on his coffee table. "I'm not going ."

"You don't have to be in the auction ..."

"I'm busy that day ."

There was another long silence, and Luke resisted the urge to squirm. He wasn't a kid anymore, and he wasn't budging on this .

"What day would that be?" Robert asked, his voice mild .

"Whatever day the dinner is scheduled for. If Dad wants someone to go play happy family with him, he can hire an actor. I'm not going." He kicked his shoe off harder than he intended, and it went flying across the room, knocking over the frame holding his law degree .

There was a heavy sigh. "You have to forgive him someday, you know ."

"Do not." Staring at the frame sitting on the floor, Luke ran a hand through his hair and tried to find words that sounded less like a toddler in a tantrum. "I don't have to forgive him. It's not mandatory ."

"He could really use our support. The divorce is hitting him hard, and Meredith... Well, she's doing her best to take him for all she can." The clink of ice sounded over the line, and Luke could practically smell the Scotch .

He paced back across the plush carpet. "Uncle Robert," he said, keeping his voice steady by the skin of his teeth, "why exactly do you think I care ?"

"He's your father ."

Gritting his teeth, Luke pried his fingers loose from the phone case as it groaned in protest. "I know he's your best friend, but spare me. He

hasn't been a father to me since Mom died ."

"Kiddo..."

"He missed my graduations, all three of them, because Meredith was 'feeling neglected' and needed a trip to Europe. He missed every Christmas and every birthday because of work. If I wanted to talk to him, I had to call you because he never even picked up the phone for me!" Stalking up the stairs, he smashed the button so hard turning on speakerphone that his fingertip ached. "Tell me again how great of a father he was. When was the last time you even saw him ?"

"Last week," he said immediately .

"Before the divorce," Luke snapped, and the line was so quiet that he had to check that he hadn't finally pushed his godfather into hanging up .

"He has his faults," Robert said after a moment, "but he's still your father, and I think this would be a good opportunity for you to get to know him ."

"No, thanks." Luke tossed his suit on the floor as he pulled on a pair of ugly orange pajama pants with the Sigma Alpha Omega logo on them in faded purple glitter. "I'll see you for Christmas, Uncle Robert. I'm sure Dad will have a new girlfriend to take to Italy by then ."

"I'll talk to you in a day or two, kiddo," he said with a sigh. "Just think about it, okay? It's for a good cause ."

"Good night, Uncle," Luke said, disconnecting the call with another vicious stab .

With the pop and hiss of the speaker gone, the apartment was dead silent. He hadn't bothered with the light, so his furniture looked ghostly in the shadows. For a moment, looking at it made him feel guilty. The pieces had almost all been gifts, Robert's designs from his multinational furniture business replacing the furniture that Liam had picked out .

Climbing into bed, he pulled the blanket over his head and blocked it all out. He needed sleep. Everything else could wait until tomorrow .



"I T'S TEN TILL," Vivian said, sticking her head around the door frame .

Luke glanced up from the brief he was proofing. "Ten till what?" he asked, glancing at the clock. His phone buzzed, and he fished it out of his pocket with a sigh. "Can you get Greg up here? This brief is a disaster."

"He went home," she said. "You're going to be late if you don't hurry."

Frowning as his phone buzzed again, Luke glanced at it and his eyes widened. "Shit."

"I'm here. Where are you? —Kurt"

"Don't make me come up there. —Kurt"

Stuffing his papers into his briefcase, Luke cursed under his breath in Chinese. "Tell Mr. Fox that I'm leaving for the weekend, and schedule a meeting with Greg first thing on Monday." He gave his office one last, frantic scan and shoved his arms into his suit jacket. "You should get out of here, too."

"Oh, I'm planning to," she said, smirking at him from the doorway. "I have a very relaxing spa getaway planned in Napa, and I'm turning off my phone."

He laughed. "I'll keep that in mind." His phone started buzzing again. "Shit, shit, shit. I've got to go."

"Have fun," she called after him as he jogged for the elevator.

He got lucky, and it opened right away. Climbing in, he took one look at his reflection in the polished chrome and cursed again. His hair was standing on end, his collar was crooked, and his tie had hot mustard smeared down one side. Smoothing his hair with one hand, he yanked off his tie with the other, sticking it in his pocket. It was already ruined, some wrinkles couldn't make things any worse.

At street level, cars were lined up three thick, and he realized belatedly that he had no idea what Kurt was driving. Pulling his phone out to text him, he walked slowly down the row of cars in the half-circle driveway.

"Where are you? —Luke"

Some asshole in a red sports car pulled in with a screech of tires and laid on his horn. Luke froze, his shoulders hunched as he prayed that it wasn't who he thought it was.

"You're late," Kurt called through the open windows of the Porsche.

The cold frost of trepidation crept up his spine as Luke turned to glare at him. People were staring. "Don't ever do that again," he said through gritted teeth as he hurried over .

"Do what?" Kurt asked as they peeled out of the driveway in a cloud of burnt rubber .

Luke couldn't do anything but hang on. "I hate you ."

Contrary to appearances, Kurt was an excellent driver. Once he was done showing off, Luke was able to relax and enjoy the sights of the city. He'd lived in the condo for almost two years, but hadn't done any more exploring than it took to find the best takeout in the neighborhood. When they pulled into a parking place behind an imposing brick building, he could freely admit that he had no idea where they were .

"What do you think?" Kurt asked, draping an arm over his shoulders as they walked to the front of the building .

"It's an art gallery." Luke glared at the sign, digging his heels into the uneven concrete. "Are you kidding ?"

Kurt clapped him on the arm. "Nope. Let's go ."

"Drinks." Luke shook his head, shoving the other alpha so that his arm slid away. "We were going out for drinks, Kurt. Not art ."

"They serve wine," he said cheerfully, pulling Luke along with a firm hand on his elbow. "It's even free." They scuffled all the way up the stairs. "Come on, man. I flew all the way to California for this surprise, and I'm not letting you ruin it ."

"You flew to California," Luke said skeptically, "for an art show?" He raised one eyebrow, trying to ignore the throb of a headache getting started behind his eyes. "You never gave two shits about art ."

"It's a friend's show," Kurt said, disappearing into the building .

Rubbing his temples, Luke debated catching a cab back to his condo. "Five minutes," he said to the gold foil of the window .

In contrast to the historical building, the inside was contemporary white from floor to ceiling. There were islands of light and color with people clustered around them, and the hum of quiet conversation reminded him of the library .

He hadn't been inside a gallery since Liam's last show. Thankfully, this wasn't one of the galleries that had hosted the shows he'd haunted like a ghost. Some things were constant, like the woman standing by the door in a crisply starched uniform handing out pamphlets and glasses of wine .

"This isn't funny," he said when Kurt grinned at him. "Let's go ."

Ignoring him, Kurt took a glass in each hand and flashed the attendant a charming smile. Shoving one of the glasses at Luke until he took it, he raised an eyebrow. "I'm not joking. If you want to wait outside, I shouldn't be more than an hour ."

His voice echoed in the empty space, the people closest to the door casting glances at them. Shushing him, Luke had to force his jaw to relax. "What exactly do you expect me to do here?" he asked .

"You walk around and look at the pictures," Kurt replied, sarcasm thick and honeyed. He elbowed Luke in the ribs when he tried to protest. "In case you've forgotten, that's it. Just go and look, and if anybody asks you if you think they're better than the exhibition from two years ago, tell them you just like the pretty colors ."

"Fuck you," Luke hissed. Kurt didn't pay any attention to him, blowing a kiss as he slipped away to examine the first painting .

Stuck for anything to do, Luke downed the glass of wine and grabbed another off a passing tray. His stomach turned at the thought of spending an hour staring at some stranger's canvases, but at the same time, he couldn't bring himself to let such a tiny thing defeat him. Stalking further into the gallery, he kept his eyes on the floor. If nothing else, maybe he could find somewhere to sit .

Ten minutes later, standing in front of a painting of a black dot on a storm-tossed gray canvas, he found himself leaning in to examine the brushwork. The paintings weren't bad. The one in shades of green had drawn him in immediately. It felt familiar .

Most of the pictures were abstract, but there was one toward the end that he circled back to again and again. Blue waves forever caught in the perfect curve crashed into a beach of flawless white sand. Half buried in the corner over the red 'SOLD' label, a discarded sandal stuck out at a whimsical angle. It should have been trite, the same retread image in every cheap, mass-produced hotel room art piece, but there was so much emotion

just under the surface. It radiated off the canvas as he looked at it, warmer than the spotlights raising sweat on the back of his neck .

He sipped his wine and stared at it .

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" You promised you'd come to the show," Jay said, clutching his phone to his ear. One of the waitresses slipped past him, swiping at a stain on her little black dress with a damp rag. In the whirling panic of his brain, he couldn't remember her name for the life of him. Smiling tightly at her, he ducked into the storage room off the hallway to the bathroom .

"Victor's business trip was cut short," Mary whispered. "I couldn't get away ."

"Mom," Jay begged, "this is the biggest show I've ever done." He rubbed at a smudge of soot on his shirt cuffs and tried not to think about the disaster area the kitchen had turned into. "The chef burned all the hors d'oeuvre, and the owner has been stuck behind a five-car pile-up for the last three hours ."

"You'll figure it out, Jay. You always do ."

"Mom," he said, but she was already gone. He pressed his forehead against the phone, trying not to breathe too deeply. The lingering smoke smell rising off his shirt made his eyes burn, and he wanted to go back to his studio and hide. He was running out of time. If he didn't sell at least one painting this weekend, he wasn't going to have enough money to pay rent on the space next month .

"We're almost out of wine." The hostess slipped into the small storage room, wringing her hands. "I thought we had another case, but I can't find it ."

"Of course, we are." Jay laughed, the sound slightly hysterical as he wiped the tears off his phone with the corner of his shirt. "This is how my life is going right now ."

"Should I call Bonnie?" She kept looking at him, chewing her lip and smearing lipstick all over her teeth .

Squaring his shoulders, he pulled out his wallet. "Send Emily to get more wine, and make sure that the chef hasn't been drinking it on the sly," he said firmly. "When she gets back, put the bottles in here, not the kitchen." He handed her the last of the money that Bonnie had loaned him for incidentals. "Don't bother calling. Even if she wanted to, she can't do anything stuck in traffic ."

"Okay," she said, losing some of the nervousness with concrete instructions to follow. "Are you going to be okay ?"

"Yes," he said, digging up a smile for her. "It's just the stress," he lied through his teeth .

"Artists are so sensitive." She nodded sagely, patting him on the shoulder .

Jay let himself slump against the crates as she disappeared back into the gallery. Peeking through after her, he groaned. The gallery was packed, and he wasn't sure he had the strength to deal with the crowd. Most artists would kill for a full house on opening night, but he just didn't have the energy tonight. He hadn't eaten since last night, and was counting on stealing some of the appetizers out of the kitchen .

He could see the two art critics that Bonnie had warned him about huddled in front of the three paintings he'd done after getting drunk in his studio last Christmas. He'd camped out there for almost a month because the heat had been shut off at his apartment. They'd probably say the paintings were about lost love or some bullshit like that because of the red. If he was honest, it had been the only color he had left. With barely enough money for food that month and his job at the restaurant ending on a sour note when he wouldn't sleep with the manager, he hadn't been able to get more paints .

He straightened his back automatically, his chin coming up "If nobody will support you, you have to support yourself," he muttered, smoothing down his shirt. "Mr. Price, Mr. Turner," he said as he stepped into the gallery. "I'm so glad you could make it ."

The art critics looked him over as he approached them. "We were just discussing this series," the taller of the two said. "It's so typically indicative of a heartbroken artist. Trite, really."

Covering the involuntary roll of his eyes by scanning the room, Jay smiled. "It is a pleasure to meet you, gentlemen. I'm looking forward to your impressions."

Working the crowd was exhausting, and Jay hid his shaking hands by tucking them away in his pockets. By the time he made it through half the gallery, he could feel a cold sweat popping out on his forehead. He greeted an older couple, well versed in local art circles, but he couldn't focus on the conversation for more than a minute. Gray spots danced in his vision as he looked around the room for escape, struggling to keep his breathing even.

Like he always did when he needed strength, he searched out the painting. His painting. The one he'd felt too vulnerable to give a title. The cool blue of the water was like a balm to his fraying nerves, and he managed a slow, deep breath. He could only see a tiny sliver of the sand, the perfect beach gold that had taken him sixteen frenzied days to get just right, the rest of the picture hidden away behind a broad-shouldered alpha standing under the spotlight.

Jay took another breath, turning back to the couple with a smile. "It was so good to meet you," he said. "I shouldn't keep you. Enjoy the show." He slipped away before they could try to drag him into further conversation.

The alpha in the rumpled suit was still standing in front of the painting when he made his way around to that side of the gallery. He was taller and younger than most of the people in the gallery, his hair still pure brown without a hint of gray. He kept tilting his head, and Jay's curiosity got the best of him.

Stepping up beside him, he tilted his head to the same angle. "It looks the same to me," he said thoughtfully. The alpha jumped, fumbling the empty wine glass that had been dangling from his fingers. It pinged off the floor, rolling to a stop under the painting. "Sorry," he said, wincing as conversations stopped all around the gallery. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's okay," the alpha said, his deep voice carrying through the room. A flush stole up his cheek as he cast a sidelong glance at the crowd. The pink cheeks only emphasized the delicate cast of his features,

his nose small and straight over full lips, and high cheekbones catching the shadow of his long lashes .

Jay's anxiety melted under the need to soothe the sudden tension in that tall form. "What were you thinking about?" he asked, stepping closer .

A tiny smile spreading across his lips, the alpha gestured at the painting. "Someone once told me that you should always look at art from different angles because the galleries never hang them right side up." His eyes slid over Jay in a mischievous glance as he leaned in .

Bursting into startled laughter, Jay tried to stifle the sound in his hand as people turned to look again. "Smart friend," he said, shifting slightly as their shoulders brushed together. The alpha was warm, even through the layers of his suit, and it felt good against Jay's chilled skin. "I put labels on most of these, but a couple still ended up on their sides ."

"You're the artist?" His voice cooled, the intimate tone evaporating as the other man put a bit of space between them. "Your technique is very good." The stilted words were anything but complimentary .

Unsure of what had changed, Jay pasted on a professional smile. "Thank you. I'm glad you're enjoying the show, even if some of the pictures are upside down ."

"One could argue that the right side up is whichever side speaks to the viewer." The alpha pressed his lips together in a grimace, shaking his head as though the words had been a mistake. He wandered a few steps away, his eyes sliding over the canvases. Taking the hint, Jay let him go, but after a moment, he turned back. "I like this one better from the left ."

The painting was titled "Lights of the City on a Cold Winter's Night," and Jay hadn't actually looked at it since the day it was painted. His eyes skittered across the surface, the blur of color smeared angrily into the black field turning his stomach .

He swallowed the feelings, turning to stare at the blank white wall. "Why do you think it's better that way ?"

The alpha crossed his arms and frowned. "I'm not an artist," he said with a shake of his head. His eyes caught the spotlight, the flash of green making Jay's heart skip a beat .

His eyes slid over the painting again, refusing to catch, and a chill crept up his legs. "Didn't your friend tell you?" Jay said, his voice coming from a long way away. "Anyone who tells you what a painting is 'supposed to' say is full of shit. All that matters in art is what it says to you." The alpha's teeth were white and straight as he flashed a startled smile, and Jay's nerves settled even more. "There's no wrong answer here."

They drifted closer to the painting, and Jay had to really work at not seeing it. It was a large painting, taking up almost the entire wall from floor to ceiling. They were silent for a moment, the gallery flowing around them as they waited.

"If I look at it standing up, I feel alone," he said after a moment. Each word was bitten off as though he wasn't sure he wanted to say it. "But if I tilt my head to the side, it's more comfortable. It makes me think of Hong Kong and London, lying down at the end of a busy day of sightseeing in a hotel room overlooking the city." He smiled, his eyes distant. "I feel like I can conquer the world. Like I'm just waiting for the sun to come up on another day of adventures."

Jay stared at him, his hands itching for a brush or pen to trace the perfect curve of his neck. The light in this man's eyes as he talked about the painting made Jay want to look at it again. Made him want to see the beauty and hope that he talked about. This painting that had been ugly since the day he ground the paint onto the canvas in a fit of rage, too tired of hurting to hold it in another second.

"You make it sound beautiful," he said, his voice hushed with wonder.

The alpha blinked at him as if seeing him for the first time. "It is." His eyes raked over Jay's smudged and rumpled clothes, warm and inviting again.

Jay glanced around and leaned in, rising up on his toes. "Can I tell you a secret?" he whispered, warmth creeping up his spine as the other man's eyes darkened. "I haven't looked at this picture since I painted it."

Smiling like he was waiting for the punchline, the alpha didn't seem to know what to do with the realization that Jay was serious. "Why not?" he asked, his eyes drifting to the huge canvas.

Jay leaned in closer, resting a hand on the soft wool of his suit. He was gratified when those enchanting eyes snapped back to his lips. "Because I hate it," he said so quietly that the words were barely a breath .

"You what?" Glancing around as his deep voice carried, the stranger frowned. "Why ?"

Unable to help it, Jay laughed, a dark and bitter sound. "Call it bad memories," he said .

Pursing his lips, the alpha crossed his arms. "That's too bad. It's a decent painting, but I know how memories can linger ."

Jay shook his head. "I'm not sure I believe you, but if you like it, I wouldn't be heartbroken if you wanted to take it home ."

Those green eyes slid his way again, a long glance under lashes so long and thick that he was jealous. For a moment, Jay considered making a move, but then the guy began to smile. Not the sweet, awkward smiles that he'd been giving up until now, but a smile full of mischief and confidence. The kind of smile that Jay never could resist .

"Whatever you're thinking, no," Jay said, trying to step back .

"No idea what you're talking about," the other man replied, hooking their arms together and maneuvering Jay dead center in front of the godforsaken canvas. "Just hear me out. Try it my way, and if you still hate it, I'll buy it off you right now. You'll never have to look at it again ."

Too shocked to protest, Jay stared at him wide-eyed, a corner of his brain already calculating how long he could live off a sale like that. "I could lie," he said, his mouth running along without him .

"You won't ."

"You don't even know me," Jay protested, confused and intrigued by the sudden change. The man next to him was almost a completely different person, and even stranger was how safe Jay felt tucked up against him .

"Just look at the painting," he said with a grin, cupping one big, hot hand under Jay's chin .

"I'm doing this under duress," Jay muttered, allowing him to turn his head to look at the painting. The chuckle that tickled his ear gave him the strength to really look at it for the first time .

He couldn't help the tension that crept into his shoulders as he stared at the violent mash of yellow and black, sickly green and angry red speckled across the surface. He could still see the letter, the last contact from his stepfather, the man who had been his only father figure since the age of eight. The pieces were there, somewhere, buried in the mounds of black paint for art historians to excavate centuries from now .

"Now look at it like this," that rich voice said, warm breath against his cold skin making him shiver. The fingers under his chin stroked the pulse of his neck as Jay allowed his head to be tipped to one side .

The colors shivered, nauseating swirls dancing as the canvas, the biggest he could find, skewed sideways. It was the right size for a corporate lobby, wishful thinking in every overconfident thread. Or a hotel window. His breathing stuttered as his head came to a stop, and the lights of the city lost their hateful glare. The warm pulse of light and life that washed over him was so shocking that he jerked upright .

"Did you see it ?"

"How did you do that?" Jay asked, unable to tear his eyes from the canvas. The hand slid away from his chin, and he grabbed for it, missing the warmth already .

"Sometimes," the alpha said distantly, his lips hot against the sweat at Jay's temple, "you just have to look at things from a different perspective ."

Stomach knotting, Jay tracked the angry swirls as he tilted his head again. He couldn't pinpoint the change, but after a moment, the light of the painted city settled into a gentle glow. There was no blue or purple in the painting, the colors too calming for what he'd been feeling. At this angle, though, the black mixed with the light of the gallery added the illusion of a coming dawn to the picture, a hopeful note that he hadn't painted and had never seen before .

"How did you do that?" he asked again, his voice barely there as if the hush of the dark night had stolen it .

Strong fingers squeezed his briefly before the alpha stepped away. "Magic," he said. “Someone taught me that once, and now I'm teaching you." His eyes stared through the painting at the faraway horizon, and Jay was torn between capturing the slope of his nose and taking in every detail of the altered painting .

There was a frantic energy to his stare as they stood in silence, a desperation to absorb the changes in case the magic disappeared at midnight like Cinderella's carriage. The alpha drifted away, putting space between them with a deliberate nonchalance that belied the tension in his shoulders. Jay didn't follow .

"Luke, man. There you are." The voice shattered the silence, the bones in Jay's neck grinding together as he jumped. "Oh, good. You found Jay ."

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Luke rubbed his temples, glaring at Kurt as he strode over. The heat of the little artist's skin was still imprinted into his hands .

"How much wine have you had?" he hissed as Kurt wrapped himself like an octopus around Jay .

"Relax." Kurt set the delicate omega back on his feet and grinned at him. "Sorry about him. Remember me ?"

"Hi, Kurt," Jay said, his voice flat. "How's your mother ?"

"Still trying to set me up with nice girls in hopes of grandchildren," he said cheerfully. "You remember Luke, of course. I figured he'd want to catch up with you, so I dragged him out of his hermit hole ."

"Kurt," Luke said, trying to push away the headache that was making the skin around his left eye twitch. "I don't think we've met ."

Kurt snorted. "Sure you guys have." He frowned when they both stared at him blankly. "Summer of senior year?" He poked Luke in the chest. "You stayed at the Danvilles' for part of the summer because your dad was stuck in the Caribbean on some couples retreat ."

The blood drained out of Jay's face right before Luke choked on air, the memory of big blue eyes hitting him hard. Bent at the waist, he coughed and tried to shove Kurt off of him as the bigger man pounded his back .

"Luke?" Jay said distantly. He was staring at something off to the side, and as Luke got his breathing under control, he followed his gaze to the soothing blue beach painting. It was a punch to the gut, seeing the sandal and the water now .

"The lake house," he said quietly, and Jay flinched. "Sorry ."

Shaking his head, Jay pulled on a strained smile, refusing to meet their eyes as he offered his hand. "It's Collins now, Jay Collins. I'm glad you could make it ."

His hand was ice cold in Luke's grip, and he resisted the urge to warm it up. "I knew you'd be a great artist one day," he said, trying to fill the silence .

Jay didn't even glance at him, turning to scan the crowd. "I should greet the rest of the guests. I hope you guys enjoy the show. If you need anything, let one of the staff know." He backed away as he spoke .

Stuffing his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching after him, Luke nodded. "Good luck," he said. His eyes tracked the petite form through the crowd. Now that he was looking for it, he could see the familiar freckles across the nose, the reddish cast to the eyebrows that hinted at the hair hidden under dark dye. He barely remembered those few days of summer at the lake anymore, but he still berated himself for not recognizing Jay. As a freshman, he'd hung around the Sigma Alpha Omega house most of Luke's junior year .

Kurt was watching him, one eyebrow raised, and Luke turned away pointedly. "I don't want to talk about it," he said, trying to preempt his frat brother's insatiable curiosity .

"How about we head out?" Kurt asked, slinging an arm over his shoulder .

Luke glanced at him, surprised by his tact and the sympathy in his eyes. "You just want to get me alone to interrogate me," he grumbled, but couldn't help the grateful smile that stretched his lips .

"Am I so predictable?" Setting his empty glass down on the tray of a passing waitress, Kurt steered them through the crowd. "I'm going to have to come up with some new tricks ."

"Please don't." Luke shivered as they stepped into the cool night air, his eyes drawn back to the light of the gallery. "I think you

owe me a couple drinks. Real ones," he said before he could overthink it .

Kurt frowned at him in concern but nodded. "You're never too old to get smashed with friends," he said, his voice cheerful even though he was watching Luke a little too closely .

"I'll even let you drag out all my secrets as long as you make sure I'm drunk enough not to remember," Luke said, relief making the joke come out shaky .

"Can I get that in writing?" Kurt patted him on the back as they separated to get into the car. "I know just the place ."

"I HATE YOU," Luke mumbled, his head pounding .

"You gave me a free pass, man," Kurt said, his voice over the awful phone connection slicing into Luke's brain until he wanted to dig out his ears just to make it stop .

"Please, be quiet." His stomach twisted as he settled back on the bed. The shrill ring of the phone had almost made him cry, and he wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep and feel nothing for a week .

"I left you some painkillers on your bedside table, and a glass of that stuff you take for your ulcers, just in case." In the background, someone laid on a horn, and Luke flinched. "I'm flying out first thing tomorrow, but I thought we could go to dinner tonight. I have reservations at Chateau l'Estelle ."

"I'm dead," Luke said, stretching his arm out blindly until he stuck his finger in the thick, chalky ulcer medication. "I'll probably still be dead later." He'd be lying if he said that the thought of dining at the exclusive five-star restaurant didn't tempt him, though .

"Liar," Kurt said. "Take the meds, sweetheart, and I'll be by at seven. Wear something pretty for me ."

"How has your mother not figured out yet that you're gay?" His stomach grumbled, and Luke admitted to himself that short of actually being dead, he'd let Kurt drag him out to dinner. "No drinks," he said firmly, "and you're paying ."

“My mother subsists on a strict diet of denial and Valium. I've got to go.”

The silence of the line going dead was so heavenly that Luke drifted off a bit until the phone beeped a low battery warning at him. Feeling slightly less likely to puke if he sat up, Luke managed to get his phone plugged in and take some painkillers without spilling more than half of the glass on his sheets. He couldn't get his shaking hands to set it upright on the nightstand, so he dropped it over the side of the bed. He'd clean up the puddle later .

By the time the sun slanted through the blinds on his bedroom window, waking him up for the third time that day, he had only one goal. Still in his boxers, with his hair standing on end, he shuffled out of bed, cursing as his foot sank into the wet spot on the carpet. He left it there, collapsing on the couch in the living room and turning on the TV .

A dozen episodes of reality TV later, a firm banging on his front door woke him from a light doze. Kurt's cursing and cajoling in Spanish drifted through the condo, and he dragged himself to his feet so that he wouldn't end up with a noise complaint from the neighbors .

“You said seven.” He squinted at his watch accusingly .

Kurt looked him up and down, unimpressed with his appearance. “I said to be ready at seven. You haven't even showered, and I'm not taking you to the Chateau smelling like last night's vodka .”

Luke was resigned enough to let him hurry them back upstairs, but he drew the line when Kurt tried to undress him. “I think I can handle it from here.” Kurt remained skeptical but left him in the bathroom to clean up .

The hot water felt incredible, and he stayed in the shower longer than necessary. Drying off, he had to admit that besides the dark circles under his eyes, he looked completely recovered .

In his bedroom, one of his nicer suits was laid out on the bed. He rolled his eyes at Kurt's obsessive tendencies and purposely chose a less formal, but more expensive, pair of gray slacks to wear instead. Kurt gave him a sour look when he reached the living room but didn't comment, shoving a mug of coffee into his hands .

“I've missed this,” Luke said, savoring a sip of the strong, black Cuban coffee. “I can never make it quite the same .”

“You only love me for my coffee.” Kurt tried to look offended, but couldn't be bothered to look away from his phone.

"Your fund is up 12% this quarter," he said with a satisfied smile .

Clapping him on the back, Luke wandered toward the kitchen. "Remind me to increase your Christmas bonus," he teased. The kitchen was his favorite part of the condo, done up in professional grade appliances with plenty of storage. He dug around in his pantry for the chocolate chip cookies he'd baked last weekend when he couldn't sleep .

"Don't spoil your dinner," Kurt called. "Do you have any peanut butter ones ?"

Luke rolled his eyes, grabbing another container and handing it over as he pointedly stuffed two cookies into his mouth. Kurt tucked the box under one arm, still tapping away on his phone .

"We should get going. Traffic is a beast ."

"Traffic is always a beast," Luke said with his mouth full. Kurt grimaced in disgust, brushing crumbs off his jacket. Luke reached out to take the cookies back and ended up with a swat for his troubles .

"I didn't say I was going to eat them now," Kurt said. "These are for my flight." He herded Luke out the door and into the elevator .

"They make cookies in Miami, you know." Luke licked a smear of chocolate off his finger, checking his reflection in the elevator door .

"Not like yours," Kurt said as he pressed a messy kiss to Luke's cheek. "You're the best, baby ."

Luke shoved him off, knocking their shoulders together as they headed for Kurt's car .

Chateau l'Estelle was in a neighborhood that looked vaguely familiar to Luke. It was full of trendy boutiques and high-end shopping experiences, so he assumed that he had been in the area for a gallery show with Liam. Perhaps it was just him, but the glow of the lights in the windows looked tacky, like fake gold earrings .

There was nothing so pedestrian as a check-in counter, and as they walked in, the maitre d' directed them to the glittering bar off to one side. Luke couldn't even bring himself to look at the racks of expensive bottles stacked on glass shelves behind the counter. He ignored Kurt's muffled snicker and scanned the room .

Tucked off to one side, the bar was dim and intimate with little tables arranged seemingly at random. Along the wall, comfortable couches arrayed in the sort of seating areas you'd expect to see in a hotel lobby were packed with people. For all that there was a steady flow of conversations, the room was surprisingly quiet. Too quiet .

Over the heads of dozens of people, Luke heard a familiar laugh. His blood froze in his veins, and he tried to convince himself that he was hearing things. After Liam had left, he spent weeks seeing his face in the streets and hearing his voice in every murmur of background noise. It was just his imagination .

Wandering toward the French doors that opened onto the terrace, Luke scanned the tables to reassure himself. The crowd shifted, and he stumbled to a halt. Sitting with a group of men and women that Luke recognized from countless late-night artistic conferences and pep talks, Liam looked amazing. His hair had grown, and there were new lines around his eyes, but he was smiling, soft and sweet, as he gestured with the glass in one hand .

Luke traced the curve of his lip, his breath catching at the light in those vibrant hazel eyes. For a moment, he was transported back in time. He took a step forward, his hand itching to brush the flyaway hair out of Liam's face and press a kiss to the bunch of freckles next to his left eye .

A strong hand caught him by the elbow, steering him toward the terrace. "You really don't want to go there, man," Kurt said gently .

Reality landed with crushing force across Luke's shoulders, hunching him under its weight. He nodded, allowing Kurt to lead him into the fresh air. He couldn't help stealing one last glance as they walked away, and as he committed to memory the shadow of Liam's lashes against his fair skin, their eyes met .

Panicking, Luke ducked behind Kurt. Cursing under his breath, he scanned the small patio for an escape route .

"Go grab the car," Kurt said, pressing his keys into Luke's hand. "I'll let them know we're leaving ."

Luke gripped the keys so tightly that he was sure he'd have an imprint in his palm all the way home. "Thank you," he whispered. Turning away from the restaurant, he lifted one foot to hop over the knee-high decorative fence that separated him from freedom .

"Luke?"

It was so tempting just to keep going. He allowed himself a moment of petty anger, imagining the way Liam's face would crumble. In the end, he couldn't do it .

"Liam." He turned around slowly, bracing himself for the impact of looking down into his ex-boyfriend's eyes. "I didn't know you were back in town ."

"I'm not. Not exactly." He smiled sheepishly, the generous curve of his lip crinkling in a way that always made Luke want to kiss him. "There's a big charity show next weekend, and I donated a couple of pictures." He glanced at Kurt but kept his focus on Luke. It had always been that way when they were together. Liam had a way of focusing that made Luke feel like the center of the world. "How are you? You look great. I was worried ."

Kurt rolled his eyes, his normally easy-going expression set in hard lines. "You worried so much, you walked out without a word ."

Luke could understand why Kurt felt the need to take sides, but he didn't need help fighting his battles .

Liam flushed, biting his lip and picking at the hem of his shirt. He looked back at his table, all the artists watching with avid interest. They were a gossipy bunch, and Luke knew that anything that happened here would be all over town in minutes .

"Can you check our reservation?" Luke asked with a not-so-subtle nudge. Kurt grumbled but left. Luke turned and gazed down the street, his heart aching too much to look at Liam any longer. "I'm good," he said eventually, discarding the first four responses that came to mind in favor of being polite .

Stepping closer so that their shoulders brushed, Liam sighed. "I'm glad." The breeze from inside the building carried wafts of his cologne, unchanged over their time apart, and Luke found himself breathing deep. "I've really missed you," the omega added, ducking his head. "It was hard to sleep when I first got to Taos ."

"You could have stayed," Luke said, instantly regretting it .

"We both know I couldn't." Liam smiled sadly, his eyes soft. "I needed to get out of my rut ."

Luke gritted his teeth, swallowing down the angry words that wanted to spill into the air. "How's the desert ?"

"Great. It's hot and sandy, and I've finished more paintings than the rest of my career combined ."

Luke stared at him, shamed by the glow that suffused him when he talked about his art. He wanted to be angry about the implied insult to their relationship, but he knew from experience that Liam didn't mean it cruelly. Casting about for something to say, he seized on Kurt's return with desperate enthusiasm. "You remember Kurt, of course ."

"It's good to see you again," Liam said. He extended his hand but didn't look surprised when Kurt completely ignored him .

"Our table's almost ready," Kurt said. He opened his mouth to continue, but his attention was grabbed by something across the street. "I'll be back in a second." He hopped over the rail and headed for a coffee shop down the block .

Utterly confused, Luke stared after him. "My life is out of control," he said, exchanging an amused glance with Liam .

"It usually is when Kurt is around." His eyes ran over Luke's face like a caress. "You really do look fantastic," he said, resting his hand lightly on Luke's arm. In the chill of the night air, his fingers were cool, eagerly absorbing the heat from Luke's skin .

"Looks like I have perfect timing," Kurt said, climbing back over the rail. He wasn't alone, a slender figure tucked up behind him. "Look who I found, running late as always ."

Liam sprang back, tucking his hand away in his pocket. Luke resisted the urge to grab it back. Turning to greet Kurt's guest, he was surprised to find Jay looking around with a shell-shocked expression .

Before he could say a word, Kurt elbowed him in the ribs. "Liam," he said, suspiciously cheerful, "I don't believe you've met Jay Collins." He manhandled Jay until the omega was tucked neatly between the two alphas, somehow making it seem as though it was all Luke's doing .

Jay flashed Luke a despairing glance, looking as though he wanted to sink into the floor. Well aware of how Kurt could upset even the best laid plans, Luke patted him on the shoulder in commiseration .

Liam had backed off a few more steps, his eyebrow raised. "Nice to meet you," he said tentatively. "Are you a friend of Kurt's ?"

"If only," Kurt said with a hand pressed against his chest. "Jay has never had eyes for anyone but Luke ."

Luke groaned under his breath. There had been many times in his life where he had regretted Kurt's attempts to 'fix' a situation, but this was probably the worst. He stepped forward to attempt damage control, but Jay beat him to it, extending his hand .

"He's been the only alpha for me since I was seventeen," he said dryly. It was so unconvincing that Luke burst out laughing. Jay stomped on his foot, frowning deeply. "It's not that funny ."

"It's a good thing you aren't a performance artist." Clutching at the stitch in his side, Luke ruffled the omega's dark hair .

Jay chuckled. "I suppose it wasn't my best show ."

Liam watched them through narrowed eyes, but before Luke could explain, the hostess appeared to lead them to their table. With Kurt clinging to them both like a barnacle, he didn't have time to linger .

"It was good to see you," he said, surprised to find that he meant it. He tried not to read anything into the fact that Liam was still watching as they disappeared around the corner .

The restaurant was a warren of intimate booths and banquet rooms, all gilded in imitation candlelight. It was romantic and elegant, and every inch screamed expensive. Luke was reluctantly impressed as they were led to their table .

"What are you even doing here?" he asked Jay once they were seated .

He grimaced. "I work at the coffee shop across the street sometimes. I was just getting off shift when this crazy guy rushes in and promises me a free meal." He glared at Kurt over the top of his water glass .

Shaking his head, Luke pointed a finger at the artist. "You're the one who went with him ."

"I never turn down a free meal," Jay said seriously. He picked up the menu and then promptly put it back down again, looking a little green. "I don't think I can afford to even walk past this place ."

Luke laughed, remembering the Danvilles' big yacht and boating on the lake, but Kurt didn't smile, shaking his head subtly .

"How is your show doing?" Kurt asked, changing the subject smoothly .

Perking up, Jay grinned. "I think it's done really well, but I'm trying not to get my hopes up. I won't find out until Monday, of course ."

"You'll be great," Kurt said. "You'll sell a half dozen paintings your first week, just you watch ."

Jay shook his head. "Wouldn't that be a dream? I'll be happy with any sales ."

"It's a good thing you don't need the money," Luke said. "It's tough to make a living with art. I remember that from when I was with Liam. He was barely managing to pay his rent when we moved in together." He shook his head at the memory of the single box of possessions that the artist had brought to the house .

A pointy shoe connected with his shin, and he cursed. Kurt glowered at him, gesturing wildly behind his menu. Jay didn't notice, staring at his silverware with a flush rising up his neck .

"What?" he hissed as Kurt continued to flail about. "He's just lucky that his family can support him ."

Jay cleared his throat. "Actually," he said, his voice thin, "my step dad disowned me ."

Frozen in shock, Luke felt the heat creep along the top of his ears. He felt like a total ass. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said, fidgeting with his napkin. "Have you been on your own for long?" He glanced at Kurt, understanding now why his friend would fly across the country for an art show .

Smiling mirthlessly, Jay met his eye. "About ten years ."

T HE GLOW of the clock told him that it was well past midnight. Luke rolled over for the hundredth time, trying to get comfortable. He hadn't slept a wink so far, his eyes burning as his mind went over the dinner again and again. After Jay's revelation, he hadn't known what to say, fading into the background as the meal got increasingly awkward. Even Kurt's charisma hadn't been able to get the conversation flowing again .

It didn't help that every time he closed his eyes, he saw the lake. He could remember bits and pieces of that summer, although time had blurred the edges. What he remembered most was the long walk into town in the rain, his split lip refusing to stop bleeding and his knuckles burning. Ten years ago ...

He finally drifted off to sleep .

Mid-afternoon, he dragged himself out of bed and headed into the bright August sunshine. The gallery was less intimidating during the daytime, crowds of weekend tourists tromping through the stores and museums of downtown. He stopped to help a family of six free their double stroller from where the wheel had gotten wedged in a storm drain. The father thanked him profusely while mopping his sunburned brow with a handkerchief pulled out of his fanny pack. Luke bit his lip till it hurt to keep from laughing .

Inside, the brick building was just as dark and quiet as before. More so, even, without the opening night crowds. He wandered from spotlight to spotlight, the art taking on new meaning now. He could see the arch of the old college administration building in the blood-red painting of "Broken Promises and Forgotten Dreams," and the orange and purple streaks in "A Life Unlived" made him think of the Sigma Alpha Omega banners .

There were other paintings that he didn't recognize, and he looked at them for a long time, trying to glean clues about what parts of Jay's life they contained .

"Can I help you with anything, sir?" The attendant's smile was a little strained. Luke was startled to realize that he'd been wandering aimlessly for two hours .

"Yes," he said, surprising them both. "Do you deliver ?"

She gaped at him for a moment, then nodded. "Of course ."

He smiled. "Perfect. I want to buy that." He pointed at the massive black and yellow width of "Lights of the City." Her eyes widened, and she swallowed hard. "And a few others," he added impulsively, thinking of the green on green hanging across the gallery .

"Let me get the owner," she said faintly, staring at the huge canvas with commission calculations flashing in her eyes .

"You do that," he said cheerfully, trying to decide which paintings to hang where .

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It took Jay almost twenty minutes to get up off the floor of his studio. He'd slept funny, and his whole left side was numb. Plus, his mouth felt like the inside of a turpentine can, and he was running out of clothes. He made a mental note to head to the laundromat by the end of the week .

Shuffling down the hall in last night's clothes, he ducked into the public bathroom to try and clean up a little. Stripping down on the cold tile, he used an old paint rag and a sliver of cheap soap to wash as best he could. He didn't have any more shampoo, but his hair wasn't all that greasy, so he rinsed it and called it good .

It was an act of will not to think about the night before. His brain kept circling the subject, remembering the restaurant itself, everything from the exquisite food to the pattern on the plates. After tossing and turning on the floor until two in the morning, he refused to spend any more time thinking about Luke Carter than he already had .

Thinking about food made his stomach gurgle urgently, and he had to force himself to only eat half of his last granola bar. It didn't do much for his hunger, but unless he sold a painting or picked up more than a few hours at the coffee shop, it was going to have to last him. Despite how uncomfortable it had been, he was grateful to Kurt for the warm meal .

He tried to remind himself not to get his hopes up all the way to the gallery. He even walked around the block twice to try and get his heartbeat under control, but every time he thought about the possibility of having sold a painting, his hands started to sweat. Despite himself, he already knew what he would do with his share of a sale .

If there was a sale. Which there probably wasn't. He repeated it to himself like a mantra as he stepped into the cool air of the gallery .

Emily was manning the welcome desk today, and she glanced up with a professional smile as he came in. As soon as his presence registered, she shot to her feet. "Wait here," she said. "Bonnie wants to see you right away." She disappeared into the back without a smile, and Jay's heart sank .

Surely that was a bad sign. He ran through everything he'd done in the last week. Maybe she'd found a better artist and was cutting his show short. Maybe he hadn't sold anything at all, or his paintings had been poorly received. Maybe she was going to tell him that it was all a mistake .

Jay fought the urge to run, wiping his damp palms on the wrinkled fabric of his paint-stained pants. He paced a few feet further into the gallery, his heart sinking as he scanned the paintings. The only one marked as sold was "Untitled Beach," which Bonnie had insisted on showing despite the fact that he couldn't bear to part with it .

"There you are," Bonnie said. She looked much more herself today, her hair flecked with pastel dust and held in a bun with a paintbrush. Despite the fact that she'd been halfway across the country until the morning of his opening, she didn't look even slightly jetlagged. Remembering summer trips across the Atlantic, Jay was unspeakably jealous. "I've been expecting you all morning." She fluttered past him, her comfortable house slippers swishing against the floor .

For a moment, he wondered if he'd missed some appointment. "Sorry, Bonnie ."

She blinked at him blankly. "For what? Oh, don't worry about it. I'm just used to my artists banging my door down to get paid first thing in the morning." She gestured at the three red paintings hanging on the wall as she hurried past them. "Those ones, too," she said to Emily without pausing. "Sorry about the mess. I had a great idea for a triptych yesterday, and nothing gets done around here unless I do it myself ."

Jay had to jog to keep up as she rounded the corner, disappearing through the hidden door and up the stairs to her office. He waited at the bottom, scanning the gallery. The glossy white paint and concrete looked just as spotless as they had the night of the opening. He doubted dust would dare to settle on the paintings here .

Swallowing a comment about not expecting to have a paycheck to collect, he said, "Everything looks great."

A loud snort echoed from the second floor. "You're so full of shit." She practically hopped back into view, a check clutched in her hands. His eyes locked on it, and his heart stuttered. "At the rate you're going," she said, waving the flimsy piece of paper around, "we're going to have to cut the show short or supplement with another artist. Unless you think you can get a dozen more paintings done in the next week."

His stomach clenched, the pain like a hard right punch. He'd been right. She was pulling his show, and he was never going to be a real artist. "We can supplement if you think that's best," he said, hoping against hope that she would give him another chance.

She hummed thoughtfully. "The problem is finding an artist who complements your style. It really would be best if we could get a few more of your paintings to hang in the blank spots." She passed him the check and had him sign the sheet that said he'd received it.

He scrawled his name in the space provided, his last name still awkward, even after all these years. He couldn't bring himself to look at the numbers. He knew exactly what they had listed his paintings for, and he wasn't naive enough to expect any of the more expensive ones to have sold.

Something she'd said tickled the back of his mind. "Blank spots?" he asked faintly. Emily and one of the other attendants were wandering through the paintings on the other end of the room, stacks of sold signs in their hands. The breath hissed out of him in a shocked squeak as picture after picture was labeled.

Oblivious to his inner meltdown, Bonnie nodded. "I have to ship out ten of the paintings this week. A company in Miami bought half a dozen of them for their corporate headquarters. I can reorganize what's left, but if you sell too much more, it's going to be noticeable."

Jay stared at the check, choking on his next breath. There were too many zeroes. Way, way too many zeroes.

"I don't suppose you have any paintings that you held back?" Bonnie asked, chewing on the end of a paintbrush she'd pulled out of her pocket.

His chest heaved as he tried not to fall apart in the middle of the gallery. "I have a few that weren't dry," he said, his voice strangled.

She grinned like he'd told her it was Christmas morning. "I'll send my crew to get them," she said. She rubbed her hands together in a way he'd only ever seen on TV, and the moment felt so surreal that he pinched himself .

"Am I dreaming?" He swayed slightly, pinching himself again when he noticed the 'SOLD' sign mounted next to "Lights of the City ."

"If you are," Bonnie said, "don't wake up. This is the best opening I've had in years. I have artists who have painted for decades who don't make this kind of money their entire show, much less the first weekend." She patted him on the shoulder. "I think we'll do your next show in the spring. Everybody buys art in the spring. You'll make a fortune ."

His throat worked, but only a tiny whine escaped, like the cry of a balloon deflating. He was going to have another show. He had enough money in his hand to pay bills and buy paints. Hell, he had enough money to go grocery shopping. His heart pounded in his ears. "I should go," he said, taking a shaky step toward the exit .

"Of course," she said, rubbing her hands together again. "Let me know when to send the truck to pick up the paintings. Keep up the good work ."

The slap of heat as he stepped out of the gallery knocked him out of his daze. The bright sunshine burned his eyes, washing the world into harsh lines. It all looked so real that he had to hold the check up to that honest light and make sure it still had all those zeroes .

It did, and he leaned back against the brick of the building and started to laugh. Cupping his hand over his mouth, he laughed until his stomach couldn't take another second. He gasped for breath, clinging to the check until it started to ripple in his sweaty fingers .

Frowning, he smoothed it out carefully, his giggles fading into hiccups. He needed a bank. He pulled out his phone to check where the nearest branch was. A text alert flashed at him as soon as he turned it on .

"Made it back home in one piece. Thanks for asking. Mom says hi. —Kurt "

He pursed his lips and ignored the text for a moment while he got directions. Only when he was waiting at the crosswalk did he reply .

"How did you get my number? —Jay "

"Magic. —Kurt "

Rolling his eyes, Jay tucked his phone back into his pocket, gripping the check with white knuckles until he had handed it over to the bank teller. He didn't breathe until she handed him the receipt. His bank account had never been so full .

"How's California? Still sunny? —Kurt "

"How's your show doing? —Kurt "

"Are you a millionaire yet? —Kurt "

"Are you ignoring me? —Kurt "

Jay laughed, scrolling through the messages as he walked away from the bank .

"I had my phone on silent. I'm busy. —Jay "

Barely a second later, his phone lit up like a Christmas tree with an incoming call .

"What part of 'I'm busy' do you not understand?" he asked, standing on the corner and trying to decide what to do first .

"I need something to distract me," Kurt said. In the background, someone was screaming. "Two of my sisters just announced their engagement. On the same day. Neither of them is the oldest. And they've planned their engagement parties for the same weekend ."

Jay winced. "That sounds... awkward ."

"The only awkward thing about it," Kurt said, his voice tight, "is that I can't escape. So be a pal and entertain me. I tried to make Luke do it, but he knows better than to answer my phone calls ."

"So I'm the poor sucker who's stuck with you?" He shook his head. "You're lucky that I'm in a good mood ."

"Tell me about it." Kurt jumped onto the new topic so eagerly that Jay felt bad for him. He was clearly desperate .

Relenting, Jay sat down at an empty bus stop. "I sold paintings," he said, the words rushing out in one breath. Once he got started, he couldn't stop. "I sold a lot of paintings, and I have so much money that it doesn't even seem real. I don't have any idea what to do with it all, and I'm tempted to buy enough ice cream to make myself puke." He paused in horrified realization. "I should not be trusted with money !"

Kurt laughed, his voice deep and booming even over the tinny connection of Jay's shitty prepaid cell phone. "Wow," he said. "You really shouldn't."

"I'm a menace," Jay agreed, hysterical giggles making his abs ache. "I'm going to do something really stupid and end up homeless again in a month. I'll be one of those people you see on the nightly news."

"Hey, breathe," Kurt said, his voice concerned. "You'll be fine."

"You don't know that." Jay sucked in a breath, scrubbing tears out of his eyes. "I don't know what I'm doing."

"Who does?" A door clicked firmly shut, muffling the screaming. "Okay, look. Free advice. Here's what you do. You have bills that need to be paid, right? Past due stuff? Breathe, man." He sounded completely serious, and Jay couldn't help but be warmed by it when he said, "I can fly back to California tonight if you need me."

"No," he said, straightening his shoulders. "No, I can handle this. Bills."

"Are you sure?" Kurt teased. "Because I would love to be on the other side of the country right now."

"You'll have to trick someone else into helping you get away from your family," Jay said, taking a deep breath. "Bills. My post office box isn't far from here."

"I'll stay on the line. Just in case, you know?" Something smashed, the sound of breaking glass so clear that Jay flinched. "I hope that wasn't Nana's mirror," Kurt muttered.

"So, your family hasn't actually changed any?" Jay thought for a moment. "It was Marizza and Venice, wasn't it?"

"Venice and Elodie." He heaved a long sigh. "And Marizza and Catherine are furious that they got there first."

Wincing as he remembered the fiery temperament of Kurt's oldest sisters, Jay whistled. "I'm so sorry." Kurt just grunted.

The post office was packed, but the mailboxes were off to one side, and Jay only had to wait for one heavily tattooed man to pry a sparkling pink package out of his box. The boxes on top were smallest and cheapest, so Jay had to stand on his toes to reach the mail crammed into his box in the

corner of the top row. He hadn't checked it for the last few weeks, well aware that there was nothing he could do about any of it .

"Okay," he said shakily. "Bills. There are a lot ." "There are probably a bunch of duplicates," Kurt said. He was even further from the screaming, typing on a computer now .

"How's the market?" Jay asked to distract himself from the pile of urgent notices. There weren't as many as it first appeared, but even the ones left were enough to make his skin prickle .

"Shaky, but I've accounted for that ."

In the middle of the stack, a square envelope, the kind used with birthday cards, stuck out like a sore thumb. It was pink with a bluebird stamped on it, and Jay couldn't help but smile. Rosita had been his mother's housekeeper since before Jay was born, and she was the only thing he'd missed while he had lived with his Aunt Carol .

"I got a card from Rosita," he said as he tore it open, knowing how much Kurt loved the old woman .

"Oh, man. I miss her cooking," Kurt groaned. "The only person I know that cooks that well is Luke, and he won't even make me cookies without heavy-duty blackmail ."

Jay stared in growing anger at the piece of paper that had been folded up several times to fit in the envelope. Kurt's words washed over him without meaning as his chest clenched, spots dancing in his vision. "They can't do that," he said, his voice cracking halfway through .

"Jay? What's up, man ?"

He flipped the paper over, staring at the handwritten note on the back. "They put the lake house up for sale." He had to prop himself up against the wall to keep from falling to the floor as the world spun around him. "They can't do that ."

The flier had obviously been photocopied, the letters smudgy and indistinct. He couldn't tell if that was an eight or a six, or maybe a three, in the price. Either way, it was way more money than he could get, even if he sold every painting he had .

Furious typing competed with the ragged saw of his breathing as he clutched the phone in his numb hand. "That house was my grandmother's," he said. "I always wanted to set up a painting studio there ."

"Shit," Kurt said, still typing. "That really sucks. I remember how much you liked that place ."

"They can't do that," Jay said again, crumpling the paper in his fist as he remembered something Aunt Carol had told him. "No, you don't understand," he said over Kurt's sympathetic noises. "That house is part of my inheritance ."

The silence stretched, and the cold shock coating his skin melted away under the heat of his rage .

"Didn't you say your dad disowned you?" Kurt asked gently

.
"My step dad disowned me. My inheritance was from my real father." Jay clenched his hands until his knuckles bleached white. "They can't do that ."

"The paperwork was all done in New York, right ?"

It was a struggle to think of anything through the red haze clouding his mind. "I think so," he said, his jaw popping with tension .

"You need to call Marcus ."

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"I need to ask you a favor. —Kurt "

Luke flipped his phone over on the table, hiding the message .

"If it's important, I don't mind you taking it," Sam said, setting down his fork. "I get calls from clients all the time ."

Shaking his head, Luke took another bite of his pasta. "It's not work ."

Sam nodded, accepting the comment at face value. It was one of the things that had drawn Luke to the psychologist when he'd run into him outside a yoga class at the gym. On impulse, he'd asked him out for coffee, which had turned into lunch after they'd both had to cancel twice. It hadn't had anything to do with Marcus's monthly call to pester him about his love life .

Picking at his entree, Luke tried to remember what they'd been talking about. He drew a complete blank, and Sam didn't seem eager to continue whatever it had been. "I haven't been here before," he said, gesturing to the restaurant. "It's good." He bit back the urge to recommend a couple other restaurants with better sauce than the canned alfredo that they were using .

Sam smiled, showing off his slightly crooked teeth. "I come here every Tuesday ."

Luke raised an eyebrow. "Only Tuesdays? What about the rest of the week ?"

"Mondays I go to Vargas," he said seriously. "Tuesday is here. Wednesday I bring a salad from home. Thursday I eat Thai Phoon

on Mason Ave, except for the first Thursday of the month when I take my son out for pizza." Twirling his fork through the strands of his spaghetti, he took a large bite .

"You have a son?" Luke leaned in a bit. He'd always loved children, but he wasn't sure he was ready to date someone with kids. That had been the one sticking point between Liam and himself. A family history of schizophrenia had made the artist dead-set against having kids .

Sam smiled sheepishly. "Not really." He chewed another mouthful. "It's hard to explain. He's my son, but I only see him on the first Thursday of the month and Christmas." He shrugged, wiping his mouth nonchalantly .

"Oh." Luke was surprised by how disappointed he was. "How old is he ?"

Pursing his lips, the omega lowered his voice. "Thirteen. Can we please discuss something else ?"

Luke nodded. "Of course." He couldn't help but do the mental math in his head. He was pretty sure he was the older of the two of them at thirty. "Do you have any hobbies ?"

"I surf. Have you ever been? There's a beautiful beach up the coast that—" His phone chimed, and he frowned. "Sorry, that's work. I have to take this." Getting up from the table, his phone was at his ear before he made it out the door .

Sighing, Luke flipped his own phone over, signaling for the waiter to bring the check. Before he could type out a text, his phone rang .

"I'm not bailing you out of jail again," he said, ducking his head to hide a laugh when the couple at the next table gave him a scandalized look .

"Would I have a cell phone if I was in jail? I feel like I wouldn't have a cell phone," Marcus said thoughtfully .

Luke groaned. "I thought you were Kurt again. He wants to ask me for a favor." He handed the waitress his credit card, glancing toward the front where Sam was pacing back and forth. "One check, thanks ."

"Sorry to interrupt. I'm probably calling for the same favor." His voice got muffled for a moment. "Can I fax you a file to take a look at? I'm researching an inheritance case, and I could use your input ."

Signing the receipt, Luke watched his date settle onto a bench outside. "Sure," he said. "You're not interrupting anything. I was just heading out. Send whatever you have to my apartment, and I'll take a look at it tonight."

"Thanks. I'll send it over now. Drive safely."

Luke tucked his phone into his pocket and headed out. Sam was still sitting down, speaking firmly into his phone. He glanced up as Luke approached.

"Sorry about this. I had a good time," he said, holding the phone at arm's length.

"It's fine. I got called in to consult on a case," Luke held out his hand for a goodbye handshake, but the omega was already focused back on his call.

The trip back to his office was hot and crowded, people bumping against him as he fought his way through the flow of pedestrians. By the time he made it into the elevator, he felt worn through.

Vivian was waiting in his office, a stack of files on her hip. She took one look at him and dropped everything onto his desk. "Oh, honey," she said, pulling him into a hug. "It'll be better next time."

"You've said that every time," he said, letting her straighten his collar and fuss with his hair.

"One of these days, I'll be right," She picked up the files again, sorting through them with her brightly colored fingernails. "These are urgent, but the rest of them can wait." The stack was over an inch thick.

Luke pulled up his desk chair with a sigh and got to work.

The slow fade of the light until he was squinting at the pages made him realize how late it had gotten. Setting aside the last of the urgent files with a groan, he stretched his back until it popped. Outside, the fiery glow of sunset was faded to purple in all but the smallest strip over the beaches in the distance.

Vivian glanced up when he dropped a stack of files into her outbox, doing a double take when she realized that he had his briefcase in his hand. "You're heading out? Already? It's not even eight. Are you feeling okay?"

He stuck his tongue out at her. "I have some work to do at home."

"Is that what the kids are calling it these days?" She smirked at him, ducking his swat .

"I'm older than you," he said, trying to smother a laugh as the elevator door slid open. "When I say I have work to do, I mean that I'm going home to look over stacks of papers ."

She shook her head at him, calling out just before the doors closed, "A girl can dream ."

He hadn't bothered driving to work because the weather had been unseasonably pleasant, but he found himself regretting it as he emerged onto the street. The sidewalk was still crowded despite the late hour, people laughing and cheering nearby. Luke found himself slowing down as he passed, trying to see over their heads as someone shrieked .

The bulk of the group was packed around the edges of a small slice of grass that the city had generously named a public park. In the center, a woman in a glittery costume flipped through the air and landed on top of a giant who stood head and muscled shoulders over the crowd. Everyone clapped, and they both bowed, the woman flowing flawlessly to stand between his shoulder blades .

"We'll be in town for two weeks. Eight different performances a day, and extras on the weekend." A heavily tattooed omega pressed a shiny flier into his hand. "Carnival games and rides, all certified and inspected by the city ."

Luke stared at the flier as the man moved on, leaving just a hint of cotton candy scent in the air. He hadn't been to a carnival in years, but he could still remember the lights and the giddy, weightless feeling of the rides. Swallowing hard, he stuffed the flier into his pocket, trying not to remember the breathless laughter and sweaty hand of the boy who'd been with him. The boy with paint smeared across his nose and flyaway red hair that clung to everything in the wind off the lake .

His apartment was cold and quiet, and he had to resist the urge to start a batch of cookies just to make it smell more lived in. Instead, he made a quick dinner and sat down to look through the file Marcus had sent. It wasn't thick, which was a relief .

Flipping through the first few pages, he almost threw the folder across the room in frustration when he read the name Jay Collins scrawled across

the top of every page. The deeper he got into it, though, the more intrigued he became. Scribbling notes across the margins until his pen ran dry, his dinner sat untouched as he growled and grumbled under his breath .

After the second read-through, he picked up his phone. "You know this is a load of crap, right ?"

"Oh, good. I'm glad it isn't just me," Marcus said, unfazed by the lack of context. "Laws are always different when it comes to inheritance, but that didn't make any sense. Then again, what do I know? I'm just an accountant ."

"I'm sending my notes back right now," Luke said, stabbing at the button on the machine. "The only reason this has managed to go on for so long is because Jay didn't know to challenge them ."

Marcus hummed. "I have a feeling that there's a lot of money involved in keeping anyone from looking at this whole situation too closely," he said, shuffling papers. "If you agree with me, though, then he might not even need to hire a lawyer ."

"For a case like this," Luke said, "even you could file the injunction. Jay's father's will was never challenged, only Jay's access to it. It's not an unusual move if the family thinks that a child is too young to handle the money, but Jay is well over the age where any judge would agree to continue keeping it from him ."

"And either way," Marcus said thoughtfully, "that doesn't give them the right to sell the house ."

"Exactly." Luke grimaced as his stomach growled, grabbing the cold plate and heading for the microwave .

"I'll get the paperwork put in tomorrow. If we're lucky, they won't try to drag this out ."

Luke snorted. "Having met Mr. Danville, I wouldn't recommend holding your breath ."

"Good to know," Marcus said, his voice solid steel. "Thanks for the help ."

"Anytime," Luke said, munching on a chocolate chip cookie while he waited for his food to reheat. "Have you heard from the others lately ?"

"Of course," Marcus said, always eager to share news. "Did you hear about Teddy's nomination ?"

"No," Luke said, grabbing another cookie .

“He's up for some kind of international award for that housing project he designed.”

By the time they hung up, Luke was yawning. He pulled his plate out of the microwave, frowning as he realized that he wasn't at all hungry. Licking chocolate off his fingers, he shoved the empty Tupperware with its sad pile of cookie crumbs into the dishwasher so that he wouldn't have to look at it. He wrapped his dinner in foil and stuck it in the fridge, dragging himself off to get ready for bed .

Two and a half hours later, still staring at the ceiling, he groaned .

The lights of the city shone in stripes across his ceiling, reminding him of the neon of the carnival. He'd been so grateful to Jay for getting him out of the house. The carnival had been bright and alive, something he'd needed after his father had extended his vacation for two more weeks. They'd ridden all the rides, eaten deep fried sugar in all its forms, and then played the carnival games .

It would have been the perfect night if it hadn't been for that damned monkey. There wasn't even anything particularly special about it, just a cheap, green gorilla with sunglasses and a coconut drink. Jay had fallen in love instantly. He'd spent all his money playing the rigged game without getting enough points for the stupid stuffed animal. Pushing out that kissable lower lip, he'd stared at Luke with big, blue eyes and begged. He had to have it .

Unable to resist, Luke had given over his last dollar to give it a try. Maybe the carny had taken pity on him, or he'd had a severe case of beginner's luck. He'd landed every throw, and in the heat of the moment, Jay had kissed him .

Rolling out of bed with a growl, Luke pulled on a t-shirt and headed back out into the kitchen. He refused to open his recipe book, pulling ingredients from memory. It helped keep his mind off things right up until he put the first batch into the oven .

The smell of hot sugar reminded him of waiting in line for funnel cake, sweaty hands entwined. Jay had felt perfect standing next to him, like they'd been made for each other. He'd fit just right in the curve of Luke's arm when he pulled him in to shelter him from the wind .

Slamming drawers, Luke dumped another heap of flour into his mixing bowl. It had been ten years, for God's sake. He knew better now. Every

omega seemed perfect at first, but none of them were. The last thing he needed was to get involved with another artist .

Towards dawn, out of flour and surrounded by cooling cookies, he pulled out his phone .

It took three tries for the call to go through. "Who died?" Marcus asked, his voice sleep-rough .

"I'm about to do something stupid, and I need you to talk me out of it." Luke stuffed a cookie in his mouth, hissing as the melted chocolate burned his lip .

"How stupid are we talking? Kurt-stupid or Cody-stupid ?"

"What does that even mean?" he asked, leaning against the refrigerator to finish his glass of milk .

"Are you going to make a fool of yourself or try to get yourself killed ?"

"Do they know you use them as a standard of measure?" He set his glass in the sink and shuffled toward the bedroom. He could barely keep his eyes open, and every time he closed them he saw the Ferris wheel, the lake, and the boathouse that Jay had used as a studio .

"Kurt thinks it's hilarious. Quit changing the subject ."

Luke flopped down on his bed, shaking away the image of pale skin and red hair sprawled across a paint-stained dropcloth. "I need you to refuse to give me Jay Collins' phone number ."

There was a long pause, Luke's eyes sliding closed before Marcus said, "So this is more a Nikolai-stupid, then ."

Snorting, Luke dragged the covers over his head. "Sounds about right ."

"Luke," Marcus said solemnly, "I am not going to give you Jay's phone number. He's technically my client, and it wouldn't be ethical ."

"Thanks, man," Luke slurred, sleep sliding over him in a wash of moonlight on water. "You're the best ."

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE dreams of running along the beach laughing and the phantom lover that caressed him with paint covered hands, Luke's

phone gave up and shut off. It wasn't until he stumbled into work and plugged it in that he got the landslide of texts waiting for him .

"I'm not sure calling Jay Collins qualifies as stupid. —Marcus "

"I think it might be good for you. —Marcus "

"I was serious about the ethical implications, though. —Marcus "

"This is the best idea ever. —Kurt "

"You need to get back in the saddle. —Kurt "

"Jay's a good guy. —Kurt "

"Sending you Jay's contact card now. —Kurt "

"Name your firstborn after me. —Kurt "

"I may have made a mistake. Sorry. —Marcus "

Luke rested his cheek on his desk, staring at the messages. His head was pounding, and all he wanted to do was sleep for a week .

"I hate you. —Luke "

Mainlining coffee got him through the morning, but when lunch rolled around, he found himself slumped over in his chair staring at the new contact on his phone .

"You look like shit," Vivian said as she bustled in with his lunch. "Are you coming down with something ?"

"I don't date artists," he told her, his finger hovering over the delete button. "That's a good policy to have, right ?"

She frowned, tugging his phone out of his hand. "You can't blame all artists for what Liam did." She paused, the lines between her brows deepening. "And Bailey. And the other one. What was his name? Crockett ?"

"Cricket." Luke glared at her, trying to grab his phone back without expending any actual energy. "If that's the best argument you can come up with, then I'm done here ."

"Okay," she said, rolling her eyes at him. "You've picked some really bad apples over the years. But ask yourself this: What was so bad about them?" She leaned over him as he drooped in his chair, too exhausted to play keep away even if he was six inches taller than her. "I'll break it down for you, shall I ?"

"Don't you have a job to do?" he muttered .

"My job is assisting you," she said sweetly. "I'm assisting. The problem with Liam is that he's too much like you."

Jerking out of his seat, he grabbed his phone. "We couldn't be more different." He tapped back into his contacts and glared at Jay's phone number.

She crossed her arms and leaned one hip against the corner of his desk, ignoring his outburst. "You were both more invested in your jobs than you were in your relationship."

"I was going to take him to Ireland." He slammed the phone down on his desk, trying to get rid of the image of the empty paint shed.

"Honey," she said, her voice kind but firm, "a week of vacation doesn't make up for a year of neglect, and you know it." It was the same voice she used on problem clients, smooth and calm with nothing to fight back against.

"I went to every gallery show, every opening night party. We lived together!" Frenzied energy shivered through him, and he paced across the room. "If he wanted more time, all he had to do was say so."

"How many times did you cancel dinner plans to work late? How often did you guys take a weekend trip to wine country or sleep in on Saturday after watching bad movies?" She nodded when he glared at her. "Exactly. I'm not saying it's your fault, boss. I remember when Liam first moved in. You started working Saturdays because he would spend the whole weekend at his studio without coming up for air. Schedules didn't mean anything to him." He turned his back on her, and she sighed. "No one is perfect, Luke."

"So this is all my fault?" Hunching his shoulders, he stared at the green on green canvas that he had mounted opposite his desk. Even though it had only been there for a week, he was addicted to the soothing effect that it had, a dappled light effect like sunlight in a forest.

She gave him an unimpressed look, tapping her nails against the screen of his phone. "Don't be dense. Bailey, from what you told me, had the opposite problem from Liam. He wanted all of your time, and he threw a tantrum every time you couldn't give it to him. That's not healthy."

"And I suppose Cricket thought I was too needy." Growling under his breath, he threw his hands up in the air and dragged his eyes away

from the painting. "I don't date artists because they're flighty, and I need a partner I can depend on."

"My last blind date skipped out on the check and left me stranded in the club district without a ride. He was a pharmacist," Vivian said bluntly. "Flighty people are everywhere, but you're not saying 'I don't date flighty people.'"

"Everyone knows that artists are flightier than normal people."

"Everyone knows, huh? Is that the kind of evidence that would fly in court, counselor?" She stared down her nose at him, and he ground his teeth. "Maybe what you should really be asking yourself is why do you date so many artists? What do you like about them?" She waved his phone at him. "Maybe now you can find out."

Horror crept up his spine as he realized that his text messages were open. "What did you do?"

"I assisted," she said cheerfully, pressing his phone into his hand and walking out of the office with her head held high.

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"Are you free on Friday? —Luke"

Jay spent Thursday staring at the text while he unloaded and organized the hundreds of dollars of paints that had arrived. It was less than half of what he'd originally had in his cart but still more than he could use in a year. He didn't even remember everything he'd gotten, which was why he'd spent ten minutes laughing at his overflowing drawer of blue paint, some of the colors so similar that he doubted anyone would be able to tell the difference

He typed out a long reply about why he couldn't go out on Friday, then deleted it while he stacked canvases in order of size and material. He was conditioning an entire bucket of new brushes when he sent his first response

"No. —Jay "

Two hours later, shuffling around the palettes of watercolors to make space for the acrylics he didn't remember ordering, he was still staring at the phone .

"Maybe. —Jay "

"Why? —Jay "

"Nevermind, I can't. —Jay "

Powering off his phone so that he wouldn't have to see any responses, he set out his new easel and started planning his next painting. He was thinking about trying more realism now that he had the tools, just to see if he could .

Intending to prep a few canvases, he lay down a base layer of blue. The new paints were smooth and rich, and he fell in love with them just mixing them on the palette. They blended like a dream, green flowing through the blue with hardly any effort. He picked up a smaller brush, lines of yellow light appearing on the canvas with the flick of his wrist, and smiled .

It wasn't until he stepped back from a clearing in the woods where a traveling circus had set up that he even realized what he'd done. Cursing, he threw his brushes into the paint thinner, tempted to paint over the whole thing. He glared at the glowing lights, the sky dark overhead. It was definitely not the bright summer day that he'd been aiming for, but even he could tell it was a good painting. The brush strokes were quick and evocative, the colors full of nostalgia, and the whole image screamed of innocence and corruption. The critics would love it .

Turning his phone back on, he wasn't surprised to see that it was after two in the morning. He sent Bonnie a quick text. There were no new messages from Luke waiting, and he double checked his settings to make sure that his replies had gone through .

At this time of night, there was no point in sending anything. Normal people were asleep. Even Bonnie was asleep. Of course, if he sent it now, Luke would just see it in the morning. Nodding to himself, Jay typed out another text .

"Sorry. Working on a new painting. —Jay "

"It's okay. —Luke "

The text appeared almost immediately, and Jay frowned. He sent a response before he could overthink it. "Can't sleep? —Jay "

"No. Snickerdoodles or double chocolate chunk? —Luke "

Jay's mouth watered, and he only debated a moment before hitting dial. "Double chocolate chunk. Is that even a question ?"

Luke laughed tiredly. "I guess not," he said, his voice echoing. The silence stretched, metal and glass clinking. "How's the painting going ?"

"Good." At a loss for anything else to say, Jay stared at the picture. "It's really good. Almost done." He smacked himself on the forehead. "I might be here late doing detail work, though. I hate to make plans and then have to cancel them ."

"That's nice of you. Liam always got lost in his painting and forgot we had plans. Just a second." A mixer whirred to life .

Jay bit his lip. He could hang up, make an excuse about not wanting to distract him from his baking. That would be the smart thing to do. The rattle of noise quieted back down. "I did that a lot, which is why I don't make any firm plans if I'm going to be painting." He mouthed a curse, holding the phone away from his ear to call himself an idiot in three languages .

"Good policy. Don't let me distract you ."

"It's okay. I'm waiting for this layer to dry. It'll be a few hours." Jay bit his tongue to keep from saying anything else. Standing awkwardly in front of the canvas, he picked at a hangnail. "Unless you'd rather I didn't bother you ?"

Luke chuckled, a hoarse, unhappy breath of sound. "I'm already up, so we might as well keep each other company ."

"Why can't you sleep?" Jay threw his hand in the air, exasperated with himself, fumbling his phone so that he missed the first part of Luke's reply .

"...driving me crazy. I feel like the world is out to get me." He sounded so lost that the joke that automatically sprang to Jay's lips died unsaid .

"I'm sorry. I know how that feels." Scanning the painting, he frowned at the odd way the shadows were settling. "Right after I left New York, I got caught in a rainstorm. When I went to a laundromat to dry my stuff out, I fell asleep, and somebody stole one of my loads of laundry. On the way back to the campground, I almost got hit by a car and twisted my ankle, and then, that night, a raccoon stole my groceries ."

Still staring at the shadows of the painting, Jay didn't realize how quiet it had gotten until Luke snorted. "Now I feel like a total jerk for whining about how bad my life is ."

"No, no. That wasn't what I meant." He picked up one of his new detail brushes and contemplated the splotchy shadows. It almost looked like he'd set the paint with the intention of adding something, but he couldn't remember what. "I just meant that sometimes everything goes wrong." He idly mixed a tiny bit of white into the dark color still smeared all over his palette. "That's not it, either," he said thoughtfully. "It's more that things don't go the way we expect. Sometimes it leads us to better things ."

"Really," Luke drawled. "And what did your terrible day lead to ?"

Stroking the brush across the canvas, Jay shivered as ghostly figures appeared out of nowhere. "That's creepy," he said, eagerly adding more paint as the characters unfolded. "I can't remember anything specific, other than to go to the grocery store again the next day. It led me here, I guess ."

"What's creepy ?"

"Painting. Don't think I didn't notice you changing the subject." Piling highlights onto a woman in fancy dress, he recognized the curve of her cheek and rolled his eyes. "Sometimes," he told Luke, "I am such a drama queen ."

"Thanks for the warning?" the alpha said with a laugh .

"No seriously. I hid ghosts in this picture for myself to find." He settled back down on his stool, forming the ghostly wisps of his mother's hair. "I'm ridiculous ."

"Knowing you have a problem is the first step ."

Jay laughed so hard he dropped the paintbrush, smearing gray down one leg. It hadn't been that funny, but he couldn't stop. "I need sleep. Oh, my God, do I ever need sleep ."

"You and me, both," Luke said. "I'm going to pull this last batch out of the oven and head to bed ."

They disconnected the call, and Jay stared at his phone. "I'm going to sleep for a hundred years," he said to the silent studio. Hopping off the stool, he stretched until his back popped, looking at the ghosts on the canvas. Maybe things wouldn't go the way he expected. Locking up, he sent off a quick text on the short cab ride to the apartment he had managed to sublet .

"What time should I be ready, and what should I wear? —Jay ."

H E COULD HEAR the music from two blocks away. Jay had to stop for a moment and compose himself, resisting the urge to scream. Luke was right.

The world was out to get him .

The carnival was huge, taking up the entire parking lot of the City Convention Center. It was definitely bigger than he remembered the one in New York being .

Weaving through the crowds, he had to stand on his toes to spot Luke hovering by the ticket counter. He plastered a smile on his face and ducked around a group of teenagers. This was a terrible idea .

“You made it,” Luke said as he approached, shouting to be heard over the screams from the rides overhead. He looked good, the relaxed clothes and cheerful smile giving him a much younger appearance .

Jay nodded, tugging at a paint-smearred t-shirt. “I can't believe there's a fair in town,” he said, glaring at the bright lights. “I haven't been to one of these in years .”

“Me, either.” The alpha herded them closer to the gate. “Not since that summer .”

Gritting his teeth, Jay held his hand out for the neon green wristband. “What a coincidence .”

Inside, the music and screams were even louder, booths of games set up in a long aisle to funnel the crowd deeper. They were swept along with the flow of traffic, and he used the moment to compose himself. The stuffed animals hanging from the stalls mocked him as he hurried past. Stuffing his hands deeper into his pockets, heat coiled in his gut when a warm hand pressed against the small of his back .

Luke guided them to a gap between two of the games, his hand sliding away as soon as they weren't in immediate danger of being swept apart. “I haven't eaten yet, but if you want to go on that spinning top, maybe I'd better wait .”

Jay peered up at the rides, pointedly ignoring the Ferris wheel stationed at the point of pride in the center of the lot. “I don't remember them being so fast,” he said, biting his lip .

Laughing, Luke shook his head. “I don't think they were. This is a much bigger fair than we went to, and maybe the technology has improved or something.” He grimaced. “I feel old saying that .”

“You sound old,” Jay muttered, growling under his breath when Luke knocked their shoulders together. Shoving him back, he squeaked when Luke ruffled his hair. “Lay off, you big jerk,” he said, but he couldn't help the smile that creased his cheeks .

"Make me." Luke stumbled forward a little as someone bumped into him. "Sorry," he said, steadying himself with a hand on Jay's shoulder .

Jay's heart jumped as those gorgeous green eyes dropped to his lips. The moment hung there, and he leaned in as if drawn by a magnet. This was such a bad idea .

"What the...?" Luke jerked back, distracted by something across the way. "You've got to be joking," he said, throwing his hands in the air .

Following his gaze, Jay stared in shock at the ring toss stall. There, hanging right in the center of the prize wall, was a monkey. Not just any monkey, a gorilla with a coconut drink and sunglasses. He wandered closer in a daze. The world really was out to get them .

Up close, he could see that this gorilla was covered in glitter, but it was so close to the stuffed animal that had started this whole mess that he shivered. "That's... That's a crazy coincidence," he said weakly .

Luke shot him a dark look that faded into concern. "Are you okay? We can go if you want. This was a stupid idea ."

It was tempting. Jay couldn't breathe staring at that stupid gorilla. The original had been a casualty of being homeless, one of the few things he'd missed the most. "I'm going to win it," he said .

"These games are rigged," Luke hovered his hand behind Jay's shoulder like he might have to catch him if he fainted from shock .

Jay smiled, his fingers clenching at the memory of soft, fake fur. "I know ."

The guy running the game was watching them, clicking a handful of rings with a bored expression. Jay wandered closer, digging in his pocket, but Luke got there first .

"Two games, please," he said, handing over a crumpled bill .

"These games are rigged," Jay said. He leaned against the counter with one hip, watching Luke test the weight of the rings. He could already tell that Luke wasn't going to get any points, but he looked so determined that Jay didn't have the heart to tell him .

The first ring landed wide, and Luke cursed. Jay had to look away to hide his smile, and the carny gave him a suspicious look. The second ring landed short, and Jay didn't manage to swallow his laugh fast enough,

sliding off the end of the booth when Luke knocked him with his hip. Rolling back his sleeve, Luke glared at the bottles in fierce concentration .

Five games later, he gave up with only a handful of cheap, plastic bracelets to show for his efforts .

Jay picked up a set of rings. Rolling them in his hands, he tried to remember the trick to making them land just right. "Stand back and leave this to the professionals," he said, smirking over his shoulder .

"Professionals, huh? Western conference?" Luke asked sarcastically, crossing his arms and pouting .

"Eastern," Jay retorted, twirling a ring around his finger. Just to be a shit, he threw them one after another in quick succession, barely glancing over as they rattled down the neck of the bottles in a perfect row. It was worth it for the way Luke gaped at him .

"How did you do that ?"

"Magic," Jay said with a wink. "I'll take the gorilla, please ."

The carny rolled his eyes and pulled the stuffed animal down. It was huge, barely fitting under Jay's arm, and the glittery sunglasses and coconut shined with the many lights of the carnival .

"No, seriously," Luke said, trailing along behind him as he walked away with his nose in the air. "How did you do that ?"

Jay laughed, getting in line for a funnel cake. "There's a trick to it," he said. "After I left New York, I worked at a traveling carnival for a while. It was a cheap way to get across the country and way safer than hitchhiking. The kids thought it was funny to challenge me to beat them at the games until the oldest girl showed me all their tricks. I think her grandmother wanted her to marry me, but she was more interested in the fire-eater ."

"Is there anything you haven't done?" Luke asked, brushing aside Jay's attempt to pay. "I invited you ."

Taking the scalding hot paper plate in his free hand, Jay let his eyes glide over the lights without focusing. Now that he was looking for them, he could see the gaps in the facade that showed the greasy, scraped-together life behind the scenes. "It was better than being homeless again," he said .

Luke winced, ducking his head. His eyes followed the same path, but Jay could tell he didn't see past the glitz. "I'm sorry," he said,

clearing his throat. "I can't help but think that I was part of the reason you were disowned, and I'm sorry I didn't try to look you up when I got back to school. I should have done more."

"Bullshit," Jay said, scandalizing a woman walking nearby. He stuck his chin in the air and poked Luke with the edge of the paper plate, leaving a smear of powdered sugar behind. "I didn't just sit there and let him throw me out like yesterday's trash. I walked out of that house with my head held high. I was an idiot, but I was a proud idiot, and the whole situation was my choice. And don't you forget it."

The cluster of lines that appeared around the edges of Luke's eyes when he smiled made Jay want to do something stupid just to see them again. "Sir, yes, sir," Luke said with a sloppy salute.

"Good boy," Jay shoved the gorilla into Luke's arms and started tearing into his snack. "Hurry up and help me finish this. I want to go on the one that swings upside down."

Luke groaned.

"I FAXED OVER THE FORMS. You just need to get them notarized and sent certified mail to the court here in New York. It's important that it's certified mail," Marcus said. "The address is on the first page."

"I'm on my way out the door right now," Jay assured him, tucking the thick sheaf of papers into his bag.

Marcus hummed. "How's Luke doing?"

Fumbling his phone, Jay scrambled to pick it back up off the burning hot pavement. "What? Why would you ask me that? Did he say something?" He brushed the grit off the screen and tucked it against his ear as he climbed onto the bus.

"I'm asking because he isn't speaking to me right now, and you're the one who saw him last," Marcus said, his voice dry as the California summer. "Was there something you're worried he might have mentioned?"

"Nothing happened," Jay blurted.

The older woman sitting across from him rolled her eyes. "Ain't nobody believe that, honey ."

Jay groaned. "We went to a carnival, I won a stuffed animal, and we rode too many fast rides. That's it. We didn't even kiss ."

"Uh huh." Marcus let the words stretch out until they were as thin as Jay's nerves .

"Sounds like a waste to me," the woman said, tossing her braids .

"It wasn't," he told her. "There's nothing to waste ."

"He ugly? Mean? Married?" she asked, leaning forward in her chair .

"No!"

She tutted. "Then it's a waste." She climbed to her feet as the bus pulled to a stop .

Pressing his hands against his eyes, Jay counted backward from ten. "There's nothing to waste. There's nothing," he told Marcus. "We went out, he dropped me off at the apartment I'm subletting, and I went to bed ."

"Right."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore." Jay hopped off the bus, walking up the street. "Let's talk about something else ."

Marcus chuckled. "I should let you go anyway. Call if you have any issues. Oh," he added as Jay started to say goodbye. "Before I forget, I was supposed to let you know that Luke is available whenever you want to pick up the gorilla you left in the back of his car. Is that a euphemism? I feel like that's a euphemism ."

"I'm hanging up now," Jay said, ending the call and cutting off the alpha's teasing commentary. "I hate everyone ."

Notarizing wasn't as complicated or expensive as he was expecting, but arranging for the paperwork to be sent to New York took the better part of an hour. By the time he left the courthouse, it was late enough for rush hour traffic to be in full force. Tucking himself off to one side to escape the mob, Jay pulled out his phone to let Marcus know that everything was done .

"Are you sure they'll increase the settlement ?"

"The judge is an old friend of mine. It'll be fine ."

Icy shock numbed Jay's fingers, and he stared wide-eyed at the couple standing a few feet from him. Victor Danville had gotten older in ten years, his hair more white than blond, but Jay would recognize him anywhere .

"I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything," Victor said, one gentlemanly hand offered to a woman with piles of dark hair arranged to frame her artificially young face. His warm, charming brown eyes slid over his surroundings like an oil slick, passing over his stepson without recognition. "Don't worry about a thing ."

"I'm on my way to the islands this weekend," she told him, batting her lashes. "This whole ordeal is so stressful, I need a little pick-me-up ."

They passed out of earshot before he could hear Victor's reply, but Jay could imagine it. His hands shook with anger as he sent his text. He thought about calling his mother to ask her why Victor was in California, but by her own choice, she never knew anything about her husband's business dealings .

The courthouse was less than a mile from the gallery. Rather than sit on a bus and melt in traffic, he headed there, needing the calming effect of paint and canvas. Just stepping out of the hot sun, the sweat drying in a frigid layer down his arms, was enough to wash away the lingering discomfort .

The gallery was busy for a Monday, more than one person with the same idea stopping in to get out of the heat. Half a dozen people in business attire were examining his work, and he wasn't sure how to feel about it. Winding his way through to the beach canvas, he took a few deep breaths .

His mind wandered, imagining what the carnival painting would look like on display. The ghosts would be hard to see in the direct, bright light looking straight on, but from the side, they'd appear in waves as the glare passed over them. He'd have to do a whole series. The thought of canvases full of ghosts hanging around the room made him grimace. Maybe not .

"Can I help you find anything ?"

There were three attendants wandering through the paintings, more than he'd ever seen before. He didn't recognize the girl who smiled deferentially at a well-dressed blonde woman standing in front of the big empty hole left by "Lights of the City ."

"I hope so." She flicked well-manicured fingers at the canvases around them. "We recently had one of the larger pieces in

this collection delivered to our corporate headquarters, and now the president wants a few more to hang around the lobby ."

The attendant's eyes lit up, and even from where he was standing, Jay could see the dollar signs. "Did you have any particular pieces in mind ?"

"I'm still looking. The original piece, 'City Lights' or something, was a gift, so I wasn't sure what the rest looked like. Is this everything available? I need pieces that evoke an international feel." She crossed her arm, staring across the room at the oil-slick colors of "American Dream ."

"I'll check with the owner," the attendant said, hurrying toward the stairs. "I think there are a few canvases that are still waiting to be hung." She disappeared, and the woman wandered toward another group of paintings .

Jay's mind whirled, something about the conversation sticking with him as he ducked back outside. He tried to tell himself that it was just excitement over selling more paintings, but it didn't ring true .

Standing at the bus stop, he pulled out his phone. He barely gave the call time to connect before blurting, "You won the bet ."

"Sorry, what?" Luke sounded exhausted, and Jay almost felt guilty .

"You won the bet. You didn't have to buy the painting," he said, propping himself up against a street light .

"No, that file goes to MacMillan. The red file is for Friday." The line hissed with static, and Jay had to hold it away from his ear. "I liked it," Luke said. "More importantly, I knew my uncle would love it. He's been looking for a good art piece for the new headquarters ."

"But you won the bet," Jay said again, his brain refusing to let go of that fact .

Luke chuckled. "And I kept thinking about it, so I went back and bought it. It's a good painting. Very evocative ."

"I need to go," Jay said, hanging up his phone as a bus pulled up. It was the wrong bus, disgorging a slow trickle of worn-through people before it rolled away. He sat down on the bench and tried to figure out how he felt .

He was still undecided when he dropped his bag inside the door of his studio two hours later .

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"This settlement is more than generous."

Luke did his best to prop his eyes open and look attentive as the couple sitting on opposite sides of the table launched into round seventy-three of the argument over their divorce. The other lawyers, a prestigious and expensive group from San Diego, weren't in any better shape. One of them had been on his phone for the last two hours, and Luke had a sneaking suspicion that he was playing solitaire .

If he hadn't already been scared away from the idea of marriage by his father's terrible relationships, days like today would have made him swear off it for life. He was just thankful that he didn't have to sit in on these conversations all that often. He'd specialized in litigation for a reason. He was only there because both clients were being sued for a real estate deal that went south, and Greg had asked for a consult .

"I'm going to go order lunch," he announced at one o'clock when his stomach grumbled loud enough to be heard over the bickering .

They'd held the meeting at a room rented out by the other team, hoping that a little extra pressure of wasting money would entice the pair to sign the paperwork they'd been arguing about for the last month. It wasn't working .

Luke headed to the receptionist's desk at the center of the floor to ask for delivery recommendations. The building was bustling, people in suits parading in and out while interns and secretaries dashed after them overburdened with files. For all that, it was almost silent, a plush carpet and industrial strength insulation keeping everything muffled .

The receptionists were happy to show him the stack of menus collected from local businesses, and he dragged his feet deciding between Thai and Italian. He'd just about decided when he noticed the receptionists rolling their eyes and hiding smiles behind their hands. His palms started to sweat, and he checked his tie and ran a hand over his hair on reflex. They weren't paying any attention to him, though .

Then he heard it. Made faint by the acoustics but getting louder, someone was sobbing. Loud, unnatural, dramatic sobs. As a well-dressed woman turned the corner, her voice rose to a wail, and he was finally able to understand her. His heart pounded as she wept loudly into the phone, her makeup pristine and her eyes dry .

"I don't understand why you have to make this so difficult," she said, heading right for him, and he fought the urge to hide. "This is already so hard for me." She tossed a folder onto the main desk with a bored flick. "I just need closure, Harry. I don't want to drag this out, but the lawyers are so mean," she whined. "Please, can't you just sign the papers ?"

Whatever the answer was, it wasn't what she wanted to hear, and her beautiful features crumpled in rage. "The hell you can't." She threw the phone across the room, very slowly calming herself until her face slid back into unlined perfection. "I need that couriered to New York," she told the receptionist, all traces of emotion evaporating .

Luke squared his shoulders as her eyes passed over him. At first, he was hopeful that his stepmother wouldn't recognize him, a host of lines crossing her forehead as she narrowed her eyes at him. It was a tiny, unconscious gesture that had always spoiled her flawless image .

"Luke," she said, glancing at her manicure .

"Meredith. Lovely to see you ."

"How is that artist of yours doing?" she asked with a sly smirk .

For a moment, he thought she meant Jay and wanted to scream. "Liam and I are no longer together," he said after a moment .

"That's such a pity. Your father will be so disappointed that he doesn't get to put more trust fund babies into the world." She smiled at him, teeth bared like a lioness. "Do tell Robert that I said hello." She clicked over to her phone on her towering heels, snapping her fingers at it until someone picked it up for her .

Words crowded Luke's thoughts, insults and sly insinuations piling on top of curses and cruel sarcasm. Nothing came out. This was the kind of situation that Cody and Kurt thrived in, but he'd never been any good at. Meredith made him feel like that kid being shuffled from hotel to hotel because his father was 'too busy' for him. He just stood there, watching her get into the elevator with a triumphant smirk on her overfilled lips .

"Conference room seven is empty if you need a moment," one of the receptionists said, her voice kind as she pointed down one hall .

Luke took a shaky breath, nodding at her. "I need to order lunch," he said, waving the menus. "Six people ."

She gave him an encouraging smile. "We'll take care of it ."

Ducking down the hall, he was able to hide away and lock the door without encountering anyone. It was easy to see why this room was empty; it barely qualified as a closet, set up for just two people. There was a window, though, and he found himself looking out over the city trying to remember how to breathe .

He'd liked Meredith when his dad first brought her home. She had been young and energetic, playing tennis with him at the country club while his dad golfed. It was only after they'd gotten engaged that he'd noticed her monopolizing his dad's time .

"Give them time," Robert had said. "It's just new." Robert had apologized for not listening two years later with a summer touring Europe. Harry Carter had called when they arrived in London, complaining that his best friend had bailed on their biweekly drinks. It was the only time Luke had ever seen the friends fight .

He pulled out his phone, his fingers tapping the edge of the screen. Below the window, a silver Cadillac pulled out of the parking garage, forced its way into traffic, and ran a red light at the corner. He dialed .

"What's going on with the divorce?" he asked, speaking over Robert's greeting .

"Just a moment, sorry. I must take this call; it's my office." There were half a dozen voices in the background, the language musical and flowing, and Luke hunched over, shame creeping up his spine. He had no idea where his uncle was, or what time it was there. "Luke," Robert said a moment later, the background noise died down to a faint hollow note. "It's good to hear from you, kiddo. Have you thought about the charity auction any ?"

"I'm not calling about that," he said, frustration burning away the guilt. "I just had the extreme pleasure of running into Meredith while I was at a client meeting."

"Ah." There was a wealth of bitterness in that tiny sound.

"She sends her best, in case you were wondering."

Robert cleared his throat. "Of course she did," he muttered. "That's how it always is in divorces. People are so charming. About that auction ..."

"She was pulling her 'woe is me' routine into the phone when I ran into her. Trying to con Dad into just signing the papers." Luke dug his fingernails into his palm. "What's going on?"

"I don't know everything," he said, his voice turning up at the end the way it did when he was lying through his teeth. "She was talking to Harry, you said? I should give him a call, make sure she doesn't wear him down."

"Uncle—" Luke growled as his phone beeped with an incoming call. He was half a second from sending it to voicemail when the caller ID flashed Jay's name. "I have to go," he said. "We're not through with this."

"Of course, kiddo. I'll call you tonight."

He switched lines without replying, taking childish delight in the act. "Jay?"

"Notification of Intent to File. What does that even mean?" The omega's voice cracked. "Why is none of this written in English?"

Luke frowned at the panic seeping through the connection. "Breathe. You got legal paperwork? Is it about the house or your show?"

"How can I tell? It might as well be written in Chinese," Jay said, his voice rising and making the line squeal with feedback.

"See step one: Breathe." Luke tried to keep his voice light. "Step two: Check the first page. There should be a big, bold section that starts with 'In Regards to' or something similar."

"Sorry, sorry. First page. Where is the damned first page?"

"I still don't hear any breathing," he teased, chuckling when Jay huffed several bellows-breaths directly into the phone. "Better, thank you."

"Asshole," Jay muttered, followed by tearing paper.
"Oops ."

"It's just a copy," Luke said before he could panic further.
"Tear it to shreds if you want ."

"I just want to find the stupid first page," Jay growled. For all his bluster, his voice was shaking .

"It should have the name of the form across the top in big letters. 'Notification of Intent to File' or just 'Notice .'"

"Got it," he said a second later. "In regards to... In regards to... The filing with the 1st Superior Court of New York on September 3rd ."

"That's definitely about your trust fund, not the gallery show." He glanced at his watch, debating if he should send Jay to one of his coworkers. Rodriguez was a pro at family and estate law. Besides, even though he'd handled estate disputes when there were lawsuits involved, he wasn't licensed in New York. He definitely didn't need to keep spending time with Jay Collins .

"It's probably nothing, but I'll come by and take a look as soon as I get out of this meeting." He bit his tongue trying to cut off the flow of words, but they slithered out into the air. Banging his head against the window, he glared at his reflection from point-blank range. "It might be late, though ."

"Whenever is fine," Jay said immediately. "My sleep schedule is a little iffy at the best of times. I'll text you the address ."

Resigned to the inevitable, Luke stared at the ceiling. Intricate plaster designs and molding edged a plain white ceiling; no cheap acoustic tile here. The room felt colder for the lack. "I'll let you know when I leave the office," he said, his voice flat .

"Thank you so much. I really appreciate it ."

"Don't worry about it," he muttered, ending the call. "I'm just a complete idiot," he added to the cold glass .

"I hate you, and this is all your fault. —Luke" He stabbed the button to send the text to Kurt and Marcus with enthusiasm born of frustration .

"You're welcome.—Marcus "

He didn't bother resisting the urge to flip his phone off. Tucking it back into his pocket, Luke took a moment to make himself presentable. He

padded back out to the lobby, the carpet too plush to drag his heels .

"Luke, man. There you are." Greg slapped him on the back with a huge grin. "We're done here." He held up the paperwork, almost giddy in his relief. "They finally signed it ."

Staring at the sloppy signatures, it took all of Luke's willpower to swallow the urge to throw something. "That's great," he said faintly .

"Yeah," Greg said. "I'm off to celebrate. You game? Drinks are on me ."

It was tempting. "I've got some other work to do," he said through his teeth. "Some other time ."

Greg nodded, sliding onto the elevator as the doors were closing without another word .

Luke stared at the cheerfully bland artwork on the nearest wall, listening to the bustle of people around him. He'd been so convinced that this meeting was going to take all day that he'd already sent Vivian home. He had nothing but time .

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out to vent some of his frustration and growing paranoia on Kurt, but it was only Jay. Staring at the address, he wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. Instead, he got on the next elevator to the garage and took the long route around the city .

T HE SMELL of paint was the first thing that hit him. He'd always heard that scent was the strongest sense tied to memory. He could believe it as his mind was crowded with a rush of things he'd rather not think about .

It took him a little bit of trial and error to find the right door, following the ringing of Jay's unanswered phone. Leaning his shoulder against the door, he took in the familiar scene in front of him and tried not to smile. More than one fight had started after a moment like this, but right then he couldn't bring himself to find it anything but adorable .

Jay was painting. Perched on his stool, he was completely oblivious to the world around him as he layered brown paint over gray with small, precise strokes. There was fresh paint smeared across his forehead, still shiny in the bright afternoon sunlight. He'd also gotten paint splatter on the

top layer of papers scattered across the big supply cabinet just inside the door .

Luke tore his eyes away from the tempting curve of the omega's lips as he bent to mix a new color, his tongue stuck out between his teeth in concentration. Flipping through the pages of paperwork, he pulled a pen out of his jacket pocket and started taking notes .

"When did you get here?" Jay's voice was hoarse, and he grabbed a bottle of water off the table next to him, looking it over carefully before taking a drink .

Glancing at his watch, Luke was surprised to realize that it had been the better part of an hour. "You were adding the brown," he said, leaning in for a look at the canvas. Originally, it had looked like another abstract, but now he could see buildings and shapes starting to emerge .

"Sorry. I paint when I'm anxious." Jay crossed the room, his back and knee popping as they stretched. "Did you get a chance to look at everything ?"

Luke nodded. "Your stepfather is a piece of work," he said grimly, straightening his stack of notes. "He's claiming that your mother is the rightful owner of the lake house because the executor of your father's estate never prevented her from occupying the property ."

Jay's throat clicked as he swallowed, crossing his arms. "Can he do that ?"

"I doubt it." Waving his notes, Luke pointed to a few of the things he'd written down. "I have to call Marcus and see if he was able to find out who the executor of the estate is. It's not your mother. If it was, they would have started with that. There are usually provisions for continued property use during the time of the trust..." Jay was staring at him blankly, so he cleared his throat and tried again. "Your father wanted you to enjoy the house, so he put in his will that you and your mother can use it anytime you want. You'd still inherit it when you were old enough. It's not an uncommon provision. It keeps things from getting run down from too long sitting vacant." He flipped a few pages. "Even if there wasn't something like that, he'd have to prove that there was a reasonable expectation on your mother's part that she was the owner. Like I said before, she never contested the will, so she is well aware that she doesn't own that house ."

"She got the house we lived in and Dad's stocks," Jay said. "I remember the lawyer going over the value of everything. He had to keep repeating himself because she was crying so hard."

"There is a problem, though," Luke said, flipping to one of the last pages. "Unless they spontaneously decide to withdraw their claim, you will have to appear in court." Jay cursed under his breath, a muscle in his jaw twitching. "It's just a formality, but it does mean a trip across the country."

"What if I don't?" he asked.

Luke pursed his lips. "If you knew who the executor was, and trusted them, you could let them handle it. Or you could hire a lawyer in New York to go for you, which is probably what your stepfather will do. This is just an intimidation tactic."

"That's what he does," Jay said. "He tried it on Aunt Carol once. She laughed him out of the room." His lips twitched in a fond smile. "I always wanted to be as ballsy as her."

The curve of his mouth was distracting, vibrant red and bruised in the middle where he'd been chewing on his lips. Luke had to look away. "I'm going to call Marcus and see what he's found out. Then we can discuss your options."

Jay nodded. "I'll clean up my brushes," he said, then flushed as his stomach growled. "Are you hungry? I can order dinner if this is going to take a while."

Glancing around the crowded studio, Luke debated the lack of seating and his self-control. "Why don't we go to Milano's?" he asked, gesturing to the papers. "It's the best Italian food in town. We can get a booth and spread out."

Stomach grumbling loudly, Jay grabbed his brushes. "You're just afraid of getting paint on your suit," he said, pushing his hair back and spreading the paint that was smeared across his forehead into the strands.

Luke swallowed hard, resisting the urge to curl his fingers around that delicate wrist. "You have paint on your forehead," he said, sticking his nose in the air.

Jay cursed without heat, clearly resigned to his lot in life. Scrubbing at the patch, he managed to smear it into his eyebrow.

"I'm going to step outside and call Marcus." Luke ducked out the door before he could do something stupid .

"I'll meet you at your car," Jay called after him .

Escaping into the elevator, Luke stabbed at his phone. "I told you to stop me from doing something stupid, not enable me. I don't date artists," he hissed .

"Marcus is in the shower," Teddy's dry voice replied, "but I'm glad things are going well with Jay ."

"You, too?" Luke groaned. "Why are you all against me? What are you even doing at Marcus' place ?"

"I'm helping him with some research. And I had nothing to do with all this," Teddy protested, and Luke could just imagine him adjusting his glasses. "I didn't find out until last weekend. At the monthly dinner. That you missed. Again ."

"Fuck." Luke stalked out of the elevator, heading for his car. "That was last weekend ?"

The other alpha hummed. "Do I need to add you to my reminder system?" he teased. Luke couldn't help but laugh. Teddy was notorious for forgetting appointments. He'd programmed his system from scratch to nag him into remembering everything from birthdays to meals .

"No, please. Not that. Anything but that," Luke said. "Just forward me the calendar again, and I'll work it into my schedule ."

"Next month is Kristoff's birthday, so you better not miss that one. Also, you should bring cookies to appease the monster. Greg says he mentions your peanut butter cookies every day ."

"I'll book my flight tonight," he promised as he unlocked his car, scribbling a note on his notepad .

"So tell me about Jay," Teddy said. The best thing about the second oldest of the frat brothers was that he was smarter than all the rest of them combined, but didn't have the social skills or patience to play games. That was also the worst thing about him. "I remember him, a little. He was always quiet. A business major, wasn't he? How did he end up being an artist ?"

"He was always an artist," Luke said, shaking his head to try and dislodge the image of paint on smooth, bare skin. "He just did the business degree because his stepfather insisted. I'll call Marcus back in

an hour. It's not a problem, really. I'm just helping him with Jay's case, and I wanted to see what he found out ."

"Is that why I've been searching the city development records from the last forty years?" Teddy asked thoughtfully. "That explains a lot. The Danvilles are a big name in this area ."

"Did you find anything?" Gripping his phone too tight, Luke leaned forward in his seat, resting his arm against the steering wheel .

"Not a whole lot." Teddy cleared his throat, his voice rueful. "The house has been in the Carter family since it was built. Never sold. Marcus did seem excited that I found a name and address on the property tax forms ."

"The estate executor ?"

"You'd have to ask Marcus. All I know is that fifteen years ago, the name was changed from Carol Collins to a Stan Kowalski ."

Luke whooped loud enough to echo through the parking garage. "That's great. Thanks, Teddy." Across the garage, Jay rounded the corner with his eyebrows raised and the barest hint of a smile curling his lips. "I've got to go, but let Marcus know that I'll call him later ."

"Glad I could help. I'll text you about those flight reservations ."

Shaking his head, Luke ended the call .

"Please tell me that was good news," Jay said as he climbed in. He'd washed his face, but there was still a dark spot where the paint had settled into his skin .

"Marcus and Teddy found a lead. Does the name Kowalski ring any bells?" He pulled out of the parking garage as Jay considered the question .

"I don't really remember." He picked at the edge of one nail. "I was only thirteen when Aunt Carol was diagnosed with cancer. She had people coming in and out for a while. Doctors, nurses, all kinds of specialists. She sent me back to my mom when school started so that I wouldn't have to watch her get sick ."

Luke cleared his throat. "Well, Marcus will definitely get in touch with him, so we should know more about who he is in a few days ."

They were quiet as they drove through the early evening traffic to Milano's .

Jay fidgeted with a piece of calamari, crushing the breading between his fingers. "You're sure that there's no chance of Victor winning?"

Across the table, Luke pursed his lips. "There's always a chance," he said, "which is why the appeals process exists."

"I thought that was just in criminal cases." He leaned back as the waiter came by to pour them more water. The restaurant was pleasantly busy, but not so packed that he felt bad for lingering. "If the judge decides in my favor, can he appeal?" The calamari was a mangled mess, and he tucked it under the shadow of the dipping sauce, picking up another piece.

"Yes," Luke said, "but I wouldn't expect him to. It gets expensive."

"How expensive?" Jay asked, his heart sinking. He was just getting used to being able to buy groceries and paints in the same week. There was no way he could pay for a prolonged legal battle.

Luke reached out and gently pulled the piece of calamari out of his hand. A static shock made Jay jump when their skin brushed. "It depends on how many lawyers you have, and what kind of court costs you create. If he's going for intimidation factor, your stepfather will have a whole fleet of lawyers. You just have the filing costs for any paperwork, since the lawyer will probably be retained by the estate."

Rubbing his sweaty hands against the stiff napkin draped in his lap, Jay groaned. "Can you repeat that in English?"

"That is English," Luke said, popping a piece of their appetizer into his mouth and chewing thoughtfully. "Whoever is taking care of the estate is being paid for their work from money set aside for that specific purpose. If they are a lawyer, defending the estate and the will is their job. You shouldn't have to pay them again to do what they're already doing."

"Oh," There were still a hundred ways this could go wrong, but some of the tension went out of his shoulders. "That actually makes sense."

"That's why I get paid the big bucks," Luke teased.

"To make simple concepts sound confusing?" Jay asked, smirking wickedly.

Luke flicked water at him, and they both burst out laughing when it flew wide, spraying across the papers in front of them. Jay didn't realize that the waiter was standing next to the table until he cleared his throat.

"Are you ready to order?" he asked, his face carefully blank. "Or did you need some more time to... think about it?"

Jay flushed, the heat creeping up his neck as he tried to catch his breath. He twined his fingers through his napkin and avoided the guy's eyes. Luke didn't seem to notice, rattling off an order with cheerful familiarity.

"Everything here is great," he told Jay, leaning in as if sharing a secret. "But don't tell Marcello that I said so. His head is so big, it's a wonder he fits in that kitchen."

The waiter gave a strangled squeak, his eyes wide with deeply offended sensibilities. Jay almost laughed, watching the man swallow back a nasty comment. Eyes twinkling, Luke settled back in his seat and let Jay make his order. The waiter, so androgynous under his dark uniform that Jay couldn't tell if he was an alpha or omega, didn't even glance his way as he stabbed the order into his notepad hard enough to tear the paper.

As soon as they were alone, Luke grinned, the expression so boyish that Jay's heart skipped a beat. "I give it two minutes." He dropped a few pieces of squid into his mouth. "Do you not like the calamari?" he asked with his mouth still full.

"It's great," he said, picking at another piece.

From across the restaurant, the kitchen door slammed open, and a heavysset man in a chef's coat stomped out. "Alright, where is that little pain in my ass?" he roared. The waiter muttered something with a smug grin, and he zeroed in on their table .

Jay watched in horror as the big alpha wound his way through the tables with surprising grace, heaving like a bellows. A group of older women near the front of the room clutched their napkins in shock, but for the most part, the diners didn't seem concerned. All around them, conversations resumed as people turned back to their dinners .

Luke winked, stuffing another handful of calamari in his mouth .

The chef, 'Marcello' picked out in gold embroidery on his lapel, steamed to a stop next to their table. "You!" He pointed one thick finger at Luke. "How dare you come back here and insult me, you little shit. I ought to charge you for your meal," he growled .

He was so busy wishing the floor would swallow him that it took Jay a moment to process what the man was saying. He stared in shock as Luke just snorted .

"You wouldn't dare set that precedent. The next thing you know, Uncle Robert will be giving you money for all those meetings you cater ."

"Bite your tongue," Marcello said, reaching down and dragging Luke out of the booth for a hug. "Why didn't you call, huh? Now my Emilio will be heartbroken that he didn't get to see you ."

"It was a last minute decision." Wriggling out of the meaty grip, Luke reached across and rested a hand on Jay's shoulder, urging him to his feet. "I'm helping a friend of mine with some legal issues ."

For a moment, Jay wanted to ask where this strange, carefree doppelganger of Luke's had come from. The alpha was smiling, full of mischief that hadn't been there since he'd let Jay push him to the floor of the boathouse .

Lost in memory, Jay couldn't do more than blink as the older man gave him a thorough once-over. "One of those brothers of yours?" he asked, holding out a hand easily large enough to engulf Jay's whole shoulder. The big alpha narrowed his eyes at the colored paint under Jay's fingernails. "You're an artist ."

"Yes," Jay said, finding his voice. Marcello's hand was calloused, and despite his obvious strength, his grip was gentle .

A huge smile bloomed across the man's face. "Oh, I'm gonna hear it tonight," he said, a tiny trace of an Italian accent slipping into his voice. "My Emilio, he's going to be furious that he missed this." He rubbed his hands together, gleefully unconcerned .

Luke groaned. "There's nothing to miss," he said. "This is work ."

"For your artist friend." There was a lot of emphasis crammed into such a short phrase. "A cute, omega, artist friend ."

Swinging wildly back to wishing the floor would swallow him, Jay stared at the floor in mortification .

"Don't you need to go stir something? Anything? I have real work to do." Luke knocked his shoulder into the older man's, bouncing off like he'd hit a brick wall .

Marcello's booming laugh rattled the silverware on the table. "Is that what they're calling it these days? Alright, I'll let you get back to your work." He dragged Luke into another hug, then almost gave Jay a heart attack when he did the same to him. "You come back, you say hello, or I get grumpy," he said seriously, shaking a finger in front of Jay's nose .

He was so off-balance when the big Italian set him back on his feet that Jay just plopped back into his seat .

"I'm starting to regret coming here," Luke called after the chef as he walked away. He handed Jay his glass of water, smiling apologetically. "He was raised by wolves ."

"Italian wolves," Marcello snapped from the kitchen doorway. The serving staff, including the little waiter who wasn't so smug anymore, just flowed around him like he wasn't there. "And if that is the least of your regrets, then you can die a happy man, little Carter. Mia, take care of my friends." Swanning off dramatically, he let the door slam shut behind him .

"I'm sorry about that," Luke said again. "Usually he's not that ..."

"Vibrant?" Jay said wryly .

"That's one way to put it. His husband does a good job of keeping him in line. Marcello was born in New York, but Emilio is from Rome, and he has opinions about how to treat guests." He smiled at a skinny girl,

all elbows and knees in painfully tall high heels, who tottered over to pour the wine. "How are you, Mia? You graduate this year, right?"

"By the grace of God," she said, her voice surprisingly deep and rich. "Your food will be right out." She smiled at Jay, showing off a gap between her front teeth with no self-consciousness whatsoever. She was calm and sweet, the exact opposite of the giant chef, but she had the same liquid brown eyes .

"This is a family restaurant?" Jay asked quietly as she walked away. He'd expected something more commercial given the area .

"Three generations," Luke said cheerfully, testing the wine. "Marcello's mama started this place back when this side of the city was full of drunks and addicts. To the day she died, she refused to change a thing about it." He glanced at the plate with an affectionate smile. "Emilio is the exact same way. He only let Marcello change the china and linens after some kid they were babysitting broke all the plates and colored in permanent marker on the tablecloths ."

Fascinated, Jay leaned in as Luke looked around for potential eavesdroppers .

"To this day," Luke whispered, "no one has figured out how I got hold of the key to the storage room ."

Shocked laughter tore from Jay's throat like a bandage off a wound he'd forgotten he had. Cupping his hand over his mouth, he tried to stifle the sound, but it was as though all the tension in his body was trying to escape. Fleeing into the air, the sound peeled around the restaurant until it echoed in his ears, blocking everything else .

Warm hands on his back brought him slowly back to reality. There were two plates steaming away on the table, and Mia was watching him out of the corner of her eye from the hostess podium .

"I swear I'm not crazy." He winced as his throat protested and found a fresh glass of cold water pressed into his hand .

"Stress does weird things to people," Luke said, shrugging. The old ladies at the front of the room were pretending that they weren't watching, scraping their forks across empty plates. At least they were getting their money's worth .

"God, I don't want to go back to New York." He didn't realize how true it was until the words were out there in the air. As many

good memories as the lake house held, there were ten times as many dark moments lurking in the corners of the Empire state .

Luke pursed his lips. "If you don't mind commuting in, you could always get a hotel in Jersey or something ."

"That's even worse!" he blurted, his New Yorker soul crying out at the thought. They stared at each other for a moment, then he snorted, loud and embarrassing but so cathartic. "You heathen ."

"I'm from California." Luke grabbed his fork and dug into his plate. "What do I know? Here, try this." He cut off a piece of his lasagna and held it out .

The fork might as well have been a cobra the way Jay's heart slammed against his chest, adrenaline picking across his skin. There was red sauce smeared across Luke's upper lip, and his eyes couldn't decide which threat to focus on. There was no way he was going to be sharing food with Luke Carter. None. It was a terrible idea .

Licking his lips, he leaned forward and carefully wrapped his lips around the fork. Flavors exploded across his tongue, and the moan he made was completely involuntary. When he pried his eyes back open, Luke was staring at him, the air crackling between them .

Jay cleared his throat. "That's amazing ."

"Yeah," Luke said, shifting in his seat. "It is." He set his fork down and picked up his phone. "I should call Marcus back," he said, tapping the screen .

Swallowing hard, Jay nodded. "You do that ."

This was the worst idea he'd ever had .

THE BLUE WAS TOO DARK. Jay slammed his paintbrush into the jar of paint thinner and dragged a hand through his hair, belatedly thinking to check it for smears of color. There was a streak of peeling orange across the crease of his palm, days old and half covered by a tacky layer of white .

The line of canvases drying against the wall told him that he'd been painting for a while, possibly a day or two, but he wasn't tired. Every time he tried to step away from the easel, his mind circled back to the lake house. Sometimes they were waking dreams, ten years ago blending into the now

seamlessly until he swore he could smell cookies under the pervasive reek of the oils .

Other times they were nightmares, his coming court appearance twisted into a horror show of all his insecurities. Only picking up his paintbrush drove everything out of his mind. It wasn't peace, but it was as close as he was going to get .

He added another line of blue to his palette, working it into the globs of mixed color already there with a knife. There were enough drying paintings now that he could see the latest one out of the corner of his eye, and it was taking a lot of concentration to avoid looking at it .

If nothing else, he had a good start on his next show, but the thought of people seeing any of these paintings was making him physically ill. No matter how hard he tried, every picture was just as covered in ghosts as the carnival. There was the mountain meadow, bright and sunny, with a phantom panhandler sitting under the tree as suited specters floated past. Or the glittering beach, sunbathers sprawled on towels inches from the rough hints of the many homeless curled in the shadows of the boardwalk .

And now, the skies of Venice were threatening to storm all over the cheerful gondolas and kissing tourists. Jay loaded a clean brush with paint, trying to blot out the shadow of clouds that he'd put in without realizing. He'd mixed the paint for what might have been hours, but deep in the brush a streak of white, crooked and broken where his hand hesitated in shock, shot across the sky .

He threw the brush across the room .

Pressing his palms against his burning eyes, he forced himself up off his stool to pick it up, only to sway as the world spun. He grunted as the rim of the seat dug into his stomach, the pain steadying him. Breathing through his nose, he waited for the weakness to pass. It took long enough that he dug his phone out with shaky hands and powered it on, shocked to find that it was Saturday .

There was a basket of granola bars and bottled water on his supply table for times like this, and he made his way there slowly. There was a single bottle and two battered granola bars in the bottom. Tearing open one of the granola bars and forcing himself to chew it fully, he tried to convince himself that it was a good sign. It had been full when Luke had awkwardly dropped him off .

Jay groaned, taking a long drink of water. After Luke had called Marcus, getting information on the court date and the name Teddy had found, they had talked about Jay's options in stilted, professional terms. The food had been delicious, but he'd been so self-conscious about every motion that he'd been relieved when the waitress had taken their empty plates .

He needed to focus on the lake house, not worry about whether Luke Carter was watching him with those sexy green eyes of his. The confirmation email for his flight to New York sat uneasily in his inbox, grating on his nerves when he opened the program. He'd booked the flight as soon as Luke had left, afraid he'd chicken out if he didn't .

His flight was scheduled to arrive the night before he was due to appear. He'd been tempted to get a same day flight, but then he'd wondered if he was trying to sabotage himself by being late. He'd even gotten cancellation insurance, and he tried to convince himself that it was because Marcus said the date might be moved up, not because he wanted to change his mind at the last second .

Forwarding the flight information to Marcus, he was still chewing his granola bar slowly when his phone buzzed three times in quick succession .

"I'll pick you up from the airport. —Marcus "

"Do you have a hotel picked out? —Marcus "

"Forget the hotel. I'll take care of it. —Kurt "

Jay smiled, rolling his eyes .

"Does Marcus know that you're tapping his phone? —Jay "

"He loves me. You're staying for the party, right? —Kurt "

"You have to stay for the party. —Kurt "

"Everyone will be there. —Kurt "

He couldn't even type a response as his phone buzzed over and over again .

"Marcus, tell him he has to stay for the party. —Kurt "

"We'd love to have you, but there will be a lot of six-year-olds. —
Marcus "

"There will be cake, and Luke's making cookies! —Kurt "

"Luke will be there? —Jay "

His phone went completely silent. Anxiety knotted his stomach, and he turned back to the half-finished canvas. He'd worry about everything when he got there .

"How was your flight?"

Luke grimaced as he pulled Marcus into a hug, his arm resting easily across the shorter alpha's shoulders. "Long. I still say we should invest in a private jet. We'd get enough use out of it. I'm ready to get back to my room and take a shower ."

Smiling sheepishly, Marcus glanced at his watch. "I'm really sorry about this, but would you mind if we grabbed dinner nearby first? Jay's flight lands in less than two hours ."

Dropping his bag, Luke rubbed his forehead. "I thought his court date was last week ."

Marcus snagged the bag off the ground and got them moving again. "I requested extra time to get in contact with Kowalski." He was more tan than the last time that Luke had seen him, the summer sun still showing in the lighter streaks in his dirty blond hair .

"You did find him, though, right?" Letting himself be hustled along, Luke ran through their options if the executor wasn't available .

"Not exactly," Marcus said, steering them toward his car. "Stan Kowalski died two years ago." Before Luke could do more than groan, he continued, "I did, however, get in touch with his daughter, Piper Kowalski-Reyes. She took over her father's practice, and she's been very helpful ."

"That's great," Luke said. It was only when he noticed Marcus watching him that he realized how enthusiastic he had been.

"I hate losing a case. Even if it's just one that I assisted on ."

Marcus hummed, climbing into his old Jeep with a smug smile. "Whatever helps you sleep at night," he said as he started the car .

"Shut up and feed me," Luke grumbled, pulling on his seatbelt .

"Aye, aye, Captain !"

Luke had never expected to find a family when he joined Sigma Alpha Omega. He'd applied because the house was off campus, and after the second holiday he'd been stranded when the dorm's closed, he'd had enough. He'd heard dozens of horror stories about hazing and evil upperclassmen from people while he was waiting to hear if he'd been accepted. He'd prepared himself for keeping his head down and hating at least one member of the frat .

What he'd gotten had far surpassed his expectations. All of his brothers were great. Even Cody, the most standoffish, was loyal and funny once you got past the inferiority complex. His favorite thing was how each of them offered something different, so it didn't matter if you needed smarts, sympathy, or just another body for ultimate Frisbee, there was someone there .

Marcus had been president for most of Luke's time in Sigma Alpha Omega, calm and mature without being a killjoy. He was the most nurturing of the brothers, and they'd always joked that he'd make someone a great mom someday. He was also the only one who was just as much of a foodie as Luke himself .

"You have to try the potatoes," Marcus said as they sat down in the corner of a tiny bar. It was less than ten minutes from the airport, but it may as well have been worlds away. The decor was yellowed with age, but the seats were comfortable and the scents from the kitchen that washed over them every time the door opened were incredible .

Luke scanned the menu. It was simple but hearty, and his stomach growled as he read the descriptions. "How have I never been here before ?"

Laughing, Marcus shrugged. "It just reopened recently. The original owner's grandson runs the place." He sipped from his water glass, watching Luke over the rim. "How have you been ?"

"Fine." He folded his menu and set it down to one side, hoping to draw the waitress back. "Everything is fine ."

"You didn't have any trouble getting the time off ?"

Luke rolled his eyes. "No, Mom. My last two cases settled out of court, and it's getting to be the holiday season, so nobody's filing new lawsuits ."

"I guess that's something." The lines at the edge of his mouth, when he flashed Luke a wry smile, were deeper than the last time they'd seen each other .

Guilt prickled across Luke's skin. After Liam, he had stopped leaving his condo for anything but work, and he'd missed more of the monthly dinners than he'd made it to in the last couple years .

"Sorry," he said, sighing heavily. There was tension in his shoulders that he couldn't shake, but he tried to relax and enjoy the moment. "I'm sorry for disappearing on you guys ."

Marcus pursed his lips, patting Luke on the hand. "We understand. Although, I hope you're planning on making a lot of cookies. Kris won't talk about anything but how you owe him a million for his birthday ."

Laughter burst out of him, and he settled more deeply into his seat. "I don't know about a million, but I can definitely get a couple dozen made by tomorrow ."

"Will you need help? Kurt is at a business meeting, but he'll be at the guest house tonight ."

Luke snorted. "He'll eat more than he makes ."

Marcus raised his glass in agreement, but before he could say anything, the waitress made it over to their table to take their orders .

"If you need someone to keep Kurt out of the kitchen, I'm sure Jay would be willing to keep him occupied," Marcus said after the waitress had walked away. He looked a little too nonchalant, raising his eyebrow when Luke glared at him. "It's just a suggestion. I don't remember if Jay is any good at baking ."

Reluctantly, Luke nodded. "He's good at following directions." He felt a smile crease his lips even though he tried to hold it back. "He only steals the broken cookies ."

Taking another sip of water, Marcus watched him quietly for long enough that Luke couldn't help but fidget. "So he's baked with you

before ?"

It was an open-ended question, not pushy or demanding the way that Kurt or Cody would be. He wasn't expecting an answer, and if Luke chose not to give one, the subject would be dropped .

"You know me when I can't sleep." He tried to make it joking, but his voice cracked on the last word. That should have been the end of it, but Luke couldn't stop himself from filling the silence. "I stayed a couple weeks at his family's lake house the summer after you graduated ."

"Ah."

"Dad was on some last minute couple's thing in the Caribbean, and Uncle Robert was in Hong Kong on business. I was going to go home with Kurt, but he had that cruise." Luke took a sip of water, trying to stop the flow of words before he said anything he'd regret .

"I remember that. They went to Europe, and Marizza and Venice got food poisoning." His voice was so bland, so nonjudgmental, that it dragged the story out of Luke like a magnet .

"His stepdad is a grade A creep, and he kept putting Jay down for painting instead of taking summer classes. I almost punched him twice in the first day," he said, details that he'd forgotten popping into his head as he spoke. "First Dad and then this guy, and I was just angry at everything. The cook caught me wandering around in the middle of the night, and she gave me permission to use the kitchen as much as I wanted ."

Marcus smiled. "Did you leave them any flour ?"

"Not as much as I should have," Luke said, heat creeping up his neck when Marcus chuckled. "I guess Jay's schedule was out of whack because of his painting. He smelled the cookies and came down like a starving bear." Grinning at the thought, he gestured broadly, almost hitting the waitress as she set down their tray of food. "Sorry ."

"I can't take you anywhere," Marcus teased as she assured him it was fine .

They were silent for a moment, each of them digging into their food. The potatoes were just as spectacular as Luke had hoped, and he sighed contentedly as he stuffed another piece into his mouth .

"Speaking of starving bears," Marcus said a few minutes later, looking pointedly at Luke's half empty plate. "Don't you feed

yourself in California ?"

"My flight was delayed six hours in Chicago, remember?"
he said with his mouth full .

"That's disgusting ."

Luke grinned. "Seriously, though. I've never seen anyone put
away as much food as that night ."

Marcus narrowed his eyes skeptically. "Not even Kurt ?"

"Not even Kurt. Jay tore through an entire container of cookies
before he even noticed I was there." He laughed when the other alpha
still didn't look convinced. "I'm serious. Ask him sometime. I had to
be careful not to put the fresh trays next to him because he refused to wait
for them to cool ."

"I thought he only eats the broken ones ?"

"Usually, he does. He was so embarrassed when he realized what
he'd done that he refused to take any more cookies. He helped me bake all
week, and he only ate the ones that didn't turn out." Luke's smile
faltered when he saw the way Marcus was watching him. "Whatever
you're thinking, no ."

"It just seems like you got along well," he replied mildly .

Staring at his plate, he pushed a piece of green onion around in the
remains of his potatoes. "We did." Marcus opened his mouth,
but Luke didn't let him ask. "His parents kicked me out after his
stepdad caught us naked in the boathouse ."

Marcus stared at him, eyes wide. It was obvious he hadn't been
expecting that. "I'm sorry ."

Luke laughed, louder and sharper than he'd intended. "I got off
easy. I just had to walk to town in the rain. Victor Danville disowned Jay
."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, their food getting cold as they
picked at it. "Well," Marcus said finally, his voice sympathetic
but entirely devoid of pity, "this calls for drinks ."

"I 'M GOING TO PUKE."

Against his better judgment, Luke peeked around the edge of his door. Jay was standing in the living room of the condo that the brothers kept as a guest house for visits to New York. He kept fussing with his collar in the mirror, his hands shaky. He was so frazzled that he didn't seem to notice that the collar wouldn't lay flat because he'd skipped a button on his shirt, and even at a distance, it was easy to see the beads of sweat on his brow .

"You'll be fine," Marcus said, turning the omega around to fix the buttons on his shirt. "This is a formality. Piper will do all the talking, and you just stand there and focus on not passing out ."

"I can still make you a martini," Kurt said. He was curled up on the couch with a phone in one hand and his account ledger in the other .

"No, you can't." Marcus smoothed his hands down the shoulders of Jay's shirt. "Ignore him ."

Kurt rolled his eyes, and Luke ducked back behind his door a second too late. "There are snickerdoodles in the kitchen," he said pointedly, still staring at the doorway when Luke peeked again .

"Those are for the party," he said firmly. He felt bad when Jay almost jumped out of his skin .

They hadn't spoken more than a few words since Jay had gotten into the car last night. Even though Jay's light had been on at 3 a.m. when Luke put the last batch of cookies in the oven, the omega hadn't come out .

"Kris wouldn't mind sharing a couple cookies with Jay," Kurt insisted, and Luke's eyebrows crept up to his hairline .

"Have you met Kristoff? He'd sell me his older brother for a chocolate chip cookie." Padding into the kitchen on bare feet, Luke pulled down the container of cookies he'd hidden inside a casserole dish. "Fortunately, I may have made a few extra ."

"Yes!" Kurt shot to his feet, and Luke pinned him with a glare .

"Not for you." Ignoring the dramatic whining that erupted, he held the plastic bin out to Jay. "Double chocolate chunk," he said, turning to stare out the window. It was raining, big drops rolling down the glass and making the whole city look miserable .

He could feel eyes on him, but he ignored them all, tearing angrily into the cookie he'd grabbed for himself .

"Thanks," Jay said quietly .

"Today is going to be fine," Luke told the window.
"Just ignore your stepdad and listen to your lawyer ."

"You're my lawyer ."

Luke's head snapped around so fast that his neck popped, but Jay was staring out the windows, his teeth digging into his lower lip .

"I'm going to go finish getting ready," Marcus said loudly.
"We'll head out in ten minutes." He grabbed Kurt by the arm and dragged him to his feet .

"You're already ready to go," Kurt muttered as he followed along, grabbing a cookie on the way past .

"Shut up, Kurt ."

The longer the silence stretched, the more tempting it was for Luke to retreat back into his room. The air was so charged that all his hair was standing on end, his lizard brain telling him to get under cover before he got struck by lightning .

"I..." He cleared his throat and tried again. "I'm not licensed in New York," he said. He could feel the offer to go to the court date welling up in his throat, and he stuffed another cookie in his mouth to keep it from escaping .

"I know," Jay said, picking at the edges of his cookie until a small pile of crumbs formed between his feet. "I just... I don't know anything about law, so I just have to blindly trust this stranger. I wish it was you." He didn't appear to notice what he was saying, sighing heavily.
"Do you remember the boathouse ?"

Luke choked on a chocolate chip. "Yes," he managed to squeak .

"Victor tore it down." He glanced over out of the corner of his eye, long lashes shielding the flash of blue. "We fought all summer about college and my future. He wanted me to finish off my business degree and give up my art. Said it wasn't profitable. He wasn't about to have a son who couldn't buy his own country club membership ."

He walked over to the window, his voice getting fainter until Luke had to follow him to hear the rest of the sentence. "I sold a painting to one of Mom's friends. Six hundred dollars," he said with a sour laugh.
"I was so proud. 'Look at this,' I told him. 'I can support myself with my art.' He tore the shed down the next day ."

Luke ground his teeth, his fists clenching as he imagined planting one in Victor Danville's face. "I'm sorry."

"When I get the house back," he said, his voice distant as if he had forgotten Luke was there, "I'm going to build it again. This time, though, I'm putting in a south-facing window."

He didn't mean to laugh. It was the window that did it. Jay had related the whole story without getting upset, but he sounded so viciously offended when he mentioned that stupid window. Luke had heard hundreds of rants from Liam against rooms with north-facing windows, and he couldn't help it. The laugh caught them both by surprise, bouncing loudly around the empty room as Jay stared at him in surprise.

"Every window can't face south," he said, shaking his head.

Sticking his nose in the air, Jay sniffed. "Says you."

"Unless you want to set up camp at the North Pole and sling presents for the fat guy," he said, offering the omega another cookie, "then you're going to have at least a few rooms with a northern exposure. It's just a fact of life."

"You can have those rooms," Jay said, grabbing a cookie in each hand. "I'll take the ones with the decent light."

Luke stuck his tongue out. "How magnanimous of you."

"Big word," Jay said around a mouthful of cookie. "You must be angling for a raise."

"Oh, shut up." Luke ducked his head to hide his smile as Marcus and Kurt clattered loudly around the corner.

"Sorry to interrupt," Marcus said, "but we're going to be late if we don't leave now."

"Shit." All the tension rushed back into Jay's shoulders, and his cheeks paled to a sickly green.

In slow motion, Luke watched from outside himself as those big blue eyes turned to stare at him, terror swirling in their depths. He could feel a bad decision welling up in the back of his throat, and he tried to stall by chewing his cookie slower. It was like his body had been taken over by an outside force. "Let me grab my shoes," he said lightly, his voice echoing from a long way off. "I'll come with you."

The grateful look that Jay flashed him made something warm light up in his chest, and he cursed himself for a fool all the way to his room, his arms and legs moving without conscious thought. Marcus looked away pointedly

as he passed, hiding a grin behind his hand. Kurt, on the other hand, never content with subtlety, smirked openly as Luke joined them .

He didn't stop smirking until they got to the courthouse .

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"I'm seriously going to puke." Jay tipped his head back, pacing across the marble floor of the courtroom's antechamber .

"You're fine," Luke said, catching him by the arm. "Just breathe ."

"Why isn't she here yet? What if she doesn't show up?" The woman he was trusting with his only hope of saving the lake house was over half an hour late .

"She's on her way. She called Marcus a few minutes ago." Big hands stroked up and down his arms, and against his will, Jay found himself breathing in time .

"I didn't know that," he said when he could get words past his dry throat. He felt like he was going to fall apart at any moment, full of optimistic energy one second and desperately wishing he could drink himself into oblivion the next .

Luke chuckled, a puff of warm, chocolate-scented breath flowing over Jay's face. "You were in the bathroom. She was fifteen minutes out, so she should be here any minute ."

"I'm sorry I'm such a wreck," he blurted, suddenly seized by the urge to throw himself into the alpha's arms and hide from everything. "I'm not usually this... dramatic ."

It was unfair how model-perfect Luke looked when he smiled. Jay dragged his eyes away from his soft-looking lips and tried to focus .

"Actually," Luke said, "I have it on good authority that you're a huge drama queen ."

For a moment, Jay was hurt. Luke looked so pleased with himself that Jay paused. He'd never known the other man to be needlessly cruel. It only took a moment for it to dawn on him. "Hey!" He punched Luke on the shoulder, popping his knuckles and making him laugh and catch at Jay's hands .

He was so close that Luke's warm, sweet scent filled his nose, half baking cookies and half masculine musk. Those green eyes were swirling with heat, scorching as they dropped to Jay's lips, and he wanted nothing more than to lean up on his toes and see if kissing him was as good as he remembered .

"Sorry, I'm late ."

Jay bit back a curse as Luke jumped back like he'd been burned. The woman who ran up to them was pretty, if a little frazzled, and she shook their hands confidently .

"I always forget how much I hate driving in the city," she said. "It's nice to meet you finally, Mr. Collins ."

Somewhere deep in the expansive court building, a clock chimed the hour, and all the anxiety he'd managed to set aside rushed back .

"Breathe, Jay." The soothing heat of Luke's hand on his shoulder melted away some of the tension. "You're going to be fine ."

The woman, Piper, was watching him. "I've dealt with cases like this a dozen times before," she told him gently. "I'm not going to be caught off guard ."

"I might be." He tried to force a smile, but it didn't feel like he succeeded .

"We're up next ."

Jay cursed, his voice echoing across the marble, as Marcus appeared next to him. His only consolation was that Luke had been just as startled. He was trying to pull himself together enough to tease Luke about it when four men in tailored suits rounded the corner .

"I can't do this," he whispered, watching them approach, their long strides confidently eating up the ground. They were all alphas, six feet tall if they were an inch, and clearly chosen to be intimidating .

"Yes, you can." Luke stepped forward so that all Jay could see were his broad shoulders. "You ignore everything but the judge,

you hear me? Don't look at them, don't talk to them, and definitely don't let them provoke you ."

"Maybe he should sit this out?" Piper said when Jay swayed a little. She eased him down to sit on a nearby bench, making sure to keep him from having to look at anything but Luke's suit. "Meatheads like that don't scare me ."

Staring up at Luke's eyes, Jay wondered what had happened to his green canvas. It had been sold that first week, and once the ecstatic feeling of success had worn off, he'd been sad to see it go. He'd never admit it out loud, but it was the best effort he'd ever made at recreating the vibrant shades of Luke's eyes that night in the boathouse. The color had plagued his dreams for months, years, even, and every so often he had to make another go at exorcising the memories. There was more jade than emerald in the green today, and his fingers itched for paint .

"Do you want to sit this out?" Marcus asked .

"You can do this," Luke said, his voice so soft that Jay was willing to bet that even Marcus hadn't heard .

Everyone was staring at him. Behind the screen of bodies blocking his view, someone cleared their throat loudly, and Jay automatically straightened his back. "No," he said, even as he fought the urge to hide in the warm folds of Luke's jacket. "I didn't come all the way back here to chicken out at the last second ."

Sticking his nose in the air, he marched into the courtroom, following Luke's advice and completely ignoring the men who crowded in after him. It was harder to ignore the warm feeling in his chest at the pride on the alpha's face .

The first few minutes were a blur of introductions, he was so focused on keeping his breathing even that it barely registered. The judge was a younger man, friendly and approachable despite the dark circles under his eyes. He made a brief speech that Jay didn't catch a word of and then settled into his seat .

"Your Honor," Piper said when everyone looked at her expectantly, "we would like to allow the opposition to present their case first ."

Jay's heart skipped a beat, and instinctively, he turned to Luke for reassurance. Seated a few rows back, the alpha winked at him. It loosened the knot in his chest enough for him to breathe .

He wasn't surprised that his stepfather's lawyers were slick, or that they loved to hear themselves talk. Their opening salvo lasted almost an hour, and by the time they were done handing in a dozen cases of precedent and going in circles around the point, Jay had forgotten what the question was .

Piper didn't look impressed, and as the four lawyers took their seats, she got to her feet with a yawn. "My colleagues make an excellent case, your honor," she said, her voice dry. "However, they've neglected to mention that their client is in no way related to the property in question. Jack Collins died two decades ago and left the property to his son, not his wife, and the will was not disputed ."

The judge sat up a little straighter, looking like he wanted to yawn as well. "Is that true?" he asked the other group .

"Your honor, in her grief, Mrs. Collins never considered challenging the will. She was never advised that she couldn't use the property, and thus, never realized that it wasn't part of her husband's legacy." The lead lawyer smiled like a shark. "No one could blame a widow for being too shaken to consider such things ."

Jay wanted to snort. His mother had willfully ignored everything having to do with his father's death. It was one of the reasons that his father had left Aunt Carol in charge of just about everything. Victor, on the other hand, hadn't wasted any time taking back his mother's finances when they were married. He would have been well aware that the lake house didn't belong to his wife .

The judge nodded slowly. "The court will allow that it is understandable that the will wasn't challenged at the time. However, it's been twenty years ."

Spreading his hands wide, the man chuckled. "The subject was never raised, your honor. With the death of Carol Collins, there was no one else with a claim on the house ."

He bit his lip until he tasted blood, rage boiling under his skin. The judge was nodding again, the lines between his brows getting deeper with every agreement .

"Jay Collins has a claim on the house," Piper said pointedly .

"Mr. Collins has been separated from his family for ten years," the lawyer snapped. "His family wasn't even aware he was alive ."

That time, Jay did snort. Piper rested a hand on his shoulder, smiling reassuringly .

“Be that as it may, my client is the rightful owner of the property in question, and your client has no right to place the house up for sale.” She shuffled through her papers, pulling out a copy of the real estate flyer. Her heels clicked loudly across the floor as she walked up to hand it to the judge .

“My client had every reason to believe that they were the rightful owner,” the lawyer said, biting off each word .

“Belief does not make reality, counselor,” the judge said, his mouth twitching. “If that were the case, I believe we'd all be on a beach somewhere .”

“There is a precedent for a reasonable expectation of inheritance in the case of property,” one of the younger men said. “Vickers v Michaelson, 1994 .”

“In that case, the suit was a dispute over the distribution of sale profits. My client has no wish for the house to be sold at all.” Piper flipped through her little stack of papers again, tapping her fingers against a rubber-banded packet of wrinkled pages, edges worn from time .

“The sale has already been completed,” one of the lawyers said .

Jay didn't hear anything else that he said, his blood rushing in his ears until his vision went gray around the edges. He was too late .

Sharp fingernails digging into his shoulder dragged him back to the moment .

“...in escrow, your honor. The Danvilles have had a month's notice to pull the home off the market and disclose the pending legal action.” Piper leaned against him, sparing him glances out of the corner of her eye as she read information off one of the pages of her notebook .

“An absurd and pointless waste of time for my client. They have occupied the house more than 100 days each year since the death of Mr. Collins. They have maintained the property and kept it in repair as owners.” Two of the lawyers were packing up their files, not bothering to hide the triumphant smiles on their faces. “The only question that remains is whether or not Jay Collins is owed a share of the sale, which we continue to maintain that he is not .”

The judge frowned, flipping through a stack of papers in front of him. "Counselor?" He glanced at Piper, one eyebrow raised .

"Your honor, if I may have a moment with my client ."

Jay's heart dropped into his shoes. He wasn't going to win .

The judge held up the papers in front of him and nodded. "Ten minute recess ."

His stepfather's lawyers leaned nonchalantly in their seats, the very picture of victory. Jay let Piper lead him out of the room in a daze .

"I don't think he's hearing a word that I'm saying," someone said from a long way off .

"Let me try." Two points of warmth burned their way across his skin. When had he gotten so cold? "Jay, can you hear me? Breathe. Can you go get some coffee or something? He's freezing ."

"Luke?" The word slurred into a moan when his numb lips wouldn't cooperate .

"That's right. Focus on me and just breathe ."

"They sold my house," he said. Somewhere under his numbness, anger welled up sharp and red .

"We're not going to let them sell your house, sweetheart." Something burning hot touched his hand. It took long seconds for the pain to register, and he jerked his hand back belatedly. "It's coffee. Just hold it for a second ."

"They won. I thought you said they didn't have much chance of winning." He stuffed his hands under his arms instead of taking the scalding hot cup from Luke's hand. Everything was hazy, but he could see the exasperated look that Luke gave him .

"And to think, I thought you were joking about being a drama queen," he muttered .

That filtered through faster than the heat had, and he punched the fuzzy curve of Luke's shoulder. "Shut up, asshole. I'm never telling you any of my secrets, ever again." Reluctantly, he took a deep breath, dragging himself back into reality. "What are my options ?"

"Well," Luke said, trying to force the coffee on him, "you could have a little faith and stop giving up so easily ."

Pouting at the rebuke, Jay grabbed the coffee and downed half of it in one go. It was hot, but not scalding, and it made him realize how chilled his limbs were. "I'm not giving up," he snapped .

Luke just hummed. "Piper has a way to shut them down once and for all, but she didn't want to bring it out without your approval."

Jay gaped at him. "You mean we could have been out of here already? What is she waiting for? I approve."

"You should probably hear what it is first," Luke said, rubbing his hands up and down Jay's arm. "It's not going to be pretty, and once this goes on the record, you can't take it back."

"I don't care," Jay said, shivering as the heat of the alpha's hand raised goosebumps on his arm.

"Jay." He leaned in, tiny lines flaring around his mouth from tension. "It has to do with your aunt."

"Aunt Carol?" Jay swallowed hard, turning away from Luke's concerned gaze.

He'd been nine years old when his mother had started sending him to 'visit Aunt Carol,' overnight visits turning into weeks as she realized she didn't fight with her boyfriends as much without him tagging along after her. He'd gotten occasional visits and phone calls, like the one after she'd gotten back from her engagement party, introducing him to Victor for the first time, but it wasn't until Carol had been diagnosed with cancer that he'd spent any real time with her again.

Carol Collins had been in her mid-twenties when her brother had died overseas. The first time Jay had landed on her doorstep, she'd been hungover, a half-dressed man sidling out the door as Jay dragged his suitcases inside. It had been the last time he'd ever noticed her have anyone over, but she hadn't held it against him. Instead of parties, they'd had game night, and a smoothie bar had replaced the vodka. She'd been everything that he'd ever needed, knowing when to be a friend and when to pull the grown-up card.

Which wasn't to say she was a saint. He was well aware that she had a temper and cursed like a sailor. He knew how to start a bar fight in six languages thanks to her, and he could only ask for the bathroom in five.

"How bad is it?" he asked, aware that Piper was hovering just out of earshot.

Luke sighed. "There are letters. I haven't seen them myself, but she wrote Victor a lot while she was doing chemo. Piper can explain better about them."

"You know something, though," he said, watching the way Luke smoothed down his tie .

"I don't, actually," he said with a strangled smile. "Piper is a professional, and it's none of my business. I've seen a lot of cases, though, and the things that come out... It can be ugly ."

"It won't be," Jay said. "Not about Aunt Carol. Not anything I don't know already." He squared his shoulders and waved his lawyer back over. "What's in the letters ?"

Piper glanced at Luke, and he started to shuffle back, but Jay clung to his arm like a leech. "If you're sure," she said. Jay nodded, his throat too tight to manage words, and she handed him the rubber-band wrapped stack of papers. "These are letters from your stepfather to Miss Collins after you left her care." She gave the stack a disgusted look. "There's no way to know what her responses were, but there's enough here to get a good idea. The first few are friendly, normal letters responding to her questions about your health. Toward the end, though, there are a lot of demands. He even put them on his company letterhead to be more intimidating ."

"He liked to try to intimidate her," Jay said distractedly, flipping through the stack. "What demands ?"

"Money, mostly. But there are repeated reminders that the family was going to be at the lake house and that he expected it to be set up to his requirements, or your visit to her might be mysteriously canceled." Piper's lips twisted like she'd eaten a lemon. "There are a couple letters there from your mother as well, mostly begging for her to cooperate with Victor ."

"Sounds about right," Jay said bitterly. He shoved the stack back into her hands. "I'm not sure why I should care about any of this getting out ."

Piper sighed, straightening the cuffs of her blouse. "About halfway through, there are a few... implications." She shook her head when he opened his mouth to ask. "He makes it fairly clear that he was having an affair with your aunt ."

"No." Jay shook his head. "Not possible. Aunt Carol hated Victor." Piper opened her mouth, and he held up his hand. "She wouldn't have done that to Mom. Whatever is in those letters, it's a bunch of bullshit. Do whatever you have to with them ."

She looked at him, her jaw set. "Alright." Turning on her heel, she walked back into the courtroom .

Luke turned to follow her, pausing when he realized that Jay wasn't following, his eyes heavy on Jay's skin. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not even a little bit," Jay said, laughing bitterly. "There's nothing to talk about. She wouldn't do it. She hated him from day one ."

"Okay." He urged Jay over to a bench, sitting down next to him. Opening his mouth like he was going to say more, he closed it with a click .

It wasn't an awkward silence, despite the hundreds of thoughts whirling in Jay's head. The heat coming from the alpha's body was comforting, and he let the warmth sink into him until he relaxed with a deep sigh .

Back at the lake house, they had been exactly the same. Neither of them had said much the first few days, enjoying each other's company quietly as they unwound from the stresses of finals and school. There hadn't been any pressure to come up with topics .

On the late nights making cookies, it was like the floodgates had opened up. They'd talked about everything from aliens to favorite vacations. By the time they'd gone to the carnival, and then the boathouse, Jay had been head over heels .

"You know what the worst part about that whole summer was? At the time, anyway." Jay asked, remembering all the things he had wished for the courage to say in the days after everything went to hell. "It wasn't the shouting or the fact that I was grounded for life. It wasn't even the fact that he kicked you out, although," he added when Luke shot him a dirty look, "to be fair, I forgot that you didn't know the area or any of the shortcuts ."

"Enlighten me," Luke said dryly. "What did eighteen-year-old Jay regret the most about getting caught with his pants down ?"

Jay turned to look at him, tracing the remains of the boy he'd known in the face of the man in front of him. The differences were subtle, but they added up to someone different and new, and Luke was just as head over heels for him. "The lighting was so bad, I didn't get to see you naked." He watched through his lashes as Luke's eyes went dark and

hungry, dropping to Jay's lips. Jay licked his own lips, his heart pounding in his ears as he leaned forward just a hair .

"Good news, guys ."

Jay jumped a good foot and almost fell off the bench as Piper rounded the corner at top speed. "The judge threw out your stepfather's claim and put a halt to the sale of the house." She glanced at them curiously, her wide smile fading a little as the tension of the moment caught up with her. "Two weeks for processing and the house is yours. I'll get you the rest of the inheritance paperwork by the end of the day ."

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"Kristoff James, get off that right this instant. Next year, I'm having the birthday party at a zoo or something. At least they have facilities for all these animals there. Nate, get your brother off that, or nobody is getting any cookies !"

Luke watched Greg grump and grumble as he settled into the chair across from his husband. "I was surprised you guys decided to do this at home after the Great Nate Disaster of 2012," he said, watching a whole herd of six-year-olds run at top speed through the big suburban backyard. Greg had done wonders with the place since the last time he'd been there, and there were patches of greenery still fighting to squeak a few more growing days out of the coming winter .

Greg groaned. "Don't remind me. I wanted to go to one of those trampoline places, let the kids wear themselves out. I was outvoted." He glared at Brendan across the table .

Holding his hands up in surrender, the doctor grinned. "I have learned my lesson ."

"I blame Nate," Greg said, ignoring his alpha's amused snort. "He had a sleepover a few months ago, and Kris won't shut up about it. We told him he's too little for an overnight party, but he still insisted we have it here. I'm just sorry to put the rest of you through this ."

"You know we don't mind," Luke said. The birthday boy had gotten over his frustration at not being allowed to climb onto the table with the presents and instead decided to start a game of tag. Beginning with

Jay. Biting back a laugh, he watched as the omega stared at the children with a deer in the headlights expression. "I think we all consider it practice for when we have our own."

"I should go rescue him," Greg said, propping his feet in Brendan's lap. Well trained by years of marriage to the dancer, the alpha immediately started rubbing them.

"He'll be fine. Nate will save him if it comes to that." Brendan winked at Luke when he raised a skeptical eyebrow. The oldest of the frat brothers, Brendan had gotten more playful with the birth of each of his sons.

"You're a terrible host," Greg muttered. "My mama would never approve."

"Sweetheart," Brendan said, leaning in for a kiss, "the only time I consider things worth doing is if your mama wouldn't approve." Greg stuck his tongue out, and Brendan leaned in to nip at it, and when it became clear that they weren't coming up for air any time soon, Luke got to his feet.

"I'm going to go get some more punch," he said loudly, but neither man even glanced up.

Rolling his eyes, he padded across the lawn. What would it be like to still be so in love after all those years? He'd seen so many marriages that were awful or crumbled under the slightest pressure. It was hard for his brain to process.

The guys were all there, even Cody dragging his sorry ass in from some overseas assignment. They'd claimed a big table on the other side of the patio, crowding seven chairs into a space meant for five. Nikolai didn't mind at all, practically sitting in Cody's lap. The omega looked exhausted, but not so much that he didn't firmly turn down the Russian's offer of a lap to sleep on. While Kurt and Marcus talked about the brother's investment portfolios, Teddy fiddled with a model that he and Nate had been putting together.

"Uncle Luke, you're it!" Kristoff ran by, slapping a sugary hand on Luke's knee and leaving a sticky patch on his jeans.

Luke looked from the smear of chocolate and grass to the little boy currently giggling at him through the bars of a chair. Frowning, he huffed and puffed, flexing his arms and shoulders to make himself look bigger.

"I'm going to get you," he roared, chasing after the kids with big, exaggerated steps .

Six-year-olds scattered ahead of him, shrieking at a pitch that made his teeth ache. He shambled after them, grabbing one that was a heartbeat too slow and swinging them upside down as he nibbled on their fingers. The little boy screamed with laughter, his fine blond hair making him look like a dandelion .

"Me next, Uncle Luke. Do me next!" Kris popped out from behind one of the tables, hopping anxiously with his arms raised. "It's my birthday. I want a turn ."

"Don't whine," Nate muttered, shuffling by with a glass of soda held carefully over the heads of all the kids .

Luke dutifully leaned down, setting the blond boy on his feet and grabbing Kris by the seat of his pants. "Look what I found," he growled, blowing a raspberry on the soft skin where his shirt rode up, "a tasty snack ."

Nate rolled his eyes, the ten-year-old too cool for the screaming enthusiasm of the younger kids. He wound his way through the crowd, joining Jay in the far corner. Luke watched him hand over the drink and then prop himself up in the corner nearby with a book, subtly shooing away a pair of kids who tried to use Jay as a climbing tree .

Hiding a smile as he gnawed on another child's arm, hoisting two more up to dangle from his elbows, Luke allowed himself a brief moment to feel old. He could remember when Greg got pregnant, and now Nate was turning into an excellent alpha with all his Dad's protective instincts .

Keeping up with a herd of children was a better workout than any gym he'd ever been to, and he was worn out within half an hour, flopped on the grass as the kids crawled all over him. He could hear the guys laughing at him in the distance, and he flipped them off over the top of Kris's head as the little boy dove onto his stomach with all his weight .

"Who wants cake ?"

He could have kissed Greg when the kids all ran screaming for their seats, Kris at the head of the line screaming "Cookies!" at the top of his lungs. Laying in place for a moment to catch his breath, he tried to work up the motivation to get off the grass .

"You look like you've been to war," Jay said, crouching down next to him .

Luke laughed. "I feel that way." Rolling to his feet, he let the omega drag him upright. There were grass stains all over his shirt and jeans, and when he ran his hand through his hair, a wave of dead leaf fragments drifted down .

"You've got a..." Jay motioned to the side of his head and scrunched his nose. "I think it's a lollipop ."

"Fuck." Luke put his hands to his temple, and they came away sticky. "Great," he groaned. "This is going to take forever to get out ."

"At least it's not gum." Jay grabbed his arm, herding him toward the house. "Do you know where the bathroom is ?"

"First door to the left of the entrance. Save me some cake," he said to Teddy and Marcus as they passed their table. Cody was asleep, propped up on Teddy's shoulder, not even stirring when one of the little girls screamed about not getting a corner piece. Nikolai's jacket was tucked around him carefully .

"That's a good look on you. It goes with the whole grass-chic that you've got going on," Kurt said, laughing until Teddy put an elbow in his ribs .

"Do you want any cake, Jay?" he asked politely, his voice pitched softly despite the fact that Cody could probably sleep through a bomb going off .

"Yes, please," Jay replied, shoving Luke ahead of him through the doors. "Stop touching it, you're just making it worse ."

Luke jerked his hand away from the sticky mess in his hair, guiltily trying to wipe the sugar off on his jeans. "It itches ."

"Seriously?" Pausing in the middle of the living room, Jay rolled his eyes. "You're being a baby ."

Nate stuck his head around the door and rattled off a familiar phrase in Russian, grinning big enough to show the gap where he'd recently lost one of his teeth .

"I am not being a cabbage," Luke said, sticking his nose in the air. He marched past Jay, taking refuge in the calm quiet of the front bathroom. It had been cleaned up for the party, but there was a bag of bath toys hanging in the shower. The tiles that Nate had scribbled on in permanent marker had never been the same, either .

Teddy had done most of the renovations, using the house as a thesis project for his architectural degree back when Nate was in kindergarten. All the guys had flown out to help, and Luke had installed the built-in vanities, fresh from Uncle Robert's warehouse. He rested his hand on the scarred surface as the water warmed up. He'd have to get someone in to refinish them soon .

"Why did that kid call you a cabbage?" Jay asked, leaning in the doorway his nose crinkled in confusion. "Was that Russian ?"

Luke laughed. "I forgot that you've never met Greg. It's a Russian insult. A very childish Russian insult. Greg's mother came over from Moscow before he was born, and both the boys speak Russian. Nikolai practices with them ."

"That's impressive," Jay said. "Stop picking at that ."

"Yes, Mom," Luke said, peeling his hand away from the lollipop with a disgusting squelching noise. He ran his hand under the water, satisfied that it was warm enough .

"Don't just dunk your head in there ."

Frozen halfway to the faucet, Luke turned to look at the omega. "Why not ?"

Rolling his eyes, Jay grabbed the no-tears shampoo out of the shower. "Because it will take a million years to get that thing out of your hair if you do it that way. Hold still ."

"Since when are you an expert at this?" he asked. Cold hands shoved his head aside to get to the water, and he grumbled .

"You'd be amazed at the places you get candy stuck if you spend enough time at a carnival." He said it idly, but there was something dark underneath it .

Luke swallowed, clearing his throat and hoping that Jay would just chalk it up to the awkward position. "Oh ?"

For a moment, it seemed like Jay wasn't going to answer, small, nimble hands winding their way into his hair. The smell of the shampoo mixed with something sweet washed over him every time he moved .

"We were always traveling, you know?" His voice was steady but so quiet that Luke could barely hear it over the rush of the water. "It was like being a retail worker at some fast food chain, but worse

because you're not a neighbor or someone's kid. You're an outsider, and even if they're happy to come and enjoy the games and rides, they don't want you there. I had kids throw food at me while their parents watched. Parents spit in my face because their kid didn't win a game. One lady, I remember because we had to call the police, she beat the snot out of one of the kids working the Ferris Wheel because she didn't think the ride was long enough. Duck your head a little more ."

Warm water and suds flowed over Luke's cheek, and he had to squeeze his eyes shut as some trailing bits headed for his nose. Casting about for something to say, he muttered, "That sucks," and ended up with shampoo in his mouth. "Oh, yuck ."

Those soft fingers cupped his cheek, turning his head so that he wouldn't get more soap anywhere sensitive. Jay was stronger than he remembered, holding him in place even as he tried to lift up so he could wipe his mouth. "Stop flailing ."

Luke gave in with a grumble. "How long were you with the carnival?" he asked, smacking his lips and wishing for some mouthwash. There was no answer, and he tried to turn his head again, earning himself a vicious yank as the lollipop tried to remove a patch of hair. "Ow ."

"I tried to warn you," Jay said. "I was with them for a little over two years. I saved up enough money for paint supplies and a studio, and when they headed back east for the third time, I stayed." There was another wash of water, a chunk of glistening sugar candy chiming as it fell into the sink. "There. Let me rinse all this soap out, and you'll be good as new ."

"Is that why you don't like kids? So many years of dealing with them all hyped up on candy?" He hadn't realized he was going to ask until the words were out, and he almost bit his tongue trying to stop them. They echoed accusingly around the sink, washing down the drain with the bubbly water .

Jay's hands paused, pressing at the spot just behind his ear that made Luke shiver. "I like kids," he said slowly. "I mean, I don't interact with them much, but I don't hate them ."

"You just seemed really uncomfortable today." Luke sighed in relief as Jay snorted, his fingers tugging a little as they went back to working the lather out of his hair .

"I bought these clothes to go to court in, and there isn't a single paint stain on them. I'm not about to let those little monsters rub grass and chocolate all over me." He patted Luke's neck. "If anyone's going to ruin my clothes, it's me. You're done. Let me get a towel ."

Out of nowhere, a memory reared up, loud and overwhelming, of fabric tearing as Jay got tired of fumbling with his shirt, the buttons plinking off across the boathouse. It was so vivid that Luke felt like it had to show on his face as he scraped the excess water out of his hair. He was grateful that his position curled over the sink hid the fact that his pants were too tight .

"Here. Hope you don't mind ducks," Jay said, turning back from the linen cabinet and dropping a bright blue towel on his head .

Standing up slowly, Luke stole a glance at Jay around the edges of the towel as he rubbed his hair dry. The omega was drying his own hands off on a more sedate washcloth hanging on a hook by the door. He looked flushed and pink from the steam of the water, his lips swollen where he'd obviously been biting them .

"Thanks," Luke said, draping the towel around his neck .

Jay looked at him in surprise, then looked away, hiding a laugh behind a cough. "You look like you got stuck in a tornado. Come here ."

Holding his breath, Luke stepped forward so that Jay could smooth his hair down. He was close enough to kiss, his blue eyes flashing with amusement as he fussed with the front, the gentle tugs making it harder and harder for Luke to ignore the arousal beginning to warm his stomach. The dark dye that he used had started to fade, and at the roots, his red hair was shining through .

"Why did you dye your hair?" he asked, barely a breath of sound .

There was a moment of silence as they stared at each other, the eye contact unwavering. "I didn't want to be me," Jay said. "One of the artists that used to have a studio in the same building I do would dye his hair these outrageous colors. He said it made him feel like he could do anything. So I tried it ."

"I miss your red hair," Luke said. Against his better judgment, he was leaning closer, the warm puffs of Jay's breath drawing him in .

For the briefest of seconds, their lips met, and Jay gasped. His lips were soft and so sweet that Luke could have lived without cookies for the rest of

his life if he had this instead. He groaned, licking his way into the omega's mouth, and Jay jerked away .

"We should get back to the party," he said, his voice shaky. He backed out the door and took off for the backyard without looking back .

"Shit," Luke said, scrubbing a hand through his damp hair .

"You said a bad word," Nate muttered, sitting on the living room couch with his feet on the table. Teddy was sitting across from him, both of them clutching pieces of the model in their hands as they stared at him .

"Not a word," he said, pointing at Teddy .

Pushing his glasses back up his nose, the architect nodded. "I didn't see anything? Did you see anything, Nate ?"

"I definitely did not see Uncle Luke making out with an omega in the bathroom," Nate recited, completely unrepentant when Luke growled .

"See if I ever make you cookies again," he muttered, stalking toward the backyard .

The backyard was significantly louder than it had been when he left, the cake-smearing children screaming as they whirled around like a sugar-fueled hurricane. They'd even gotten Cody out of his coma, and he'd joined Jay at the far side of the lawn, the two omegas leaning against the fence .

They were as different as night and day, and Luke couldn't stop staring. Jay's delicate frame and artist's hands were only emphasized by Cody's rough and tumble stature. He was very nearly the largest of all the brothers, strong enough to lift any of them without breaking a sweat. Usually, he loved to play with the kids, picking them up and spinning them around, but he looked ready to drop. The fact that he hadn't seemed to notice Nikolai's jacket still draped across his shoulders just accentuated it .

"Uncle Cody, spin me!" Kris screamed, running across the yard with a pack of other kids at his back .

Luke glanced over at the 'grown-up' table, catching Kurt's eye. The other alpha climbed to his feet, tucking his phone away in his briefcase. The lack of whining showed that he was just as concerned about how the military was treating their brother .

"You know," Kurt said loudly, walking over to join Luke, "you haven't paid any attention to me all day, Kris. I'm starting to feel neglected ."

Kris, clinging with his whole weight to Cody until the omega tilted off balance, turned to size Kurt up thoughtfully. "You don't spin as good as Uncle Cody."

Jaw hanging open, Kurt pressed his hand to his chest. "That hurts. I'm hurt. Aren't you hurt, Luke? We've been slighted. Our honor has been besmirched. Just for that, I'm going to spin you till you puke," he said, scooping two kids up in his arms and starting to twirl in a circle.

"Please don't," Greg said mildly from the patio.

Luke grinned, scooping up another kid and completely ignoring Greg's resigned sigh. Soon the horde was too dizzy to do anything but giggle and stumble awkwardly around on the grass. Dropping the last kid lightly onto the grass, Luke waited for everything to stop spinning. Kurt was still spinning Kris, the little monster screaming for him to spin faster and laughing when Kurt begged for mercy.

"You're good with them," Jay said, appearing at Luke's elbow. He was chewing his bottom lip, his eyes warm as he steadied Luke with a gentle nudge.

"Thanks," Luke said, those blue eyes the only stable point in the world.

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"Crap." Jay glared at his phone as they all piled through the door of the guest condo. "I missed a call from Piper. I'm going to go call her back before it gets too late." He listened to the phone ring as he headed for the bedroom he'd been using, muttering a prayer that he hadn't missed her .

It went to voicemail, and he knocked his head against the wall as he left a short message asking her to call him back. It was probably nothing. She'd promised to let him know as soon as she sent out the paperwork to halt the sale of the house, even though he'd told her to leave it until Monday. That was all it was .

His skin prickled, and he tried to convince himself it was just unease at missing a call. It had nothing to do with the sound of Luke walking down the hall to his room. Luke Carter hadn't made his blood pound since he was eighteen .

"Keep telling yourself that," he muttered, tossing his phone onto the bed .

He'd never been one of those omegas who saw a baby and melted. He liked kids, sure, but he also liked puppies. Seeing Luke with those kids, though, had made him wonder what it would have been like if they hadn't been caught that night. If they'd done the stupid thing and had unprotected sex. If it had been their kid playing rough and tumble. Luke was going to make a great dad someday. He was kind of surprised that he wasn't already .

Knocking on the door made him jump, and he slammed his elbow into the doorknob with a curse .

"I didn't mean to startle you," Teddy said, holding up an envelope. "This was just delivered for you."

He only vaguely remembered Teddy from school. The other man had always been focused on his studies, and Jay had always found him a little dazed and distracted. He was the same way now, his pale eyes staring through people as if he could see equations and angles running under their skin that would make them make sense if he just tried hard enough.

"Thanks." He cleared his throat, glancing at Luke's door. "Can I ask you a question?"

Teddy's eyes followed his, a faint smile creasing his freckled skin. When Jay wasn't dyeing his hair, they looked almost like twins, give or take a foot of height. "About Luke? I guess. I don't know any of the really salacious gossip. You'll have to ask Kurt for that."

"Not gossip," he hurried to clarify. "Just... He's a good guy. Why is he still single?"

It was startling the way Teddy's eyes snapped back around to him, suddenly sharp and focused. Jay felt like he was stripping back layers of skin to see all the way into his soul, and he shivered. If this was what having the alpha's attention was like, he was grateful that it didn't happen more often.

Whatever he saw in Jay's face must have meant something to him because his gaze softened. "I'd better come in," he said, waiting for Jay to decide if he was okay with that idea.

Backing up until he could sit on the bed, Jay watched him shut the door. He didn't lock it, but he did rattle the handle just a touch.

"This door jams if you're not careful how you close it," he said calmly, perching his long body on the armchair on the other side of the room. "Luke has a habit of walking into the middle of conversations when they're about him. We haven't figured out how, but he always knows."

Jay picked at a hangnail, eyeing the door nervously. "Should we go get coffee or something?"

Teddy laughed, a bray of sound that bounced around the small room. It was incredibly unattractive, but at the same time, it made him seem much more human. "I don't want to make him jealous," he said. "Besides, I'm not going to say anything that he would be upset at me telling you. He just doesn't need to hear this all over again."

"It was that bad?" Jay asked, his heart sinking .

"It was... Touch and go for a while. Not the way you're thinking. He just shut down. He stopped coming to dinners, stopped calling. He missed Nate's eighth birthday, then Christmas. It was a tough year ."

"He really loved him, huh," Jay said, biting his lip hard .

The alpha was silent, looking off to one side thoughtfully. "He thought he did," he said after a moment. "They'd been together for a couple years at that point. Liam came to some of our events, and they even hosted Easter dinner once." He shrugged, turning those too-sharp blue eyes back to Jay. "We came down for a week, even the kids. Greg wanted to take them to the parks, and we planned a few days on the beach. I didn't even see Liam until the third day we were there. He was holed up in his studio working on some commission ."

Jay winced, and Teddy smiled reassuringly .

"We didn't hold it against him," he said, but the tension in his jaw told Jay that it wasn't the whole truth. "We had Easter dinner with Luke's uncle, and it was great. Then Liam found out that Luke had to go in to work on Monday. We had all been warned; there was a big case that he was prepping or something, I don't remember exactly. We had plenty to keep ourselves busy, which was good because the screaming was truly impressive ."

He delivered all the information in the same calm, nonchalant tone as he would order a cup of coffee, and it took Jay a moment to process what he was actually saying. "They screamed at each other ?"

"Oh no. Luke's voice breaks if he raises it too loud," Teddy said, matter of fact. "Liam, on the other hand, could have sung in the opera if his heart wasn't set on painting ."

"Luke must have been humiliated." Jay wrapped his arms around his waist, trying to ward off the chill that rattled up his spine .

"Not especially." Teddy shrugged, pushing his glasses back up his nose. "If you've ever met Mr. Carter Sr, you'll understand that for Luke screaming fights are an expected part of the relationship cycle. They made up easy enough, and Liam was back in his studio before we left." He leaned forward, his voice dropping a little. "I'm just pointing out that there were plenty of reasons for what happened on both sides ."

"What happened?" he asked, scooting closer. He felt bad for snooping, but at the same time, he couldn't imagine the boy he'd known then or the man he knew now going through all of that and not realizing what a bad situation it was. It was like the Luke he was learning about was a completely different person .

"Liam got an offer from a gallery in Taos and left. On their anniversary ."

Jay flinched, hissing under his breath. "Oh my God ."

Teddy sighed. "Yeah. Luke moved out of the house that night, and he hasn't really dated anyone since." He pursed his lips. "That's not entirely fair. He goes out, sure, a few times a year, just to show Marcus that he's getting over everything. He hasn't let himself be involved with anyone since Liam. And he has this crazy idea that it was the fact that Liam was an artist and not the fact that they were about as compatible as nails and concrete ."

A lot of things were starting to make sense. Jay flopped back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He'd been trying to figure out what was going on with the mixed signals he'd been getting, and now he knew. What he wasn't sure about was what to do with that knowledge. "I see ."

"Do you?" Teddy asked, propping one ankle on his knee and lacing his fingers on top. "I'm glad someone does because I don't ."

"Don't strain yourself, Specs. It's not your wheelhouse ."

Jay startled and slid off the bed, landing in a tangle of limbs at the bottom. "Holy shit. I thought you said the door jams ."

Teddy hadn't so much as twitched. "Cody uses his special forces training on it," he said mildly .

"Sorry," the omega said, leaning in the doorway. The dark circles under his eyes were almost black in the shadow cast by the hall light, and there was a purple bruise spanning his arm from elbow to shoulder that it was impossible to miss now that he'd peeled off his jacket. "I just wanted to see if you guys wanted anything for dinner. I'm going to Jade King ."

"You look like you're about to pass out," the alpha said, frowning. "I'll go with you ."

Cody opened his mouth, the lines between his brows deepening to a mulish set, but he sighed, slumping harder against the door. "Okay,

fine. You win this one. Just don't get used to it ."

"Wouldn't dream of it. Where's Nikolai?" Dusting off his trousers, Teddy climbed to his feet, and Jay felt very small between them. "Nevermind, I'll find him. Since you're so much better at relationships than I am, you should give Jay advice," he said, practically dripping sarcasm .

Rolling his eyes, Cody lowered himself to the floor and shook his head. "He's a bit touchy about that," he said, groaning a little as he stretched his legs out. "I'll apologize later. What were we talking about, exactly ?"

"I don't need advice," Jay said, heat flushing his cheeks. "I was just wondering why Luke is still single. He obviously likes kids ."

Cody tipped his head back against the door frame and hummed. "Once, when we were all completely shit-faced," he said, his eyes sliding closed, "Luke told me that he was never going to have kids. I think he's full of it, personally. What he really doesn't want is to be like his dad, awful relationship after awful relationship, and some poor kid stuck in the middle ."

"I can't really blame him." Jay remembered all the awful boyfriends his mom had brought home before she sent him to live with his aunt .

"If you want my advice, which you've already said you don't," he said, cracking one eye open to pin Jay with a stern look, "it's to listen to what Luke doesn't say ."

He couldn't help but laugh, the sound more bitter than he expected. "I'll just get out my crystal ball, shall I ?"

"Oh, shut up," the other omega muttered. "I've been on the go for thirty-two hours. Cut me a little slack." He propped himself up a little straighter, prying his eyes open with obvious difficulty. "Luke never says the first thing that comes into his head. It makes him a great lawyer, but a terrible communicator. I don't think he even realizes that he's doing it anymore, but what he really thinks? You can see it, right behind his eyes, even if it never makes it out his mouth. Whatever hits the air is what he thinks he should be saying, even if it's totally the opposite of what he wants ."

"That sounds..." Jay trailed off, trying to think of a nicer way to say that it sounded fucking annoying .

"It's a giant pain in the ass," Cody said, his lips twitching, "but you get used to it after a while. Maybe if you stick around, you can help us train him up right ."

Jay groaned. "I'm not sticking around. I'm not around to begin with. There is nothing to be around ."

Cody laughed, whiskey smooth and deep. "You sound like you need sleep as much as I do ."

"Get out of my room," Jay said, putting his hands on his hips. "All of you. Out. I hate you ."

"Pretty omega boys are done with girl talk, yes?" Nikolai leaned around the door frame, stepping lightly back from the kick that Cody aimed at his knee. "Chinese food is waiting unless you are going to be sensible and come to bed." He batted his eyes at the omega, who paid him no attention as he hauled himself off the floor. Nikolai sighed disconsolately as Cody walked away, blatantly staring. "I shut door for you," he said without looking away. "We are being back in a little while. Luke is not hungry and staying in his room if you are needing anything ."

"Thanks," Jay said, the sarcasm totally lost on the big Russian .

Alone in the room, finally, he crawled up on the bed, only remembering the envelope Teddy had brought him when it crinkled under his palm. It seemed like a hundred years ago that he'd gone to the courthouse, not just that morning .

He debated leaving the envelope till later, but if he didn't open it, he'd just have to think about everything he'd learned today. The feeling of hot lips brushing against his was seared into his brain along with the silky slide of hair through his fingers .

Tearing into the envelope, he thought about going out to see a movie or something. He didn't even know what was playing, but there had to be something that would take his mind off things. Impatient, he dumped the contents of the envelope into his lap, papers flying everywhere .

"Wonderful," he grumbled, trying to gather it back into a stack .

Most of the papers were covered in legal jargon. That just brought to mind the dinner at Milano's, and he groaned and set them aside. He wasn't even going to try to understand them tonight .

About halfway through the pile, he found a letter from Piper that must have originally been on top .

"Jay—

"Here's all the information on the lake house and other properties bequeathed to you in your father's and aunt's wills. The first four pages are a summary of items and their original and current values. I've also included a year-over-year accounting for the investment funds .

"If you or your money manager need any further information, just let me know .

"Piper Kowalski-Reyes "

Jay stared at the sheet for what felt like an hour. "Four pages? " He reread the letter as if the information would have changed. Aunt Carol had always joked about leaving him her collection of commemorative shot glasses. At least, he hoped it was a joke. "I swear, Aunt Carol," he told the empty room, "there had better not be three and a half pages of descriptions of those stupid glasses. That's something you would insist on." He flipped through the pages in his lap, looking for anything that seemed like a summary. He missed it the first time, mistaking it for one of the year-over-year reports that she'd mentioned. It wasn't until he found them at the bottom of the stack that he went back to the right page .

It wasn't shot glasses .

He couldn't breathe. Black spots danced in his vision, and his hand shook as it gripped the paper tightly enough to crumple the corner. There was no way that this was correct. He couldn't even process the numbers that marched down the side of the page. That was more money than he could have imagined making if he lived a hundred lifetimes .

If someone had asked him a month ago how it would have felt to suddenly realize he'd never have to worry about money again, he would have said he'd cry with joy. Instead, he felt like he was dying. Clutching at his chest as he panted for air, he pushed the whole stack of papers off the bed and stumbled to his feet. He misjudged the door, the black encroaching on his vision and wobbly knees conspiring to bounce him off it twice before he could get it open .

The lights in the hallway blinded him for a moment, his room dimming now that the sun was setting, and he stumbled. His head knocked into a corner, and he slid to the ground, his pulse pounding in his ears until he couldn't hear himself think .

"Jay? Fuck, are you okay ?"

He wanted to laugh. "I'm a... a millionaire," he stuttered, his teeth chattering so badly that he bit his tongue. The taste of blood made him want to throw up, and he tried to curl up in a ball on the floor as his stomach cramped .

"You what? Jesus, you're freezing." Warm arms dragged him onto his feet, and he whined in protest when it made his head spin. Luke smelled like cookies and musk, and he was able to drag in a full breath with that scent filling his nose. He tucked his face against the alpha's neck and just breathed. "I'm calling Cody," Luke said distantly .

Shifting closer, Jay felt briefly ashamed that the other omega was going to know he was having a... whatever this was. Heart attack? Mental breakdown ?

"Cody, I think he's in shock. Yes. He's freezing. Okay, I'll get some in him. No, I couldn't understand what he was saying ."

"I'm a millionaire," Jay said, trying to get his lips to form the words a bit more clearly. It didn't seem to help, his tongue getting tangled; it came out more like "I'm a milliner," and the idea of him drowning in a million hats made him giggle .

Luke would look good in a top hat. He vowed to buy the man a purple one. Or one of those old white-haired wigs that the lawyers used to wear. He squinted up at him, trying to picture it and snorted so hard that he bit his tongue .

"Ow," he said, laughing so hard that he could barely stay on his feet. He stuck his fingers in his mouth, trying to feel if he was bleeding. He couldn't hold still long enough to get a good grip, and it just made him laugh harder, muffling the howls in his palm and Luke's neck .

"Drink this." Luke didn't make him hold the glass, and Jay dutifully opened his mouth, choking as whiskey burned its way into his sinuses .

"What the fuck?" he gasped, coughing and spitting. The heat of the alcohol steadied him a little, and he looked around in a daze. Luke had changed into a t-shirt and sweatpants, a distracting strip of skin

visible where the well-worn fabric didn't quite meet. His room was larger than the one Jay was in, with personal touches here and there, including a painting over the bed. "Is that my picture?"

Barely glancing at the black and white canvas, Luke nodded. "How do you feel?"

"You put one of my paintings in your bedroom?" Jay turned around in a circle, noting the knick-knacks scattered on the table and dresser, a bookshelf stuffed with well-worn volumes in one corner. He'd never really thought about what people did with his paintings when they bought them, but knowing that something he had made was so close to where this particular man slept was too intimate.

Luke reached out and carefully checked Jay's pulse, his hands soft and warm on Jay's wrist. "Yes. You're still breathing too fast. Finish the rest of the whiskey."

"It burns my tongue," he said, pouting. Reminded of his injury, he stuck his fingers back in his mouth to check for bleeding. It tickled, and he tried to stifle the giggle.

Firmly removing Jay's hand from his mouth, Luke held up the glass. The rim was cold against his lip until the alcohol sank in and started to sting. "Cody and the guys are on their way back. I really think you should drink this."

"I don't want to." He winced at the squeaky whine in his voice. "Do you know who you're talking to?" he asked suddenly, hysterical laughter welling up as he thought of the best joke ever.

"Yes," Luke said, his voice dry. "I'm pretty sure I know who you are."

"No, you don't." Jay giggled, swaying on his feet, and Luke steadied him again, his jaw jumping. "I'm a millionaire," he said, the words coming out clearly. He burst out laughing again, practically hanging from Luke's arm around his waist.

"That's it. You're going to bed," Luke said, his voice muffled.

Something soft wrapped around his face, smelling like sugar cookies and warm skin, and Jay whined when it was pulled away. He rolled onto his side, burying his face into the covers and hiccuping.

"I refuse to be held responsible if you smother yourself with my pillow."

He tried to lift his hand to flip the alpha off, but sleep suddenly sounded like the best idea ever, and he was never sure if he'd actually managed it .

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"How is he?"

Luke dug through the bags of food, grabbing a container of fried rice for himself. "Out cold. At least he's not laughing anymore," he said, throwing himself heavily into an armchair .

"I saw the papers in the guest bedroom. I take it Piper sent over the inheritance information?" Marcus nudged Kurt over until he could settle onto the couch, a container of beef with broccoli on his lap .

Balancing a large chunk of fried rice on his chopsticks with all of his attention, Luke hummed noncommittally. He ignored the way Marcus' head came up, and how Teddy fixed his glasses. "I always forget how much I miss Jade King ."

"You know something," Kurt said, grunting when Cody elbowed him in the ribs .

"It's none of our business," Cody muttered, his mouth full of noodles. "It's especially none of your business ."

"Since when has that stopped anyone here?" Kurt frowned, picking up a piece of sweet and sour shrimp that had fallen onto his napkin from the jostling .

"Jay is not Sigma Alpha Omega," Nikolai said seriously from where Cody had banished him to the floor. "He is never signing paperwork and giving up all rights to privacy in perpetuity ."

Marcus rolled his eyes. "We're not that bad," he said, taking a sip of his wine. "We only gossip because we care ."

"Speak for yourself," Kurt muttered, and Marcus threw a napkin at him .

"I don't know anything," Luke said, keeping his eyes on his plate. "Kurt's the one that grew up with the Danvilles ."

"Don't try to pin this on me," Kurt glared. "I grew up in the same neighborhood as the Danvilles, sure, but I really only know them because of Jay. My mom went through a phase where she wanted to arrange a marriage for Lucia because she's got that birthmark, so she had me inviting over everyone in the neighborhood that was our age ."

Marcus leaned forward, a piece of broccoli caught between his teeth. "Was Victor," he asked, taking a moment to chew and swallow, "always such a bastard ?"

"Yes," Luke said, at the same time that Kurt nodded .

"That's very... definitive," Teddy muttered, picking at his pork stir-fry .

"It was sad," Kurt said thoughtfully. "Jay's mom is a nice lady, but she's always following him around like a shadow. Whenever they would go out, he'd treat her like an ornament, and she wouldn't say a word. Mom hated her ."

"He used to insult Jay right in front of her, and she'd just stare at her plate," Luke growled, remembering more than one awkward dinner. "I hated her more than I hated him, most of the time ."

Everyone shifted uncomfortably, turning their attention to eating for a few minutes .

"This is how it is being in Russia," Nikolai said a moment later. "Not my mama, of course, but most women are too shy like bunnies to speak out against their husbands. Especially in rich circles. And a man who is cowed by his wife is risking investigation. Omegas are still banned ."

"She didn't come from money," Kurt muttered. "That's one reason Mama decided Jay wasn't a good match. He wasn't a Danville by blood, and his mother worked as a waitress in a diner before she met Jack Collins ."

"That must have been quite the story," Marcus said. "What did the Collins family think of her ?"

Luke sighed. "I did some research," he said, glaring at Kurt when he coughed to hide a laugh. "When Victor threw me out, he said

something about not letting me land an easy meal ticket. He'd asked me what my dad did, but I just told him he sold electronics, so I don't think he realized that I was one of those Carters." He stabbed a piece of egg with his chopstick, tearing it into tiny chunks. "I was curious, so I checked him out."

"He thought you were a gold-digger?" Kurt was practically rolling with laughter, even Teddy chuckling a little. "That's fantastic."

"Shut up," Luke muttered, kicking him on the ankle. "I couldn't get too much information, but what I found was interesting. Victor Danville filed for bankruptcy the same year Jack Collins died. He lost everything on a bad stock purchase, and ended up selling off all his property to cover his debts."

Kurt nodded. "I remember when he moved to the neighborhood. There was a lot of talk about how he was behind on the rent."

"So everything that they have is Jay's mother's?" Marcus asked.

"It was back then," Luke said. "He took the money she brought in and turned it into a multi-million dollar firm. Even in California, he has a reputation."

"It's good, then," Nikolai said, leaning back against the arm of the couch. When everyone looked at him curiously, he shrugged. "If Jay's papa had lots of money, then Jay will have a big inheritance."

"I don't think he was quite prepared for how big," Luke set his half-eaten container of rice down. "I'm going to go check on him."

"I'll put your food away," Teddy said, getting to his feet. "I have noise canceling headphones, and I'm going to watch a movie," he added.

Luke kept walking, trying to ignore the way his ears burned.

"Teddy, man. We have got to teach you about tact," Kurt said behind him before Luke got out of earshot.

He almost turned back when he got to the door to his room, his skin prickling with the knowledge that they were expecting him to... What? Dive into bed with Jay? If he'd been thinking clearly, he would have made it very clear that he and Jay were not an item.

Then again, after that scene in the bathroom, maybe Teddy had a point. All the work he'd done to forget about the kiss meant nothing as the memory came rushing back. His hand shook as he opened the door .

The bedroom was dim now that the sun had gone down, the light from the novelty lamp on the bedside table barely covering half the bed. Jay was still face down on the pillow, his back barely moving as he breathed .

Perching in the shadow on the other side of the bed, Luke tried to pry the fabric away from his face. It earned him a swat, the omega dragging the pillow and half the blanket right back up with a sleepy grumble .

A smile twitched his lips as Jay's fine hair stood on end, energized by static. He couldn't resist putting his hand out, the strands tickling his palm as they clung to his skin .

He should grab his things and go sleep in the guest room that Jay was using or bunk with Cody. Propping his shoulders against the headboard, he picked up his tablet. He wasn't tired yet, so he'd stay here and make sure Jay didn't have another panic attack when he woke up. He still wasn't convinced that Jay wouldn't suffocate, so if he left, he'd just worry .

"Oh, shut up," he muttered to the voice in the back of his mind that was laughing at him. It sounded suspiciously like Kurt, and he tried to block it out as he opened up a science fiction novel that he'd picked up for his flight .

DISORIENTED, Luke sat up, his tablet sliding off his chest as he groped for his phone. Instead of his bedside table, he got a handful of warm flesh and froze .

"I didn't mean to wake you," Jay said quietly. Under Luke's palm, his heart was racing. "I should go to my room ."

"Don't," Luke said, his voice harsh with sleep .

Jay sucked in a deep breath, his chest rising under Luke's hand. Luke jerked it back with a curse .

"I'm not saying you can't leave," he said, running his hand through his hair. It didn't wipe away the feeling of Jay's heat. "I just don't want you to feel like you have to ."

"I'm taking up your bed ."

Staring into the dark, he could just make out the shadows of Jay's eyelashes against his cheek. Maybe it was his imagination, but he looked flushed. "It's a big bed," he said, forcing himself to shrug nonchalantly. "I don't mind sharing."

Jay sniffed, ducking his head, and Luke winced, panicking internally. The glow of the lamp outlined the omega's shaking shoulders, and he wondered if he should go get one of the others.

"You don't mind sharing?" Jay said, throwing his head back and laughing. Luke gaped at him, his eyes drawn to the golden line of his neck and the sparkle of tears on his cheeks. "That was amazing. Priceless. I can't even tell if that was the best line you've ever come up with, or if you're just that cheesy." He collapsed on his side on the bed, cackling into the pillows. "It's a big bed," he said, making his voice deeper.

"Get out," Luke said, glaring. "I don't have to put up with this."

"But you said you didn't mind sharing," Jay said, wiping at his eyes. "Oh, my God, Kurt is going to die when I tell him about this."

"Don't you fucking dare," Luke growled, looming over him. "I will put salt in your paints if you even think about it around him."

That just made Jay laugh harder, his face flushed pink as he squirmed on the covers. "Go for it," he said around giggles. "I can just replace them all. I'm a millionaire."

Luke winced as the laughter hit a hysterical note. "Several hundred times over, I'm sure," he said, bracing one arm on the blanket. "Do you want me to go get Marcus?"

Jay took a deep breath, shaking his head. "I'm okay." A giggle escaped, and he grimaced. "I think I'm okay." His eyes were bright in the glow of the lamp, and Luke had to look away. He started to sit up, but Jay caught his arm. "What am I going to do?" he asked, his voice lost.

"What do you want to do?" Luke took a slow, steady breath to keep his heartbeat from jumping at the feeling of those delicate fingers on his skin.

"Buy a swimming pool full of ice cream," Jay said immediately, biting his lip .

Caught up in the way those even, white teeth pressed into the soft flesh, Luke didn't laugh. "Sounds sticky," he said .

"It would be a disaster," Jay whispered. "But I could do it." He turned his head to look out toward the window. "What if I mess it all up ?"

"You won't," Luke whispered back. "This isn't a test that you can fail. There's no right answer ."

"I feel like there is, and I have no idea what it is. I just know I'm going to drown in ice cream because I'm too stupid to have so much money." He rolled onto his side, his shoulder brushing against Luke's chest in an electric snap of contact .

He had to bite back a groan at the thought of that lithe body covered in ice cream. "You're not stupid," he said, gently shoving Jay until he rolled back onto his back. "Money is one of those things that most people just don't get. Do you think I manage my own money? The first and only time I tried investing, I lost everything." Levering himself up, he motioned for Jay to sit up next to him. The room was full of rustling fabric and quiet breathing for a moment, his ears attuned to every little sound .

"Do you just stick it in a savings account, then?" Jay asked, settling cross-legged, close enough for his knees to brush Luke's hip .

Luke laughed. "Kurt would kill me. No," he leaned in close, his voice dropping as he imparted the secret that most of the men he knew would kill to learn. "I have the best money management team in the country ."

Intrigued, Jay pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Marcus?" he said after a moment .

"And Kurt. Don't get me wrong," he said when Jay rolled his eyes, "he puts on a good act. The careless playboy thing keeps people off guard. There are only three things in this world that Kurt Villanueva is dead serious about. Money, friends, and family ."

Ducking his head, Jay glanced at the door, his eyes a flash of blue in the light, and Luke's gut clenched. "He's a good guy. I wish his family wasn't so crazy ."

"You and me both," Luke muttered. In the darkness of the room, there wasn't much to distract him from the way Jay's lips glistened or

the puff of his breath where it brushed across his cheek .

"Can I ask you a question?" Jay said a moment later, his eyes practically glowing as they caught Luke's .

He had to clear his throat to force out his reply, the tension in the air pressing in on them so that the words came out a bare breath of air. "Of course ."

"What's my favorite cookie ?"

He wanted to laugh, wanted to snap off a witty answer and turn the conversation from the cliff that had suddenly appeared in the distance. He shook his head, but Jay was all he could see, and the denial caught in his throat. "Chocolate peppermint," Luke said, the ground dropping out from under him, "with chunks of after dinner mints." His heart in his throat, he sucked in a deep breath, praying that he didn't end up broken at the end of this. "I haven't made them in ten years ."

The last sound was still vibrating in his throat when Jay's lips crashed against his, bruising and hungry. Their teeth clashed, noses bumping as they both shifted, pressing closer .

"This is a terrible idea," Luke said, threading his fingers through Jay's hair and tilting his head so that the kiss smoothed out, hot and wet and perfect. He ran his tongue along the seam of Jay's lips, the rich, earthy flavor of him flooding his senses .

"I've made worse," Jay said, pulling back to yank at their shirts .

"Just so we're clear." Luke's hands itched to touch the warm skin revealed as the ruffled button-down that Jay had worn to court came free one button at a time .

"Crystal," Jay said, leaning forward to bite at Luke's lips .

Luke groaned as sharp nails raked up his back, dragging the fabric of his t-shirt with them. He dragged it over his head, only pulling back far enough to throw it across the room before diving back into the kiss. Jay fought him for dominance every step of the way, teeth scraping across Luke's tongue as it stroked the sensitive roof of his mouth .

Growling in frustration, Jay tugged at the cuffs on his shirt with his teeth, one of the cufflinks tumbling off the bed. When Luke reached out to help him, he pushed him backward onto the bed, straddling his hips .

"No," he whispered, nipping at Luke's bottom lip and making them both groan .

Content to let him do the work, Luke ran his hands up the tight skin of his abs, hidden and revealed with each shift as the omega struggled out of his shirt. They twitched under his palms, so hot that it was like touching a live wire. His cock twitched, and he was grateful for the loose sweatpants .

Jay finally got the shirt off, flinging it across the room and sprawling fully across Luke's chest, the skin on skin contact wringing a moan out of his throat. He trailed his lips down Luke's jaw, sinking his teeth into the sensitive skin when Luke tried to direct him .

"Bossy," Luke said, choking on his next breath as Jay ground their hips together. He was rock hard inside his dress pants, the zipper an uncomfortable pressure for them both. "Not complaining," he gasped, and Jay chuckled against his chest. "Pants ?"

Sinking his teeth into Luke's chest in a way that made him arch into the pressure instead of away, Jay nodded, smiling against the mouthful of flesh when Luke cursed. Jay squirmed as he wormed his hands between them to undo his belt .

The hiss of the zipper was a physical caress that sent shivers up Luke's spine, and he growled, reaching out to pull Jay back when he climbed off .

"Your turn," he said, snapping the waistband of Luke's sweats against his stomach. The back of his hand brushed the erection tenting the soft fabric, and Luke growled .

He shoved them down his hips, kicking them off as Jay toed off his shoes and left the last of his clothes in a pool of fabric on the floor. He was glorious, every dip and hollow of his body bathed in gold by the lamp. There wasn't a spare ounce of flesh on him, muscles coiled just under the skin. His rippled abs lead down to narrow hips, a trail of red hair leading to the erection standing proudly between corded thighs .

"Fuck, you're just as beautiful as I remember," Luke said, reaching out to stroke the tender skin of Jay's hip. A shudder shook him from head to toe, and Jay closed his eyes, his head tipping back for a moment before he caught Luke's hand .

"You look better than I remember," he said, stroking a single finger down Luke's chest. "I don't remember this being quite so... firm." He smiled, licking his lips as he climbed back onto the bed .

"I only let myself buy ten pounds of flour a month," Luke said, well aware he was babbling, but unable to stop himself. Jay knelt next to him, looking good enough to eat, and he wanted to pin the omega down and taste his fill. "If I'm out of flour and I can't sleep, I go to the gym instead ."

"It's a good look," Jay said, leaning down for a kiss. He plunged his tongue into Luke's mouth, his chocolate and salt taste going straight to his head .

Surging up off the bed, Luke flipped them around, pinning Jay to the bed so that he could deepen the kiss. Grinning into the kiss, Jay arched his back, rubbing them together from knee to chest. They both gasped, and Luke's hips jerked against the smooth skin of Jay's hip .

"Do that again," he said, sliding his hands under Jay's hips to grasp the globes of his ass. It was almost impossible to tell in the thrift shop clothes that Jay usually wore, but he had a fantastic ass; Luke's fingers sank into it as he urged him to move .

Jay obliged, gasping as Luke kissed his way down his chest. Delicate fingers threaded through his dark hair for the second time that day, the sharp tug whenever Luke did something he particularly liked streaking down his spine and settling in the pleasurable tangle in his gut .

He licked his way across the ridges of Jay's abs, teasing the sensitive spot that made his hips jerk for long minutes until those fingers in his hair dragged him away. He couldn't stop sinking his fingers into the delicious flesh of Jay's ass, his fingers brushing the crack until Jay gasped .

"Tell me you have lube and condoms," he whined, yanking hard on Luke's hair when the other man's breath puffed across his erection .

"I think so," Luke said, letting the omega drag him up for a kiss. He fumbled in the bedside table with one hand as he cupped Jay's jaw with the other, deepening the kiss until he was swallowing Jay's whimpers. "Yes." He sighed with relief, dropping a pair of condoms and a barely used tube of lube onto the bed .

"Thank God," Jay said, grabbing a condom and tearing it open .

Luke couldn't quite muffle his shout when Jay grabbed his cock in one eager hand, rolling the condom on without warning. He spared a prayer that Teddy's headphones were as good as he hoped, and then all thoughts

scattered in the face of the pleasure of that touch. It had been entirely too long .

He didn't put up any resistance when Jay flipped them around again, straddling Luke's hips and pressing the lube into his hand. For what felt like ages, Luke could only stare at the vision above him, taking every detail and locking it away in a place in his memories reserved for the best and worst days of his life. He still wasn't sure what this was, but he wasn't about to stop now .

Dumping entirely too much lube out into his palm, he stroked his hand over Jay's hip, grabbing the artist's lips in a kiss as he stroked his fingers carefully across his hole. Jay groaned filthily into the kiss, and Luke couldn't resist pushing one fingertip in .

"Shit." Jay hung his head, a debauched angel painted in light and shadow by some old master as he rocked back against Luke's hand .

"That's right; just like that. Fuck, you look amazing. Just a little more, and I'll give you another one, sweetheart." Luke worked the finger in carefully, pressing deeper with each thrust of Jay's hips. He could hear himself talking, nonsense phrases and dark, lust-filled encouragement, but he couldn't spare the brain cells to worry about it .

"More," Jay groaned, biting his kiss-swollen lip and working himself onto Luke's hand faster .

Luke lined a second finger up, and Jay drove back against it, swallowing it to the second knuckle without pausing. They both groaned, Jay shuddering above him as he curled his fingers around, working him open carefully. For all he knew, it hadn't been as long for Jay as it had for him, but he was determined to make this good .

He brushed the firm lump of Jay's sweet spot, and the omega threw his head back with a sharp cry, his hips jerking erratically. Luke couldn't breathe, watching the muscles move under his skin, his gorgeous cock dancing as he writhed .

"Now," Jay whined, curling his hand around Luke's neglected erection .

"One more, sweetheart, and then you can have me," he said through gritted teeth, his hips bucking into that sweet grip. He lined up a third finger, working it in slower as Jay hissed under his breath. "Breathe for me ."

"Easy for you to say," Jay snapped, rolling his hips so that Luke rubbed his prostate harder than he'd intended. He cried out, high and triumphant, a drop of precum spattering onto Luke's abs .

"Okay, you're ready," Luke said, brushing Jay's hand aside and squeezing the base of his cock to stave off the orgasm that welled up .

"Finally," Jay muttered. He whined as Luke pulled his hand out of that slick heat, one eye slitting open to glare at him .

Luke clutched his hip in one hand, stroking the rest of the lube over his cock carefully, the pressure making his eyes roll back in his head. He felt Jay shift, and then he was pressing into heaven, the pleasure overwhelming him. Gritting his teeth until they ached, he fought to keep from thrusting up, forcing his eyes open so that he could see Jay slide onto his cock .

It was worth the effort, the omega arched over him, every muscle in his body thrown into harsh relief as he, too, trembled with the effort it took to be patient. The light caught the red in his hair, and with the dark dye blending into the shadows, he looked so much like he had in the boathouse that Luke was momentarily adrift. Digging his fingers into the bed to remind himself that it wasn't a worn plank floor this time, he cursed as Jay settled against his hips, every breath and tremble sending sparks of pleasure through his body .

They hovered there for several beats of their racing hearts, each of them trying to prolong the moment, to stretch the pleasure out before it all came crashing down on them .

It was Luke who snapped .

Unable to resist shifting, just the tiniest bit, he pulled out the slightest bit just as Jay shifted. Pleasure crackled across his skin, and his hips jerked forward, slamming him back into that heavenly heat. They both cried out, their voices echoing off the walls, and that was that .

Jay's thighs clenched, the cords standing out as he raised himself up just enough to drop back down, neither of them willing to give up even an inch more than necessary. He was gasping, his eyes wide and clouded with pleasure .

Hanging on to sanity by the narrowest of margins, Luke bucked up over and over, doing his best to help Jay find the angle that made his throat work with bitten off screams .

He didn't notice his orgasm racing toward him until it was almost too late. Digging his heels into the mattress, he gritted his teeth and curled his

hand around Jay's dripping cock. "Come on, baby. You first."

There was a moment, frozen forever in his memory, as they both hovered on the edge. Jay's eyes met his, the blue like a beacon against the acres of skin flushed pink with exertion and glowing with sweat. He couldn't look away as they flowed together once, twice. Jay's cock jerked in his grip, his rhythm falling apart as he fell apart in Luke's arms. He whined, his nails digging into Luke's arm as he tried to keep moving.

Lunging off the bed, Luke rolled them over, knee sliding on the edge of the bed as he drove in deep, everything turning hazy and slick as Jay shivered against him, a harsh cry echoing between them. He lost his rhythm as the pleasure in his gut exploded, rattling him to his bones.

It seemed to last forever, the world coming back slowly and rippling aftershocks surprising him as he tried to remember how to breathe. Soft hands combed through his hair, soothing him, and he became aware that he was pressing wet, open-mouthed kisses to Jay's shoulder. He was sprawled across Jay's chest, pressing the omega into the bed. He had the vague thought that he should move, but couldn't work up the energy.

Jay didn't seem to mind, digging his nails into Luke's shoulders when he lifted one shaky arm to bring him down for a kiss. It was slower, somehow more intimate without the crazed lust of minutes earlier, and he fell into it. They both groaned when their movements shifted them enough for him to slide out, the sound rattling his teeth. Everywhere they touched was slick with sweat and other things, and he chuckled when just breathing made him slide to one side.

Rolling into a more comfortable position, he was a little surprised when Jay followed him, grumbling as he tucked himself up against his chest. Luke's whole body still tingled with the memory of how good the little omega felt, and he could barely move, but here was Jay fussing with the covers and arranging them both to his liking.

"This was the best terrible idea I've ever had," he said, burying his nose in Jay's hair. He smelled like sex and paint and cheap shampoo, and Luke breathed deep.

"Shut up and go to sleep," Jay muttered, yawning as he tucked the covers around them both firmly.

"We should clean up," Luke said, making no move to get up

.

"Sleep," Jay said, covering Luke's mouth with one hand. He was asleep before Luke finished laughing .

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Jay handed over his credit card, watching the clerks load his purchases into his car. His car. That he owned .

It had been two months since he'd gotten the last piece of paper signed and gained access to more money than he'd never really believed existed. He still woke up in the middle of the night trying to remember if he had enough money to turn on the heat .

His phone, a new, top-of-the-line model, chimed cheerfully from his pocket. He grinned, signing the receipt before he pulled it out .

“The office is playing the same CD of Christmas music on repeat. I've heard 'Oh, Christmas Tree' ten times since I got here this morning. — Luke”

Rolling his eyes, Jay thanked the clerk, climbing into the car .

“You're such a Scrooge. —Jay”

“Ebenezer or McDuck? —Luke”

He laughed out loud, tossing his phone into the passenger seat and heading for his studio. Traffic was awful, everyone out shopping for gifts, but Bonnie had been getting on him about making sure his show would be ready. Time kept getting away from him, and he hadn't painted anything in almost two weeks. Partly because he'd used his last canvas and hadn't gotten to the store, but mostly because he'd been trekking all over the city looking at houses. Because he could afford one now .

“You're ignoring me. —Luke”

“I was driving. —Jay”

Eying the stacks of canvases crammed into every spare inch of space, Jay contemplated the best way to get them all upstairs. He almost didn't answer his phone when it rang, assuming it was Luke calling to whine at him .

"Sorry to bother you," Marcus said when the call connected. "I wanted to see if you had a chance to look over the spending plans I sent over ."

Jay bit his lip. "Er... No," he said guiltily. "I mean, I tried, but I felt like I was going to die, so I hid them in a drawer with all my other paperwork ."

Marcus laughed, warm and unconcerned. "That's fine. I'm flying down for the big holiday party, so I can go over them with you then ."

Groaning, Jay hefted a couple of the larger canvases, deciding to get the worst part over with. "Do I have to ?"

"Legally? Yes. It's not a big deal, though. There's no wrong answer; you just pick the plan that sounds like it fits your needs the best. If you decide you don't like that one, we can always change to a different one next year ."

Juggling the canvases and his phone, Jay struggled to get the security doors open. He almost dropped everything when a terrible stench in the foyer made him gag. Clutching his stomach, he barely managed to keep his lunch down. "Oh, that is vile ."

"Jay?"

"Something must have died because that reeks," he said through his teeth. "Hang on a second." Tucking the phone back into his pocket, he hurried into the elevator, breathing easier once he was off the first floor. "How has nobody reported that to the management, yet ?"

"It might be something outside," Marcus said. "A raccoon someone hit or something ."

Shuddering, Jay unlocked the door to his studio and set the canvases down inside the door. "Is it sad that I hope it's not? If I have to wait for road maintenance to come clean it up, I'm going to be holding my breath in and out of the building for the rest of the winter ."

"True. Do you have any taxidermists in your building? People do that for art, right ?"

"God, I hope not," Jay said, leaning against the door as he popped open a bottle of water. He'd been feeling run down lately, and he was hoping it was just dehydration and not the flu. "It shouldn't smell if they're doing it correctly, though, right?"

"No idea. Maybe the smell is part of the 'experience,'" he said dryly .

"I hate you ."

"Funny, Luke tells me the same thing at least twice a week ."

Jay choked on his water, feeling his cheeks heat as Marcus laughed at him. "I really should go," he said, not quite managing to sound regretful .

"Don't let me keep you," Marcus said. "You're coming to the Christmas party, right? We do a Secret Santa ."

"I'll have to think about it." Jay grabbed one of his palettes, thinking about trying an experiment with one of the smallest canvases he'd found .

The minute he squeezed a dollop of white paint onto the scarred white plastic, he knew something was wrong. Gagging, he barely made it to the bathroom at the end of the hall before he emptied his stomach. He didn't even make it to a toilet, bending over the sink next to the door as his body tried to turn itself inside out .

"Jay? Jay? What's going on? Are you okay?"

Panting, he clung to the side of the huge basin, trying to get his stomach to stop twisting itself in knots. There was a tiny smear of white paint on his thumb, and just that tiny bit of smell set him off again, tears dripping down his cheeks as bile burned his throat .

He'd heard stories, of course, artists who took a break or decided to try watercolors at the peak of their career. Men who had to take medical leave from their construction or auto shop jobs .

"Oh shit. No, no, no," he muttered under his breath as he scrubbed at the smear of paint. There were fresh tears on his cheek, and he tried to tell himself that it was just the ache in his gut .

"Jay! Answer me, or I'm calling Luke ."

"I'm fine," Jay mumbled, staring at his hand. He could still smell the paint, his stomach gurgling unhappily. He clenched his hand into a fist so that it would stop shaking .

"You don't sound fine," Marcus said, his voice sharp .

"It's nothing." He tried to inject as much confidence into his voice as possible, hoping to convince himself .

"People don't just puke their guts out because of nothing. Do you need me to call you a cab? You should go to a doctor right away ."

Jay swallowed a laugh. He kept waiting for the panic to hit, but he was surprisingly calm. "I'm not sick," he said .

"How can you be sure?" He could hear Marcus' shoes clicking against the tile of his office. Over the last few months, Jay had learned that the alpha's biggest weakness was feeling useless .

"I'm not sick," he repeated .

"I'm calling Luke. You should at least get checked out by a doctor. What if you have food poisoning ?"

"Marcus," Jay snapped, dragging his fingers through his hair in frustration. "I'm not sick, and you don't need to call Luke ."

"I'm calling Luke ."

"Marcus, do not call Luke." He tried to imagine having this conversation over the phone and winced. "If you call Luke, I will fly back to New York and reorganize your filing cabinets by color ."

That got the other man's attention, and he paused. "If you're sick, you don't have to hide it. They can treat just about everything nowadays, and we can't do anything to help if we don't know about it ."

Rolling his eyes, Jay growled under his breath. "I am not sick. Let me be absolutely clear. I'm not sick. I threw up, yes, but I'm not sick. I'm not terminal. I'm pretty sure I don't even have the flu ."

"But you — "

"Marcus! I'm not sick. I'm pregnant !"

The words echoed around the bathroom as Marcus came to a screeching halt. Jay stared at his reflection in the mirror. Besides the greenish cast to his cheeks, he looked more collected than he had in weeks .

Taking a deep breath, he said it again, waiting for his heart to leap into his throat. "I'm pregnant." The sky didn't fall, and his heart stayed firmly where it was, thumping along only slightly quicker than normal .

Marcus choked. "You're what? Since when? I mean, when did you find out, not when did you... You know ."

Jay laughed, light and happy, his hand pressing against his stomach. There was nothing to see, but now that he was looking for it, he could feel how the area below his belly button was harder, even though he'd gained almost ten pounds now that he could get groceries whenever he wanted .

"Since about ten minutes ago. I mean, I hadn't noticed it until I went into my studio. Fuck," he cursed, distracted by a realization as he stared at the traces of white paint embedded in the whorl of his fingerprints. "I'm going to have to call Bonnie and let her know that the spring show won't be all oils ."

"Is that what made you puke? Why didn't you want me to call Luke— Oh, my God. He doesn't know!" Something crashed to the floor, but Marcus didn't seem to notice. "You have to tell him ."

"Breathe, Marcus," Jay said, finally feeling a little bit of the expected panic raise the hair on the back of his neck. "I haven't even had a chance to sit down yet, much less tell Luke. The only reason you know is because you were on the phone." He heard keys clicking across the connection and growled. "Do not tell the others before I have a chance to tell Luke. He should get to be the one to tell them ."

"I wouldn't!" Marcus huffed, and Jay raised an eyebrow at his reflection, letting the silence stretch. "Okay, I totally would, but I wasn't going to. I'm updating your spending plans to include outfitting a nursery and prenatal care ."

"Are you serious?" He shook his head, affection driving away the chill of uncertainty. "You're such a nerd ."

"Thank you," Marcus said, his voice less shaky .

Jay stared at the bathroom door, trying to calculate if he could get the door of his studio locked and make it back to his car without his body rebelling. He didn't have a whole lot of options, so he took a deep breath to head out just as Marcus cleared his throat .

"Are you worried about what Luke will say ?"

Choking on nothing, Jay coughed hard enough to see stars. "Well, I wasn't," he said, his throat burning, "until you said that ."

"I didn't mean it that way," he said, and Jay could imagine him seated in his big corner office, wringing his hands and pouting. "It's just something that people would worry about, right? You

shouldn't. You know you shouldn't. Luke loves kids, and he's a good guy ."

"You're babbling," Jay said dryly. He decided not to point out that Luke was also a lawyer. "The only thing that I'm worried about right now is Kurt finding out and spilling the beans ."

"Won't happen," Marcus said .

"I'm supposed to meet Luke for dinner at Milano's tomorrow. I'll tell him then. Try to keep a lid on this until the dessert course, please." Digging his keys out of his pocket, Jay was as ready as he could be to brave the paint smell .

"I haven't told a soul," Marcus protested .

"Yet," he muttered. "Look, I have to get out of this building, so I'm going to hang up now. I'll see you at the Christmas party ? "

Marcus snorted. "You'll be seeing us sooner than that if Luke makes that announcement ."

"Is that a promise or a threat?" Jay muttered as he disconnected the call .

Getting out of the building was easier than he had expected, but once he'd made it into the car, he had no idea what to do. Nervous energy thrummed through him, making him too restless to go back to his apartment. He thought about going to a park he'd seen when he was house hunting, all trees and grass arranged around an artificial lake .

Stopped at the light, waiting to turn onto the highway, he abruptly changed his mind. He did a quick U-turn, heading for the gallery. There was a small, expensive clinic in the neighborhood that he'd frequently seen well-dressed omegas going into when he was homeless. They had a whole slew of awards mounted in the front window, but he'd never paid attention to what they were for. There was no reason for him not to check them out now .

"S ORRY I'M LATE."

Jay jumped a foot, shoving the napkin he'd been unraveling thread by thread under the table. "It's okay," he said, his voice cracking.

"I haven't been here long." That wasn't even close to the truth, but he wasn't going to admit to arriving almost half an hour early .

He got to his feet, accepting the chaste kiss that Luke pressed to his cheek. They'd been seated in the back this time, closer to the kitchen. Mia had winked at him as she led him back, so he was pretty sure that it was her attempt to keep her father's shouting to a minimum .

"You!" Marcello appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, one big fist swinging at Luke's head. "You leave him here all by himself for almost an hour? They don't teach you manners in those fancy schools of yours?" He pulled Luke into a hug, pressing a sloppy kiss to his cheek. "My Emilio will have words with him, Jay. Don't you worry ."

Feeling the blush heat up his cheeks and cursing his fair complexion, Jay smiled sheepishly at Luke. "I was a little early." All the nerves that he hadn't felt talking to Marcus and going through the tests at the clinic had come back with a vengeance last night. He'd barely slept, heading out two hours early because he couldn't stand to sit at home another minute .

"Did you like the place you went to?" Luke asked, his eyes warm as he settled into his seat .

For a full minute, Jay tried to figure out how he'd found out about the clinic before he realized the alpha was talking about his house search .

"No," he said finally, shaking his head. "I ended up rescheduling the viewing ."

Luke took a sip of his water, the lines around his eyes crinkling as he smiled. "Get too involved in your painting ?"

Jay's startled laugh was louder than he intended, and an older man with Mia's hair ducked his head out of the kitchen. Emilio was thin and stern, but his eyes softened as he noticed them sitting there. "Oops," Jay said, covering his mouth. The Italian omega disappeared back behind the door without a word. "I don't think he likes me ."

"Emilio?" Luke said, glancing toward the kitchen. "He's just shy ."

"Shy. Right," Jay chuckled. He hadn't had much interaction with Marcello's other half, but the first day the man was back from Rome, he'd made a man cry for grabbing Mia's ass .

"He is." Looking to Mia as she came over to take their order, he gestured broadly. "Tell him how shy your papa is, Mia. He thinks Emilio doesn't like him ."

Mia sighed. "Do you want your usual?" she asked, scribbling on her pad without waiting for him to answer. She leaned one hip against the table, her voice dropping as she turned to Jay. "Everybody thinks he doesn't like them, but he really is just nervous about talking to people. He has a really heavy accent sometimes, and people can't understand him. Vincenzo used to get so embarrassed, and now Papa barely ever talks to strangers ."

"How is Vinny, anyway? Is he still in Honolulu?" Luke smiled at Jay as she continued to scribble on her notepad. "Extra sauce, please ."

"Like I'd forget. Vinny's my big brother," she told him, rolling her eyes. "He's in Greece right now, trying to 'find himself' or something. Papa just about killed him because he wouldn't come to Rome to see him ."

"I'd like the chicken Parmesan," Jay said, letting the gossip flow over him. When they'd first started coming here, he'd tried to keep it all straight. Now, he knew better; even if he did remember the story, he was going to hear it from all three members of the family .

"Already put the order in," she said, winking at them. "I'm just killing time until that couple at table seventeen stops sucking face ."

"What if I'd wanted the meatball marinara today? What then?" Luke asked, his hands on his hips .

Mia grinned. "I'd have checked your temperature, and then Dad would have come out and checked your temperature, and Papa would have called Uncle Robert and made sure that you weren't replaced by a pod person." She skipped away from the table as Luke tried to swat her, her shoes clicking against the tile .

"Brat," Luke called after her. "Shit, I forgot to have her bring us some wine. Let me go grab some out of the kitchen ."

"No," Jay blurted. "It's okay. I think I'm dehydrated." He made a show of drinking his ice water, hiding a wince as his head ached from the cold .

"Did you run out of water in your studio? You should hire a service to restock that basket of yours. There's one that caters to all the office break rooms in downtown that I could recommend." Luke pushed his glass of water to Jay's side of the table .

Guiltily, Jay traced his fingers through the smear of condensation left on the table. "I haven't really painted much lately because of the house search. I was at the gallery this morning," he said truthfully, "talking to Bonnie about the show she's putting together for this spring ."

"You're not going to be short on paintings, are you? You've still got a couple months, and you had a bunch of finished canvases last time I went by." Luke frowned, reaching across the table to catch Jay's hand .

The warmth of those fingers threading through his made Jay realize how cold he'd gotten. "I should have enough, but she's setting it up a little differently this time because I'm putting in some watercolors and maybe acrylics," he said carefully. Luke wasn't completely clueless about the art world, and he almost hoped that the alpha was able to read between the lines so that he wouldn't have to spell it out .

"Oh?" Luke said, attentive, but unconcerned, and Jay was tempted to pout. "I've always found it interesting how artists get inspired to try different mediums ."

Jay opened his mouth to say something, he wasn't sure what, when Emilio appeared next to their table, popping into existence without crossing the intervening feet to the kitchen. He set their food down in silence, and Jay felt compelled to fill the silence .

"Thank you. It looks wonderful ."

"The plate is hot," Emilio said, keeping his head down. "Don't burn yourself ."

"We'll be careful, zio," Luke said, and the omega turned to him with a glare .

"Don't you speak to me, you rat. You leave a nice omega sitting alone in my restaurant, and then smile like your charming face is going to get you out of trouble? If you were my Vinny, I would take you over my knee and swat you until you remembered how to treat people ."

Muffling laughter in his napkin, Jay watched Luke stammer an apology. Emilio was tall enough to loom over the tables, but like his daughter, he

was so slender that he looked like he could snap in half at any moment. The sheer force of his personality had Luke curling in on himself repentantly, despite that .

"I'm keeping my eye on you, you hear me? I'm gonna watch you like a hawk," Emilio snapped. Jay flinched a little when he turned to his side of the table, but the omega just nodded. "You need anything, you tell me, and if this one leaves you waiting again, you call. I'll take the ruler to him, just like Papa used to ."

"Will do," Jay said, watching him stride back to the kitchen with his back ramrod straight. He couldn't hide a grin as he watched Luke straighten back up in his chair, his ears flushed a bright red .

"It's not that funny," Luke muttered, stealing his glass of water back to take a sip .

"It really is," Jay said before he remembered what he was here for. He cleared his throat, trying to think of a good way to open the subject. "I'm still not sure about whether to try watercolors or to stick with acrylics." Frustrated, he glared at the potted plant hanging off the shelf over their heads. "Watercolors have such a bad reputation, but I really love the different effects you can achieve." No, no, no. He narrowly resisted groaning .

"They're more difficult, too, aren't they?" Luke asked, picking up his fork. "I remember Liam talking about how hard it was for his artist friends to get used to not being able to just cover up mistakes when they had to stop using oils while they were pregnant." He took a big bite of his lasagna, oblivious to the way Jay stared at him. "I always liked watercolors. It's a pity more artists don't use them. I can't wait to see what you come up with ."

Picking his jaw up, Jay stuffed a piece of chicken in his mouth to keep from just blurting it out like he had with Marcus. He was going to do this right this time if he could figure out what 'right' was. "Liam had friends who worked in watercolors ?"

"Only while they were pregnant," Luke said, sounding genuinely disappointed. "A few of them were really good, but they went back to oils as soon as they could take the smell. What made you decide to try them out?" He held out a piece of lasagna for Jay .

Jay took a deep breath, setting his fork down and squaring his shoulders. Pushing the forkful of lasagna aside, he caught Luke's hand and

tried to smile. "I puked my guts up when I went into the studio yesterday."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Luke frowned, his lips forming a concerned question, but the only thing that came out was a strangled squeak as his brain caught up. His eyes lit up, delighted for a brief moment before he shook himself a little. "You should get checked out by a doctor," he said, his voice calm. It was all an act, his hand trembling in Jay's grip.

"I went to a clinic right after," he said, his voice gentle. He'd expected Luke to be happier about this, but now he felt like he was walking through a minefield. "I'm due in July."

Luke's grip was tight enough to cut off the circulation in Jay's fingers, but he might as well have been carved from stone for all the reaction that got. "Congratulations. Are you... Do you..." The mask faltered slightly, and he cleared his throat. "If there's anything you need, just let me know." He seemed to realize he was still holding on to Jay and jerked his hand back. "Excuse me a moment."

"Luke..." He couldn't get out of the booth fast enough to stop him from fleeing to the bathroom. "Shit." Pulling out his phone, he hit the speed dial and got a busy signal.

"SOS —Jay"

"On the phone with him now. Call Teddy. —Marcus"

Leaning back in his seat with a groan, Jay waited for the call to connect.

"I'm supposed to tell you not to panic," Teddy said. "Also, congratulations."

"I knew Marcus couldn't keep his damned mouth shut. Kurt better not know," he said, picking up his fork. His appetite had completely vanished, but his stomach was rumbling ominously.

"He didn't tell me anything," Teddy said, his voice wry, "but I can do the math. Don't ask me to babysit, please. Babies terrify me."

"I'm not exactly an expert myself. How's Marcus doing?"

"I don't think he's getting anywhere. What? Oh. I'm supposed to lie and tell you that it's going great."

Jay laughed and took a bigger bite of his food. "Thank you for being honest."

"You're welcome. Luke will come around eventually. It took us almost a month to convince him that it was okay to use the kitchen at night, but we did it." He hummed thoughtfully. "If all else fails, we'll sic Cody on him ."

"Let's leave that as a last resort," Jay said. "I like him with all his limbs." He tried to smile reassuringly at Mia as she walked past, headed for the kitchen. "Do you know what Luke is saying? Is he... not happy about this ?"

Teddy was quiet for a long time, and Jay could hear Marcus in the background, his voice a soothing rumble. "He's not unhappy," he replied after a moment .

"That's not reassuring," Jay said, his sweaty fingers slipping on his fork and making it clatter against his plate .

"Sorry. I'm bad at reassuring. Let me try again." He actually paused to clear his throat, and Jay had to swallow a laugh. "He's really happy, but he doesn't want to be. It's a Luke thing. Things that make him happy have a bad habit of being taken away, you know ?"

Heart melting in his chest, Jay nodded. "Yeah, I know ."

"Oops. I think he just hung up on Marcus. Good luck. Let me know if we need to send Cody in ."

The line went dead, and Jay barely had time to tuck his phone back in his pocket before Luke slid back into the booth, his collar damp where he'd obviously splashed water on his face .

"Sorry about that." He picked up his fork and stabbed his lasagna with force .

"It's okay," Jay said, smiling reassuringly. "It's big news. I can't expect you to take it in all at once. I still haven't fully processed it, myself ."

That was the wrong thing to say, Luke's fork scratching across his plate unpleasantly. "Keep me apprised of your decision," he said like this was some legal brief he was discussing. His voice was too calm, too even, for the way his hands were shaking. He licked his lips, swallowing hard like there was something jammed in his throat .

It was the language that made it click, and Jay almost smacked himself. "I thought we'd make those kinds of decisions together," he said firmly. "If you'd feel better with some kind of legally binding

contract, we can work on that..." He tried to remember what else Cody had told him to watch out for .

"Marry me ."

"What?" Jay's fork slid out of his hand and tumbled to the floor .

There was a bright red flush sneaking up Luke's neck, and he looked like he wanted to snatch the words back, but he set his jaw and nodded. "Marry me ."

He could think of a hundred reasons that was a terrible idea right off the top of his head, but he understood the impulse. "You hate marriage," Jay said, his voice trembling .

Luke looked away, shrugging. "Maybe I won't hate it with you ."

"That's an awful lot to risk on a maybe," he said .

Mia sidled up to the table with a replacement fork, and he gave her a wan smile. She didn't linger, and he was grateful .

"It's not a risk," Luke said. "Even after ten years, I still couldn't stay away from you ."

It was the sweetest thing that Luke had ever said to him, but Jay shook his head. "If you can honestly tell me that you didn't think of asking me in the last ten minutes, then I'll consider it." Luke ducked his head, picking at his lasagna. "Exactly. I'm not going to mess up both of our lives by rushing into anything,” Jay continued. “What if things went south? I don't want our kid to be stuck in the middle of that ."

Reluctantly, Luke nodded. "That makes sense ."

Jay couldn't hope to guess what he was thinking, so he decided to put his cards on the table. "I'm not saying that it'll never happen," he said, catching Luke's hand again before the alpha could do too much damage to his food. "I just don't think that now is the right time for that. That also doesn't mean that I'm going to let you off the hook. This is your kid, too, so you're coming to all the doctor's appointments and stuff with me ."

"That... sounds great," Luke said, a small smile stretching the corners of his lips .

"Great," Jay said, picking up his fork. "Now, you might want to tell the guys and put Marcus out of his misery. Oh, and

Marcello. I don't want to hear the lecture if he finds out you didn't tell him before we left ."

"Are you sure?" he asked, looking for a moment as timid and unassuming as he had back in college .

Nodding, Jay stole a piece of lasagna off his plate. "If you don't, then I will. I don't want Cody to hunt me down and kill me ."

"He's not that scary," Luke muttered, picking up his phone. "I'm going to call Uncle Robert, first ."

"He really, really is," Jay said, waving Mia over. "I'm ordering dessert ."

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“When the hell did you have time to make that ?”
Luke didn't bother to look away from the beautiful crib that Jay was unwrapping as Kurt wrestled with Teddy .

“It only took three weeks,” Teddy replied, shoving him off to one side. “The hardest part was waiting for my wood order to come in. It's teak .”

“We've only known about the baby for six days,” Cody said from somewhere on the other side of the towering pile of wrapping paper .

“It's gorgeous,” Jay said, running his hands over the smooth wood. “Thank you so much .”

“You're welcome,” Teddy said, pushing his glasses up on his nose with a pleased smile .

“I don't know where you're going to fit all this,” Marcus said, glancing at the gifts stacked around the room. “We probably should have waited for the actual baby shower .”

“All that means,” Kurt said, munching on one of the cupcakes that Nikolai had brought from some hole-in-the-wall Russian bakery, “is that we all have a few months to try and top Teddy's gift .”

“It's not a contest,” Marcus said .

“Yes, it is,” Kurt replied, sticking his tongue out .

Luke had to cough to cover his laugh as Jay and Marcus rolled their eyes at the same time. “Do you know when Brendan and Greg are getting in ?”

"Not till the 29th," Marcus said, helping Jay stack some of the gifts out of the way so that they could all see each other again. "Brendan's sister is coming to visit them for Christmas ."

"That will be nice." He got up, wincing when his back popped, and grabbed a handful of trash. "I'm going to go grab a bag for all this paper," he said, ducking his head to give Jay a kiss .

The omega smiled, flushed and cheerful despite the fact that he'd spent all morning ranting about how horrible his watercolor paintings were. The pictures looked fine to him, but Luke had wisely kept his mouth shut when he picked him up from his studio .

The kitchen was quiet, flour dusting everything despite his hasty attempts to clean up. There were containers of cookies everywhere, labeled for each of the guys to take with them, and then a few more just because he hadn't been able to stop. He was doing his best to keep his panic from showing, but he hadn't slept in a week. Jay was still house hunting, his realtor working hard to find listings that fit his new needs. Meanwhile, they'd held the impromptu party at Luke's because Jay's tiny apartment could barely fit the two of them .

It wasn't that he didn't think Jay deserved to have a house, but every time he closed his eyes, he could see the house in the suburbs with its empty shed. He didn't think he could stand to drive up to a cookie-cutter house every day again without losing his mind .

He would if he had to, though. He wasn't going to be like Harry; his child would never have to call his best friend just to find out where he was that week .

"You okay ?"

Shaking himself a little, Luke realized that he was still standing in the kitchen, a trash bag in one hand and a handful of paper in the other. Jay was frowning at him, one hand resting warm and comforting on his arm. "Yeah, sorry. Just thinking ."

"Anything I can help with?" He held up Luke's phone. "You were ringing ."

"Just trying to decide if I should get a more family-friendly car," he said, the lie resting uneasily on his tongue. He stuffed the wrapping paper into the bag and grabbed his phone. "It was probably Uncle Robert. Give me a second to call him back ."

"Sure." He said it easily enough, but Luke could see him watching out of the corner of his eye .

"Hello, kiddo. Did you like the gift ?"

"The changing table set will be perfect." He shuffled to one side as Jay opened the fridge, pulling out drinks for everyone. "I can get those," he said, setting the trash bag down .

"I've got it," Jay said. "Talk to your uncle." He set the drinks on a tray that Luke had brought back from Costa Rica one summer; it was solid wood, heavy even without half a dozen drinks on it .

"Is that Jay? Tell him I'm sorry I couldn't make it today. I get on a plane back to the States in two hours ."

"Why don't you tell him yourself?" Luke said, shoving the phone into Jay's hands and grabbing the drinks. "I'll be right back." He ducked the swat that Jay aimed at him, swinging the tray around carefully to keep anything from spilling. "Just say hi ."

"I hate you," Jay hissed at him, tucking the phone against his ear. "Hello ?"

The living room was slightly neater than when he'd left, the paper corralled into a corner, and the gifts piled on the dining room table. Teddy was arguing with Kurt about something, his hands waving all over the place as Cody ducked around him, grabbing errant pieces of garbage .

"No, I know that Jay's looking for a house, but this place is perfectly central, and all it would take is knocking down a wall or two," he said. "It wouldn't even take that long ."

"Teddy," Cody grumbled, nudging the redhead with his hip. "Drop it ."

"Huh? Oh. Hi, Luke." Teddy pushed his glasses up his nose with a disgruntled grimace. "I'm not supposed to mention Jay's house hunting in front of you, but I really wanted to ask you about what you were going to do with your condo ."

Biting back a laugh, Luke clapped the slender alpha on the shoulder. "Never change, Teddy," he said, ignoring the way the other guys groaned .

"Oh, I won't," he said. "I was just telling Kurt that the adjoining unit is for sale, and if you bought it, you could turn this into a family-sized unit. It would double your kitchen space," he added hopefully .

Luke blinked, startled by the thought. He'd seen something about the other condo being up for sale; Robert had talked about buying it just so he'd have the whole floor. It was tempting, if only for the extra kitchen space, and he knew that was the point. "I'll think about it," he promised .

"See," Teddy said, crossing his arms. "I told you it would be fine. Tact is a four-letter word ."

"Well," Marcus drawled, "you're not wrong. Does Jay need help with anything in the kitchen ?"

"He's just talking to Uncle Robert," Luke said, belatedly remembering to hand out the drinks .

"You left him alone with that sneaky old man?" Kurt raised his glass in a toast. "You are a brave man, Luke Carter ."

"It's not that big of a deal ."

"Kinda is," Cody said, his muscles flexing as he lifted the crib out of the way. Watching his shirt strain, Luke made a mental note to go to the gym more often. "This is the same uncle who has tricked you into showing up at six of your dad's last eight charity benefits? The guy who literally kidnapped you and put you on a plane the last time he thought you were working too hard? That Uncle Robert ?"

"He didn't kidnap me," Luke muttered, rubbing his sweaty palms on his jeans. "I'll be right back ."

"Good luck, man," Kurt called after him .

Ducking into the kitchen, he was struck by how spotless the place was; all the flour and drips of cookie dough had disappeared from the counter. Jay was leaning against one end of the island, scrubbing at a stubborn stain and nodding at the phone. When he spotted Luke, he smiled faintly .

"No, I understand. I'll keep it in mind," he said loudly. "I'm going to hand you back to Luke again. Of course. Talk to you later." He shoved the phone into Luke's arms with a growl. "I can't believe you." He leaned up and bit Luke's lip. "I'm going to make you pay for that ."

"If that's an example of your punishment techniques, can I just point out that they're not very effective?" he said, trying to pull the omega in for a deeper kiss .

Jay slid out of his arms with a quiet chuckle. "I'll keep that in mind," he said, backing out of the room .

Luke sighed, belatedly remembering the phone. "Sorry, Uncle. I missed that."

"Ah, to be young and distracted," Robert said, doing a poor job of hiding his laughter. "I was just asking if you got Harry's gift."

Irritation brought him back to reality like a splash of cold water. "I refused delivery," he said, trying to relax his jaw as the muscle cramped. "Teddy made a crib for Jay. I don't need one from Dad."

Robert sighed. "You have plenty of reason to be angry at him," he said, "but he really does just want what's best for you."

"Save it. I don't want to argue with you today, and you have to get on a plane soon." He took a deep breath, trying to keep from snapping. "I'll see you when you get home, okay? Teddy had an interesting idea about the condo that I wanted to run by you."

"Alright, kiddo. I don't want to fight with you, either, but he's my best friend. I have to try at least once, you know?"

"I know," Luke said, and for the first time in a long time, he really did. He'd do the same for Kurt or Teddy if it came down to it, and he'd probably have to someday. "Have a good flight."

Disconnecting the call, he stared at the rag draped over the edge of the counter. It wasn't until he realized that he was planning what he'd do with all the extra counter space that he rolled his eyes and went back to the living room. He'd call his realtor in the morning.

"Boss, there's a call for you on line one," Vivian said, leaning around the door frame. "It's... Uh... It's Harry Carter."

Luke grimaced, tossing his pen down on the stack of papers he was very slowly working his way through. It left a long black streak down one page as it bounced off the edge of the desk. "Can you tell him I'm not in?"

"The call came through reception, so he already knows you're not scheduled for any meetings today. Sorry." She picked up his pen,

setting it carefully on the tiny slice of free space he had left .

He'd been working all morning to get enough work done that he wouldn't have to come in for the rest of the year. About half an hour after lunch, though, all three of the other partners had gone home with food poisoning, leaving Luke to handle the employee reviews. If he didn't finish these by the end of the day, there wouldn't be time to get the Christmas bonuses deposited before the holiday .

"I really don't have time to deal with him," he muttered, digging his phone out from under a stack of secretarial reviews. "Handle those," he told her. "You know better than anyone who pulls their weight ."

She picked the stack up, hesitating as she smoothed the pages. "Do you want me to stay ?"

"No," he said, his finger hovering over the flashing light of line one. "I need these done more than I need my hand held. Next time, though, I'm going to insist." He slammed the button harder than necessary, then remembered. "Shit, what are you bringing for the party ?"

"I already told Jay when he called," she said, shutting the door behind her and leaving him with nothing to get him out of dealing with the phone call .

"Luke?"

"Hi, Dad. What can I do for you ?"

"I was just calling to see how you're doing," Harry said. He was trying to be cheerful, but Luke could hear the strain in the way he put too much energy into every word .

"I'm fine ."

"Good, good. And Jay? How's he doing? No morning sickness ?"

Luke ground his teeth, counting to ten. "Jay is fine ."

"That's good." The silence stretched awkwardly, but he ignored the nagging need to make things easier for his father. "I saw that you sent the crib back. Robert mentioned that one of your friends made you one already. Let me know if there's anything you'd rather have ."

"I can't think of anything ."

"Well, if you do, let me know. I'm going to be in California for a while, so I can grab whatever you want and bring it by. Let Jay know, too."

Whatever he wants ."

"I'll let him know, Dad," Luke said, lying through his teeth. "I'm sorry to cut you short, but I have a whole stack of employee reviews to get through ."

"Oh, of course. You got stuck with that stuff, huh? I used to let you fill out the reviews when you were a baby. Everybody got big bonuses, and they loved your artwork. Win-win. You always loved coming to work with me, before your mom died." Harry cleared his throat .

"I've really got to go, Dad ."

"Right." He hesitated, and Luke was tempted to hang up on him. "I actually called to see if I should bring anything specific to the party. I know Jay said I didn't have to, but you know how nice he is. It sounds like you're going to have quite a few people. I can have it catered, free up some time for you ."

"I'm sorry, what?" Luke said, his voice flat with shock .

"The Christmas party? Jay said you were having a potluck, and you know how useless I am in the kitchen. I could get John Higgsby to cater for you, though. You always liked his green beans ."

"When I was seven, Dad." He barely managed to keep from shouting. "It's just a bunch of friends. Nothing fancy. That's kind of the point ."

"Oh, right. That makes sense." He cleared his throat again. "I'll figure something out, then. I should let you go. Don't work too hard, and tell Jay I said hi ."

"Believe me," Luke said, a headache stabbing into his right temple out of nowhere, "I will." He set the phone down gently and pulled out his cell. Not trusting himself to keep his cool, he composed and discarded a dozen texts before settling on stating the obvious .

"You invited my dad. —Luke "

There was no immediate reply, and he set his phone on the desk next to him. With barely any of his mind on the reviews, he flew through them; anyone who didn't like it could do them all next year .

There was still no answer by the time he locked his office door and headed home, and he started to wonder if Jay was ignoring him on purpose. Against his better judgment, he tried calling, but it just went to voicemail .

"Are you at the studio? —Luke "

"I'm coming over. —Luke "

Traffic was terrible, as usual, and by the time Luke found a parking place a block from the studio, he was barely keeping it together. It wasn't like Jay hadn't known how he felt about his dad. They'd had long conversations about it ten years ago. It had been one of the things that they'd had in common, both of them not sure what to do about their complicated family relationships .

He would never have gone behind Jay's back and invited Mary. A tiny voice in the back of his head, this one with Teddy's matter-of-fact monotone, pointed out that Jay had tried to invite her, but she declined so that she could go to her husband's business party. Jay was more forgiving than Luke had ever been .

Pressing his forehead against the steering wheel, he focused on breathing until he could think about his father coming to the party without wanting to yell at something. Jay had to have a reason for doing this, probably something about family and healing his relationships. It was nothing Luke hadn't heard before. Hell, he'd thought it all before .

Jay hadn't been there for ten years of trying to forgive and forget. Ten years of making plans only to have his dad cancel last minute because Meredith didn't want him to go. Ten years of birthdays and holidays and special events without so much as a phone call. Harry Carter was a charming man, and he always won his way into people's good graces, but it didn't take long for him to let them down, either .

He probably wouldn't show. Luke wasn't sure if that would be better or worse. He was used to Harry letting him down, but he didn't want Jay to have to figure it out the hard way .

“Sorry, I'm here. Yes, I invited him. —Jay”

Staring at the message for a long minute, Luke sorted through possible responses in his head .

“I didn't want him there. —Luke”

He thought that struck the best tone, making it perfectly clear that Luke was willing to take the blame for uninviting his father. The phone buzzed right away with an incoming call .

“I know you don't get along with him, but he is going to be a grandpa. I thought he deserved to be there. Besides, it felt wrong to invite Robert and not invite him,” Jay said, not bothering with hello .

“He's not going to be a grandpa. He's barely been a father,” Luke protested. “I don't want our daughter to be disappointed every

time he breaks a promise ."

"People change, Luke. Maybe he won't disappoint our son ."

It was petty, but for a moment Luke hoped that he would, if only because it would prove that it was Harry's problem and not just something in him that made him unlovable. "Are you sure you want to take that risk ?"

Jay was quiet for a moment. "There are still at least three years before the baby remembers anything. I think we should give him a chance ."

"I don't," Luke said, biting off the rest of the words that wanted to come out. "He's not dependable, Jay. He probably won't even come to the party. He'll meet some woman in a hotel bar and disappear to the Bahamas for six months ."

"Then we'll have a nice Christmas with the rest of our friends ."

Growling in frustration, he snapped, "I stopped speaking to him to remove that kind of uncertainty ."

Jay sighed. "You can't just shut him out without giving him a chance, Luke ."

"I've given him chances my whole life. Do you not remember how I ended up at your house to begin with? He swore for weeks that he was going to come get me and take me on vacation, just the two of us." Even now, he could remember the humiliation when he'd realized his dad had gone to the Caribbean without even bothering to tell him that he wasn't coming .

"I think you should give him a chance," Jay said. "If only to make life easier on Robert ."

"I don't think I should," Luke said, his voice rising .

"Luke..."

"I don't want him in my house," he shouted. "He is not invited, and if hell freezes over and he does show up, I will have him escorted out by security. I am not going to give him the chance to walk all over me again ."

The sound of his ragged breathing echoed in his ears, muffling the horns and sirens of the city .

"And I don't suppose what I want means anything," Jay said finally. "It is your house, after all ."

Knocking his head against the steering wheel, Luke cursed, all his anger draining away and leaving him exhausted. "Jay ..."

"No, I get it. It's your safe space, and I shouldn't have imposed. I just know that if my mom put forth even half the effort that your dad has, I'd be so fucking happy, and I wanted that for you." He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about the invitation. I knew you wouldn't be happy. I'll call and explain ."

Luke opened his mouth to apologize, but nothing came out. He wasn't actually sorry. He didn't want his dad anywhere near his house, or Jay, or the baby. "I'll see you for dinner tomorrow," he said instead .

"I can't. I'm checking out a few open houses up in the park district, remember." Something clattered to the floor, and Jay sniffed loudly. "I should go ."

"I'm right outside, can I give you a ride home ?"

"I'm at the gallery, actually. I wanted Bonnie's opinion on the watercolors," he said. "I'll see you this weekend ."

"Jay..."

"I really do need to go. Their Christmas party is starting in a few minutes, and I still have to add glitter to my entry in the ugly sweater contest. I'll call your dad in the morning ."

The line went dead, and Luke cursed, long and loud and in every language he knew. It fogged up the inside of his windshield, and he had to turn the heater on and wait for it to fade before he could head back to his condo. His empty condo without so much as a houseplant .

After Liam, he'd gone to New York, and when he'd come back, the condo had just been there, full of all his stuff. In the two years since, he'd never thought of it as unwelcoming, but like one of those paintings with the hidden image, now that he'd seen it, he couldn't get it out of his head. He'd never made it a home .

It wasn't that he hadn't tried, but what did he know about homes? He'd never even slept in the same bedroom for a whole year before he moved into the frat house. There were more homey touches in his room in the New York guest suite than in his entire condo .

And Jay wasn't there .

Heading for the highway, Luke ignored the turn that would take him home. He couldn't stand the idea of sitting there and stewing. There was a winery just outside town that had a wonderful restaurant attached. Maybe the drive would clear his head .

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"This room gets excellent light, and there's a big backyard," the realtor said, her smile a little strained .

Jay sighed, looking around. It was a nice house, probably the best he'd seen all morning, but there was just something missing. "The kitchen is really small," he said, opening one of the half-dozen cupboards skeptically. "I like to cook." That was a complete lie, but he was still hopeful that Luke was planning on spending a lot of time in whatever house he bought .

"For the price they're asking," the realtor said, glancing at her sheet, "you'd still have room in your budget to remodel ."

He still wasn't sure what his budget actually was. Marcus had handled all of that, setting him up with a highly recommended service when he mentioned wanting to look for something more permanent than his tiny sublet. What he was sure of was that he didn't want to have to renovate a house .

"I think I'd like to see something else," he said .

"Of course. I can set up another viewing after the holidays." She scribbled vigorously on her notepad. He was pretty sure he wasn't going to hear from her again .

"Sounds great." He managed a strained smile as she showed him out, a brisk breeze making him shiver. "Happy Holidays," he added as she got into her car. She didn't reply .

He couldn't blame her. They'd been to six houses today, and he hadn't even considered any of them. It would be easy to put it down to bad sleep

since he'd been up most of the night, or an off mood caused by the mild nausea he'd had all morning, but he didn't think it was either .

He'd gotten into the car with every intention of giving the properties a chance, but the longer he drove, the more he worried. Would Luke even want to come so far out of town to see them? Would he want to be so far from the gallery and his studio? Even if he eventually put a studio in the house, it was going to be at least a year before he had the time and energy to start a project that involved .

In what little sleep he had managed last night, he'd had a nightmare about the baby getting into his paint thinner, and now he wasn't sure he wanted to have a studio in the house after all .

He was stuck in traffic on the highway when his phone chimed, and he grabbed it eagerly. It wasn't Luke, and his heart sank .

“Don't buy anything that's been remodeled just to be sold. They always cut corners, and you'll have to tear it all up to check the electrical and plumbing anyway. —Teddy”

“I didn't see anything I liked. —Jay”

“You're done already? —Marcus”

“Are you coming to dinner then? —Kurt”

“Pick up some rolls, would you? Teddy forgot them. —Cody”

Laughing a little tearily, Jay tried to keep his grip on his phone as it went crazy. His emotions had been out of control all day, and he felt like he was constantly on the edge of a breakdown .

“Nikolai got in, finally. He brought vodka. —Kurt”

“Do you mind if I sit you next to Cody? He just tried to dislocate Nikolai's arm. —Marcus”

“Also, butter. Luke used it all. —Cody”

“He's been baking all day. I don't think there's an empty Tupperware in a five-mile radius. —Cody”

“He made these new cookies I've never had before. Chocolate mint. They're delicious. —Cody”

He stared at the phone so long that his vision blurred, slamming his elbow on the steering wheel when someone honked. Traffic was moving again, so he tossed the phone onto the passenger seat and scrubbed at his eyes. He didn't look at it again until he was walking into a grocery store,

and when he did, he laughed so loud a little girl riding in the back of one of the carts shushed him .

"How long do you think you'll be? —Marcus "

"I forgot you can't have any drinks. Sorry. —Kurt "

"Can you grab a bottle of Ranch dressing while you're out? Teddy dropped the one we have, and it exploded. —Marcus "

"What are the odds that Nikolai is actually related to Russian mafia? Asking for a friend. —Cody "

"Didn't Greg say that his old landlady was ex-KGB? I don't think you should risk it. —Jay "

He tapped out his reply with one hand, grabbing bread and dressing with the other as he sped through the shelves .

"I was only going to hurt him a little. He keeps tripping and landing in my lap. —Cody "

"Did you ask him to stop. —Jay "

The longer he went without a reply, the funnier it got, and Jay found himself laughing under his breath as he handed his card over to the cashier. From the looks she was giving him, he probably wasn't as quiet as he thought .

"Ranch, rolls, and butter acquired. If you need anything else, say so now, 'cause I'm on my way out of the store. —Jay "

"I think that's everything. What did you say to Cody? He's blushing bright red. —Marcus "

"I'll tell you later. —Jay "

Tucking his phone into his pocket, he tried to ignore the fact that he still hadn't heard from Luke. He hadn't called Harry yet, either, the dread that surrounded that whole conversation making it hard to even think about it. In fact, if the rest of the guys hadn't made it so clear that he was expected, he'd have gone back to his apartment and hidden from the Carter men for the rest of the week .

The door was open when he got to Luke's condo, and he slipped inside without drawing attention to himself. Teddy was the only one who noticed, smiling at him vaguely as he pointed toward the kitchen. Ignoring Cody and Nikolai's bickering and Marcus' desperate attempts at refereeing, he slipped around the corner .

The kitchen looked like something had exploded. There was still dressing spattered halfway up the walls, and he could see some on the

ceiling. Flour dusted every surface, something he'd noticed was pretty standard in Luke's kitchen, but there were also puddles of water or oil here and there. The sink was piled with more dishes than Jay had realized Luke owned, and the whole room was hot and sticky with steam .

"I'm telling you, man, just ask... add another mutual fund to your portfolio," Kurt said, his eyes widening as he caught sight of Jay. "But we can talk about that another time. I'm going to go see if Cody has managed to kill Nikolai yet ."

It was almost comical, watching him scoot out of the kitchen at top speed, a smear of flour on his shiny black shoes. Luke, on the other hand, barely moved .

"You made it," he said quietly, wiping at the counter and knocking all the flour onto the floor .

"Yeah, the viewing didn't take as long as I expected. I brought dressing." Jay held up the bottle, trying to figure out where he could put it without getting the bottle filthy .

"Sorry about the mess. Teddy tried to help me by putting everything away." He glanced up briefly, those gorgeous green eyes jolting like an electric shock down Jay's spine. "I'll put those on the dining table," he said, stepping carefully through the mess. He was barefoot, chocolate smeared across his big toe, and it was hopelessly endearing .

"I've got it," Jay said, going to his toes for a kiss .

He'd meant it to be quick and sweet, a hello to reassure himself that everything was still solid. It didn't end up quite as he planned. Luke's hand landed on the curve of his lower back, his fingers digging into the top of his ass and dragging him close. His startled gasp gave the alpha the opening he needed to deepen the kiss, his tongue teasing all the sensitive spots in Jay's mouth until they were both groaning. He tasted like vodka and chocolate, and the mix went straight to Jay's head .

When they finally broke apart to breath, Jay was smiling. "Wow," he said, pressing his lips to the 5 o'clock shadow on Luke's jaw. The scratch of hair made his lips tingle. "Hi ."

"I missed you," Luke said, his throat bobbing. His eyes were intense, almost glowing, and Jay vowed to one day capture their color on canvas. "I'm sorry about yesterday ."

Shrugging uncomfortably, Jay tried to keep the smile on his face. "Thanks, but you were right. This is your home, and I shouldn't have gone behind your back."

"No, I wasn't right," Luke said, shaking his head. "I don't want this to be a case of mine and yours. That's how divorces and shitty relationships start. I want you to feel at home here, too, and that means I should have listened."

"How long did it take Cody to get that through your head?" Jay joked, immediately regretting it. "Sorry, habit."

Luke glanced off to the side, his throat clicking as he swallowed. "I did talk to Cody. He has good advice sometimes, and he likes putting that psychology degree to use."

"He's a smart guy," he agreed, leaning into Luke's chest. "So does that mean I don't have to call your dad? Because let me tell you, I've been dreading it all day. I kept coming up with these elaborate plans for how to let him know, including sending him a certified letter." He shuddered and tucked his head under Luke's chin. "My last resort option was asking Robert to do it, but that seemed like a cop-out."

"Move in with me."

Jay closed his mouth so fast he bit his tongue. Luke was glaring at the doorway to the living room, his lips pursed like he was trying to prevent any more words from escaping. Jay opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out, and he was left with his mouth hanging open in shock.

"Before you argue with me," Luke said after a moment, "I just want to point out that this isn't a sudden idea. This isn't me asking you to marry me all over again. Teddy had a really good idea last week, and I've been thinking about it ever since." He set Jay on his feet, pacing the two strides to the other side of the kitchen, and then turning around and coming back. "I don't like coming home to a house without you in it."

"I hate that you're looking for a house in the suburbs. I don't want to drive all the way out there and have nightmares about you taking off for Taos every time I try to sleep. I want to see you every day, make too many cookies for you while you're pregnant, and listen to you complain about all the weight you're putting on. We don't even have to share a room, I just want you nearby."

"Okay."

"I know this isn't what you wanted, but... What ?"

Jay cleared his throat. "Okay," he said slowly as if he was savoring the sounds .

"Are you serious?" Luke was staring at him, tension thrumming in the line of his shoulders until he looked like he was about to shatter apart .

"Yes? It might not be permanent, but there's no reason not to try. I was thinking about looking closer to downtown anyways. Traffic today was the worst." He startled as Luke whooped, grabbing him up in a bear hug that knocked the air out of him .

From the living room, Teddy's voice was raised high enough for them to hear. "I told you he'd say yes ."

Laughing, he braced himself on the alpha's big shoulders and kissed him. "I suppose we can't disappoint Teddy," he said .

"Wait till you hear what he's going to do to the place," Luke replied, spinning him around .

"I hope he's going to start with cleaning up this Ranch. I just got some in my hair ."

"M ARCUS WANTS to try ice skating again tomorrow," Cody said, yawning as he shuffled toward the door, the last of the group to leave .

Luke groaned, and Jay raised an eyebrow at the other omega .

"Try to picture Teddy on skates," Cody said, tucking his hands into his pockets and smiling when Jay burst out laughing .

"Marcus is almost as bad, and Kurt refuses to even try. And then there's Nikolai ..."

Cody rolled his eyes. "Fucking show off." He propped his shoulder against the doorway, leaning in conspiratorially. "He skates in circles around the others. Literally. Like a big, Russian asshole ."

"Sounds par for the course," Jay said, biting his lip to keep from laughing. His stomach was aching from all the stories that the brothers told over dinner, each trying to embarrass the others more .

"Hey, it's not like you're falling all over yourself, Mr. Military Black Ops," Luke said, shoving Cody out the door. "You don't get to complain if you don't bruise your ass ."

"I was just trying to warn you," he said, smirking, "but I'll take that rule under advisement ."

"I haven't been skating in years," Jay said, watching Luke lock up .

Freezing with one hand on the light switch, Luke shook his head. "Nope. Don't even think about it. I refuse to go out there and crack my tailbone again ."

"Aw," Jay said, pouting dramatically. "But I think it would be fun to watch you slip and slide all over the place ."

"Tough," Luke growled, grabbing him in for a kiss. "If I break my ass, you're going to be the one taking care of me ."

"Good point," Jay said, nipping his lips. "If anything, you're the one who's supposed to be pampering me ."

"Oh?" Luke's eyes darkened as he tipped his head to look down Jay's body, and Jay's heart sped up. "How about I run you a bath, and you can soak while I get your room ready ?"

For a moment, the words didn't compute. "You're not seriously going to make me sleep in the guest room, are you?" he asked, stepping back with his hands on his hips .

Luke held up his hands. "No, of course not. I just didn't want you to feel like you had to sleep in my room. I figured we'd set the guest room up as your space until the remodels are done, and then you can have the other master ."

Narrowing his eyes, Jay advanced on the alpha, stabbing him in the chest with his finger. "Or we could share a bedroom ."

"If you want," Luke said, swallowing hard as Jay kept going until they were chest to chest. "I just don't want you to feel pressured ."

"Great. No pressure," he said, leaning up until he could whisper right against Luke's lips. "I'm taking half your closet and half your bed. I like to sleep by the window ."

"Okay," Luke said, barely breathing. "I can do that. You can have more than half the closet; there's not much in there, and it's a

big closet ."

Jay nipped his lip. "I don't have much stuff, but I will keep that in mind. How about you run me a bath in an hour or so?" He pulled back when Luke snorted .

"I think you vastly overestimate both my stamina and how much energy I have right now," he said, smiling sheepishly .

Considering this thoughtfully, one finger tapping his lip, Jay nodded. "You drive a hard bargain. I will accept a rain check as long as it's upgraded to a bubble bath ."

Luke laughed. "Deal." He pulled Jay in with tentative hands on his hips .

"Deal," Jay repeated, humming encouragingly as he was manhandled. "I believe I was promised a bed." He scraped his teeth up the tendon of Luke's neck, smiling against his skin when the alpha hissed and pulled him in tighter .

"Bed, right." Luke tried to shuffle them toward the bedroom, but their legs kept getting tangled. Staring dazedly into the distance to down the hallway, he grumbled under his breath. Without pausing, or any visible effort, he scooped Jay up in his arms until they were nose to nose .

Wrapping his arms and legs around whatever he could grab, Jay gasped. "That was the hottest thing I've ever seen," he murmured, pressing light kisses to Luke's face .

"I'll keep that in mind," Luke said, walking more confidently toward the bedroom .

Each step was torture and bliss, their bodies rubbing together until he was so hard the zipper of his jeans was painful. He was so lost in the delicious sensations that he didn't even realize they'd reached the bedroom until Luke pressed him back on the bed .

Squirming up the blanket until he could stretch out, Jay dragged the hem of his t-shirt up over his head. He was attacking the button on his jeans when he realized that Luke was still just standing there .

"Not a spectator sport," he growled, rolling up on his knees to drag the alpha in for a kiss .

"You look incredible," Luke said against his lips, his voice awed. One of his hands slid up the curve of Jay's hip, hovering inches from the spot where his stomach was just starting to press outward. It wasn't like

Luke had never touched him there, but he always treated each time like a gift that might be taken away at any second .

"You can touch, you know," he said, dragging Luke's hand over to press against the bulge. It was tiny, barely a baby bump, but he'd already noticed how much it was throwing off his balance. Luke's hand was warm, almost hot, and it trembled slightly as he stroked the tight skin .

Luke leaned down and pressed a kiss to the high point of the mound, and Jay's heart thumped painfully in his chest. Leaning back on the bed, he settled more comfortably, content to let Luke look his fill. He was not expecting the other man to slide his hand down and cup the ridge of his erection .

"Fuck," he groaned, bucking into that warm hand. He reached down to unbutton his pants, but Luke knocked his hands away, stripping him with efficient movements. "You're overdressed," he said, tugging on Luke's t-shirt and trying to ignore the puff of flour that came off it .

"Enjoying the view," he said, dragging his lips down the curve of Jay's neck .

"You can't enjoy the view naked?" He arched into the pressure as Luke sucked at the sensitive spot where his neck met his shoulder .

"I don't want to get distracted," Luke muttered, dragging his tongue down to trace circles around the tight points of Jay's nipples .

"If you're not dis... distracted," Jay gasped, "you're not doing it right. Fuck. Do that again." He pushed his back into the mattress as that wicked tongue traced a zig-zag path down his ribs .

He giggled when Luke blew lightly on the ticklish skin of his hip. It turned into a moan when he licked across the inside of his thigh. Letting his leg fall open, he put the matter of clothing out of his mind .

Luke worshiped the little bump of his stomach, peppering it with kisses as he slid his hands down Jay's legs, spreading him wide so that he could settle in between his thighs. "You're so fucking beautiful," he said into the tender skin there. "Both of you ."

Reaching down to lace their fingers together, Jay groaned when Luke's tongue flickered across the head of his cock, making it slap against his stomach. Luke's hands were suddenly everywhere, stroking his belly,

digging into the globes of his ass, pinching his nipples with the perfect pressure. All he could do was writhe, every touch better than the last .

Slick fingers slid along the soft skin of his balls, and he arched, trying to get them where he wanted them. He whined in his throat when Luke stroked a single finger up the underside of his cock, ready for more than teasing .

The press of that first finger, sinking all the way to the second knuckle, was electric. Rocking back on it, he groaned, panting against Luke's mouth when the alpha surged up for a kiss. The second finger was even better, and he muffled a shout against the back of his hand as shocks of pleasure raced up and down his spine .

He lost track of anything but the bursts of pleasure behind his eyelids as Luke played him like a master. "Now," he groaned, reaching for Luke and catching a handful of hair. The alpha laughed as he yanked .

"Okay, okay. Bossy." There was the crinkle of foil, and Jay wanted to laugh .

"This one's not expired, is it?" he asked, nipping at Luke's lips when he kissed him hard .

"I don't think so," he said, cursing as he stroked lube over his cock. "Easier cleanup ."

Jay dug his teeth into the thick muscle of Luke's shoulder as the pressure mounted, Luke's big hands spreading him wide. Finally, with an almost audible 'pop' he slid in, and they both gasped. Every breath sent crackles of energy coiling along his nerves, and he held his breath, waiting for that first perfect thrust .

Only Luke wasn't moving. Holding himself above Jay, his muscles corded with tension, he sucked in a deep breath and groaned as the tiny shift caused a cascade of pleasure to swamp them both .

"Move," Jay whined. "Are you waiting for an engraved invitation ?"

"Not gonna last," Luke gasped .

"You can add it to my rain check," Jay snapped, bucking hard and moaning, low and filthy as that gained him another inch of that delicious fullness .

Luke snapped, slamming his hips forward, his voice cracking as he shouted his pleasure .

Every nerve in his body lit up like a Christmas tree, Jay could only hold on as the tension in his gut coiled tighter and tighter. His throat ached from the ragged noises tearing free of it, but the pleasure was so intense that it barely registered. Every thrust rattled through him, until he was right there, hovering on the edge .

“Close,” Luke growled, the next thrust hitting every perfect spot until Jay was wailing .

A firm, hot hand closed around his neglected erection, and he was gone, his back arching until his shoulders were the only thing left touching the bed. He shook apart, every thrust causing another flash of intense pleasure. He wanted to scream, but his throat clenched, no sound coming out .

Feeling Luke's rhythm stutter, he pried his eyes open, the last trembling pulses of pleasure still rattling through him. The alpha was glorious, sweat causing his tanned skin to glow in the light from the hallway. His eyes caught the light and burned from within as he stared down at Jay .

Their eyes met and held as he froze, his muscles leaping into sharp relief as he growled. Long and low, the sound was pure sex, and Jay's spent cock twitched with interest. He couldn't look away as Luke's jerked back into motion, his hips making a few more stuttering strokes as he slowly sank down until his weight was pressing Jay into the bed .

Foreheads together, they spent long minutes catching their breath, the air between them thick with emotions they'd never really addressed. It itched at Jay's skin, sapping his enjoyment of the moment until he couldn't stand it anymore .

“I love you,” he whispered, biting his lip. “I know it's a cliché, but I really needed to say it right now .”

Luke startled, sliding free of Jay's body, and they both groaned. “Oh,” he said after a moment. “I... um ...”

“Don't, please,” Jay said, sitting up slightly as Luke shifted to one side. “Don't say it unless you mean it .”

“Okay.” Tugging Jay in so that he was tucked up against his side, Luke waited for him to get comfortable. “If we're doing this now, then I guess I should say that I'm not sure if I love you or not. Love is kind of not my thing. I thought I loved Liam, but now, I'm not so sure .”

This was officially the most surreal conversation that Jay had ever had, sweaty and sticky with sex and barely coherent enough to form a sentence.

Luke wasn't having that problem, his chest still heaving as he tried to catch his breath .

"Vivian told me once that I was asking the wrong question," he said, and Jay couldn't help but laugh .

"Can we just make a rule right now that we don't bring your assistant into the bedroom?" he asked .

"Oh, hush. I have a point here," Luke said, kissing his temple. "She said I should think about why I dated so many artists. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but now I know." He glanced at Jay, a tentative smile on his face. "It was always you. I spent three weeks with you, and ten years trying to recreate the way you made me feel ."

Jay had to force his words out around the lump of his heart in his throat. "That sounds a lot like love to me," he said .

"Maybe," Luke said seriously, "but I've seen a lot of people do truly horrible things to the people they were supposed to love, and I want more than that for you ."

Rubbing his cheek against Luke's shoulder, Jay ignored the tears welling in his eyes. "I love you," he said, pressing one finger to Luke's lips. "I can take a rain check. Go to sleep ."

Luke smiled, the lines at the corner of his eyes crinkling as he pulled the blanket out from underneath them and tucked it around their shoulders .

It was a long time before Jay drifted off to sleep, but he didn't regret a second of it .

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"I need to go."
"Or you could stay ."

"Or I could go," Luke said, untangling Jay's hands from his t-shirt. "You wanted mocha ice cream, and I still have to pick up your Christmas present." Jay pouted, and Luke couldn't help lingering to press a kiss against that full bottom lip. "I'll be back in two hours. You can work on your watercolors ."

Jay grumbled, glaring at the watercolor palette he'd brought over from his studio. "Fine. Grab some whipped cream, too. Kurt goes through the stuff like water, and your Uncle is bringing pumpkin pie tomorrow ."

"I thought he was bringing apple," he said, pulling on his jacket .

"Both, and a chocolate silk," Jay said, picking up the watercolors and heading for the kitchen .

Grabbing him for one last kiss, Luke grinned at the mint and chocolate taste. He knew Jay had been sneaking cookies behind his back. "Your paintings are great, sweetheart. Just tilt your head ."

He was still laughing when he got to the car .

Driving anywhere in the city at this time of year was a terrible idea, but he needed the space for everything he had to pick up. He hit the bakery that Nikolai had recommended first, picking up an assortment of pastries for the Christmas morning present exchange. He thought about going to the

grocery store next, but he wasn't sure how long his last stop would take. Knowing his luck, he'd hesitate for so long that Jay's ice cream would melt .

He had to take a deep breath when he pulled into the parking lot of the jewelry store that Robert had recommended. Even the building screamed expensive, tinted windows protecting the privacy of the customers and a doorman to discourage the faint of heart or wallet. He was neither, but it still took effort to steady his nerves and get out of the car .

The interior was just as luxurious as the exterior, no gaudy display cases here. There were clusters of plush couches situated around sculptural tables at just the right height for viewing whatever pieces the sales associate brought out. The few displays positioned like artwork around the room showed off expensive sets dripping with diamonds .

"Welcome to Fire and Ice. Can I get you a glass of champagne?" an attractive young woman asked as he hesitated just inside the door .

He'd already been through the tour when he'd consulted with the master jeweler, so he shook his head. "I have an appointment with David," he said. He hadn't thought to ask if the clerks operated on commission, and now he wished he knew .

"Oh, he's expecting you. I'll let him know you're here," she said. She seemed cheerful enough as she disappeared through one of the doors at the back of the room, and he felt some of his guilt dissipate .

Too anxious to sit in one of the overstuffed chairs, he wandered toward the back of the room where the less ostentatious displays were clustered. His eyes lingered on the wide bands of an engagement set, and he couldn't help but imagine what it would look like on Jay's hand .

"That's one of our finest pieces," David said, stepping unobtrusively up beside him. "There are over twenty pave diamonds cut and set to pass light from stone to stone until the whole thing shines on even the cloudiest of days ."

"It's lovely," Luke said. He could just imagine sliding it onto Jay's finger, feeling it press against his palm when their fingers laced together. Watching it accumulate a coating of paint every time Jay even glanced at his studio. "I am glad I went with something a bit more functional, however ."

"Pave can be difficult to keep clean," David agreed. The master jeweler was quite the character. When Luke had first been

introduced, he'd done a double take. David's smooth face didn't give away a hint of his age, but his hair, bright blue today, and the impressive number of piercings visible above his shirt collar made him seem much younger than he'd been expecting. "I just picked your items up from our cleaner, and I must admit that they're my favorite ones this year. Shall we take a look?"

They moved to one of the viewing tables, and David produced two velvet presentation boxes. Luke leaned forward, his breath catching in his chest as the jeweler lifted the lid on the first box with gloved fingers. "Oh, wow," he breathed, reaching out but not quite willing to touch the shining watches inside and smear the mirror surface .

"They did turn out well, didn't they?" He picked up the more dazzling of the two watches, turning it so that it caught the light. "We've inlaid the stones exactly as you requested, and I tested the seal myself. You could smear them with axle grease and sandpaper, and they'll clean up good as new. There is a scratch resistant coating on the face that we recommend renewing once a year, or if it gets noticeably dull. And, of course, your inscription ..."

Luke accepted the watch when David held it out to him, keeping his hands on the buttery leather band as he flipped it over to read the back .

"You remind me to tilt my head," David read, his voice thoughtful. "I hope the script is large enough for your needs. It's a bit longer than the typical engraving. We scaled the other piece to match." He lifted the other watch out carefully, turning it so that Luke could read the words on the back. "Make cookies with me forever ."

"It's perfect," Luke said, tracing a finger along the cold metal of the back .

Both watches were the best of their kind, aircraft grade materials inlaid with white gold and platinum. He'd spent almost four hours agonizing over the stones, diamonds for the dress watch and the most vibrant emeralds they had available for the other. Clustered together in one corner of the face, the emeralds glittered with every shade of green imaginable, reminding Luke of the green on green canvas in his office .

"It's absolutely perfect," he said again. He set the watch back into the box, his fingers sinking into the plush velvet. "Can I see the other set?"

"Of course." With a sleight of hand that would have made a master magician jealous, the jeweler switched the boxes in one quick movement, pausing with his hand on the lid. "I must warn you, sir, that this set has already made three of our employees cry ."

Raising one eyebrow, Luke wiped his palms on his jeans. "That bad, huh?" he joked .

"See for yourself," David said, lifting the lid .

He hadn't been sure about the rings. Even if it had been a spur of the moment decision, Jay's dismissal of his offer had hurt. He wasn't sure he wanted to go through it again. The thought wouldn't leave him alone, though. When he'd caught himself mentally designing an engagement set during his last visit, he'd decided enough was enough .

There were four rings, two for each of them, the engagement and wedding bands made to fit together seamlessly. Having used up all his best ideas on the watches, it had taken him till closing to figure out what he wanted for the rings. It had been so obvious in hindsight, that he'd been worried it would look ridiculous .

It was the lake. He'd repeatedly been assured that the champagne gold bands wouldn't clash with Jay's hair or skin the way that ordinary gold did. Looking at the way the satin finish glowed, he couldn't wait to see it on Jay's hand. The stones were subtle washes of pale blue and white, curling like the waves around the star sapphire mounted on the engagement ring .

"Yes, that's the exact reaction," David said, handing him a tissue. "It's usually the inscriptions that do them in," he added, lifting the rings out of their velvet .

Luke took them with a trembling hand, turning them to read the engraving he'd chosen for Jay's rings. "It was always you" on the engagement ring, and "I love you, too" on the wedding band .

"We can, of course, add engraving to the other two rings if your fiancé would like for us to." He looked politely away as Luke blew his nose. "If these are to your liking," he said kindly, "I'll go package them up and give you time to collect yourself ."

Not trusting his voice, Luke nodded, although he had to squash the impulse to grab the boxes back when the jeweler disappeared through the doorway with them. Everything had turned out so much better than he'd

ever dreamed, but now the thought of giving any of it to Jay tied his stomach into knots. The ring was probably too much .

The ring was definitely too much. He'd barely moved in. Better just to put it away and give it to him some other time .

Jay had said he loved him, though. Sure, it was after sex, but maybe he meant it enough to say yes if Luke offered him the ring .

It was a terrible idea .

His terrible ideas had been working out for him okay lately .

"Here you are, Mr. Carter. You're all set." David presented him with two beautifully packaged and surprisingly heavy gift bags. "I've taken the liberty of separating the rings out, just in case you can't wait," he said with a wink .

"Thank you, David. I appreciate it." Luke smiled, offering his hand, but the other man was suddenly very interested in something outside .

"Son of a bitch," he muttered under his breath, then cast a startled glance at Luke. "Sir, if you would follow me, I believe you'll be more comfortable leaving through the back ."

"What?" Startled, Luke dug in his heels as David's fingers dug into his arm. "What do you mean — "

"I can't believe that idiot still hasn't signed yet." Luke's stepmother's strident whine overpowered the chime of the door, and he almost threw himself behind one of the armchairs to avoid her. "What do you mean he's... I'll call you back. Luke, how surprising ."

David's hand was still gripping his arm tightly, and he could tell from the look on the jeweler's face that he knew exactly what was going on. "Hello, Meredith. Happy holidays," he said, turning around slowly. He wasn't quite able to manage a smile, but he didn't bare his teeth and growl at her, either, so it felt like a victory .

"Trying to win back your little artist with expensive baubles? You must have really liked him," she said, her voice mocking. She'd had her face done again, the unnatural stillness in her features making her look like a bad wax model .

"Just picking up Christmas gifts," Luke said, resisting the urge to rub her face in his relationship. "As much as I'd love to chat, I've got to pick up some groceries, and I'm eager to get home." He

walked calmly across the store toward her. He refused to give her the satisfaction of giving her a wide berth .

It turned out to be a bad choice, her hand flashing out as he got within reach. Her nails were sharp, and they dug into his skin as she glared at him. "Don't think you can buy his affection back with those. He was only ever using you for your money," she hissed .

Maybe it was a sign of how much he'd grown up, or maybe it was just Jay, but he laughed in her face. "That's your method, Meredith, not his." He shook her off and continued out of the store with his head high .

"NO PEEKING," Luke said, covering Jay's eyes with one hand as he squeezed past him into the bedroom .

"Are those my Christmas presents?" Jay asked around a mouthful of mocha ice cream. He was using a mint chocolate chip cookie as a spoon, crumbs smeared all over his mouth. It was adorable, and he tasted like heaven when Luke gave in to the urge to kiss him .

"No," he said, sliding his palm over the barely-there lump of Jay's belly. His baby. It still made him a little shaky just thinking about it .

"Then why can't I look?" Without opening his eyes, shoved another cookie in his mouth sulkily .

Luke laughed, the tension he hadn't realized he was carrying draining out of his shoulders. He hadn't thought Meredith had gotten to him, but standing in front of Jay, he could feel her influence shaking loose .

"Because I risked life and limb for these packages, and I'm not letting you spoil the surprise." Pressing a kiss to Jay's nose, he ducked into his closet, dropping the gift bags behind his dust-covered golf bag .

"That sounds like a fun story ."

"It really isn't," he said, herding the omega ahead of him into the living room. "I ran into Meredith ."

Peering over his shoulder at the bedroom, Jay winced. "Ouch. Maybe I should check to be sure you have all your pieces ."

Luke cupped his chin, turning him around to press a kiss to his forehead. "No peeking."

"Can I have a hint?" Jay batted his lashes, leaning up and nuzzling Luke's lips. "Just a little one."

"It's not an elephant," he said dryly. "Or a monkey."

"There go my dreams of opening a circus. Oh well, more ice cream." Holding his last cookie over his head like a sword, Jay headed for the kitchen. "Did you get your dad's message about the dish he's bringing?" he asked as he dug around in the fridge. "I didn't understand a word of it. What's a mouse salad on toast?"

Luke laughed, the sound echoing around the kitchen loud enough to startle them both. "Oh, my God. I'd forgotten all about that," he said, propping his shoulder against the doorway. "It was something Mom made. I was about six, and they had a party— I don't remember what for. The actual name is French, something like cheese mousse and sea salt, but all I heard was mouse salad. It's just the fancy version of canned cheese and crackers."

Sticking a cookie into the quart of ice cream, Jay hummed happily. "Sounds delicious."

He wrapped an arm around Jay's waist, grabbing a spoon and stealing a bite of ice cream. "It was one of my favorites when I was a kid. I think I spent an entire month refusing to eat anything else."

"Hey!" Jay glared, curling protectively around the ice cream. "Mine."

"If you eat all of that yourself, you'll regret it."

"You don't know that," Jay said, stuffing an extra large piece of ice cream covered cookie in his mouth.

"I can extrapolate given the available data," he said, stealing another spoonful.

"Don't go using your lawyer mind tricks on me. It won't work." Jay leaned his head back on Luke's shoulder, pressing a kiss to his jaw and leaving a sticky ring of crumbs. "I could, however, be convinced to share in exchange for a present."

Shaking his head, Luke rubbed his chin against Jay's shoulder. "Are you seriously going to spoil your Christmas? You only have two more days to wait."

Jay pouted. "I haven't had a Christmas present since I left the carnival. I'm allowed to get excited," he said, stuffing another cookie in his mouth .

Nervous energy crackled in Luke's gut, his fingers smoothing Jay's shirt restlessly. Jay's hair floated around his face, clinging to his lips. The smell of his shampoo and Jay's naturally sweet smell mixed with the ice cream, and he couldn't imagine going back to an empty house. He couldn't even imagine skipping out on a lazy Saturday for anything less than a full-scale emergency at work .

Had he and Liam really been so badly matched? He didn't for a moment think that Meredith was right about the artist using him for his money; it just wasn't who Liam was. Once they'd gotten into their rut, though, it had taken something really drastic to shake them loose .

"I should send Liam a gift basket in Taos," he said, stealing another bite of ice cream when Jay blinked at him in surprise. "If he hadn't left me, I might not have found everything I was looking for ."

Blushing bright red, Jay buried his face in the container of ice cream. "I don't think I can finish this," he said, chewing his most recent cookie slowly .

"Told you so," Luke said, stealing the container and digging in. "I didn't get you a pony," he said when Jay swatted him on the hip .

"Well, I didn't get you a puppy," Jay said, munching on the last piece of his cookie. "It was a near thing, though ."

"I didn't get you a yacht," Luke said, making a note to have Teddy add some kind of dog area to one of the balconies when he remodeled .

"Don't you already have one?" Jay asked .

"No," he said, taking an aggressive bite of ice cream. He regretted it almost instantly as his teeth started to ache with the cold .

"Yes, you do," Jay said, pointing a sticky finger at him. "Kurt was complaining about not being able to go out on it ."

"Dad tried to give me a Carter Security model ship when they retired it last year. I refused." He set the quart down on the counter and waited for his mouth to warm up .

"So, what? It's just sitting at the marina with no one using it?" Crossing his arms, Jay looked down his nose at Luke thoughtfully .

"Uncle Robert and his niece Amelia use it sometimes," he said, shrugging. "Maybe Dad put it in Robert's name instead of mine. I don't really care."

"You're impossible." Shaking his head affectionately, Jay leaned up and rubbed his face against Luke's cheek, smearing ice cream residue across his skin and the rasp of his unshaved beard. "We should go out on this yacht when the weather is warm again."

"You're disgusting," he said, wiping at the sticky mess and only succeeding in spreading it to his fingers. "And I'm not accepting the yacht."

Jay hummed, wetting a paper towel to wipe his own face clean. "Is my Christmas present bigger than a yacht?"

Stealing the paper towel, Luke rubbed at his cheek. "No."

"I don't know about this," Jay said. "It's going to have to be a really nice present to make up for the yacht."

"You can buy your own yacht," he pointed out, trying to figure out how he'd ended up with ice cream in his hair.

"Or I could just use yours. Besides, Carter Securities are the best, and even an old display model must be completely amazing. I just want to push all the buttons and pretend I'm James Bond." He paused. "There aren't actually missiles on your yacht, are there?"

He sighed. "No. The defense system isn't currently active, and Uncle Robert wouldn't have stocked it with torpedoes." Jay laughed, but Luke was perfectly serious. "Dad's company outfits some of the most high-end clients in the world. Missiles and torpedoes are both options if the client wants them."

"Jesus." Jay grabbed another cookie, his eyes wide. "That's... terrifyingly cool." He took a bite of the cookie, then seemed to realize what he was doing. "Ugh. I need to get out of the kitchen, or I'm going to eat all of these and make myself sick. And don't say 'I told you so.' It's not attractive."

Luke mimed locking his lips. "Yes, sir. Whatever you say, sir."

Rolling his eyes, Jay wandered into the living room. There was a tree in the corner that had been delivered pre-decorated by the same designer that had done his condo. The stack of presents underneath was small only

because they'd moved the rest of the boxes to the guest bedroom after they started blocking the kitchen door .

"Is my present smaller than a breadbox ?"

"I'm not playing twenty questions, sweetheart. You can wait thirty-six hours to find out." Pulling him down onto the couch, Luke nuzzled the omega's neck. He had to shift the gaudy, glittery gorilla that had taken up residence on the corner cushion out of the way just to have room to spread out. "How did your painting go today ?"

Jay groaned, distracted just as Luke had hoped. "I love watercolors so much, but they make me want to tear my hair out. I really thought I was getting somewhere today, and then a drip! Right in the middle of the picture. I almost threw the palette. It was the perfect green !"

"Are you going to try to do a green canvas again?" he asked, picking up the remote to see if he could find a good movie to watch. He wasn't expecting Jay to go completely still next to him. "Jay ?"

"You... you saw that, huh?" Jay said, ducking his head. He fussed with the hem of his shirt, rubbing at a chocolate stain. "I forgot I had one at the gallery show ."

"You have more than one of them?" Leaning forward, he couldn't see much more than the curve of Jay's cheek, very nearly the same color as his hair .

Groaning, Jay buried his face in his hands. "This is so embarrassing. Yes, I have more than one. I lost two of them when Victor tore down my painting shed, but I've done three others since then. I only put one in the show because they look pretty similar ."

"Why is that embarrassing? I like the green on green one. It's very soothing. I'll have to see if I can convince you to sell me the other two so I can hang them in the conference room by my office ."

Jay squeaked, curling almost in half. "You bought the green canvas?" he asked Luke's thigh .

"...Yes... Is that a problem?" He smoothed a hand over Jay's back, frowning when he realized it was shaking. "What's wrong, sweetheart ?"

"Nothing," Jay said faintly. "No, everything." He sat up suddenly, and Luke was startled to see tears pouring down his face as he laughed. "I can't believe you bought 'Green Eyes .'"

"Is that what it's called? It's hanging in my office ."

Jay grabbed his stomach, propping his forehead against Luke's shoulder and gasping. "Oh, oh, ow. That's too funny." He shook his head. "I can't even remember what name I sent it in with. I always call them 'Green Eyes' in my head." A fresh burst of laughter made it impossible for him to continue .

Crossing his arms, Luke leaned against the arm of the couch and waited. "This must be a hell of a punchline," he muttered .

"It's you," Jay gasped, scrubbing at his face as he flopped backward onto the cushions, almost cackling. "It was always you ."

Luke blinked, shock raising the hairs on his arm. "You... Me... My ..."

"Yes," Jay said, howling with laughter. "I spent ten years trying to reproduce the green of your eyes because whenever I needed to feel happy, all I could think about was you and the boathouse ."

The tears on his cheeks didn't seem so funny now, and Luke dragged him upright into a hug. "Hey, hey. Breathe for me, baby. I've got you now ."

"I can't believe you ended up buying that." Jay rubbed his tear-stained cheeks on Luke's shirt, hiccuping with a painful cross between a giggle and a sob .

"It was always you," Luke whispered, pressing soothing kisses to his hair. "It just took us a little while ."

"Too long," Jay said. "Too fucking long ."

The tension in Luke's gut twisted into a knot, and he shot to his feet. "Wait here," he said, racing into the bedroom. Tearing the artfully arranged tissue paper off the gift bag, he dug around until he found the right box. There really wasn't any way to hide that it was a ring box, so he held it behind his back as he walked back to the living room, each step a little slower .

"This is a terrible idea," he said as soon as he cleared the doorway, Jay staring at him in confusion. He was beautiful, even with ice cream dripped down his front and his eyes red. "I just want that on the record before I do this ."

"Is that one of my presents?" Jay joked. "If I had known that crying worked, I'd have done it earlier ."

Pressing one finger to Jay's lips, he tried to think of a way to explain everything that didn't sound insane. "Ten years ago, Victor threw me out because he assumed that I was trying to marry rich. He didn't recognize who I was, and that's fine by me. You know I don't need to marry rich, and now, you don't either."

"Luke, what are you—" Jay's mouth snapped shut with a click as Luke lowered himself to one knee.

"I spent ten years looking for you in every artist I met. You spent ten years trying to find the perfect green. We both wasted too much time, and I really don't want to waste any more." He pulled the box from behind his back, and Jay gave a strangled squeak, fresh tears already dripping down his chin. "I'm not going to rush this, but I want both of us to know that I mean this. I meant it then, and I mean it now, and I'll mean it tomorrow. I want you to be sure of that. Hell, I want the whole world to be sure of it." He opened the box, too nervous to actually look at Jay's reaction. "Jay Collins, will you marry me?"

"Holy shit," Jay whispered, blinking hard as he stared at the ring. "I can't go boating with something like that on. I'll drown."

Helpless laughter welled up, and Luke couldn't resist the urge to sweep Jay up in his arms. "I'll buy you a life jacket," he whispered against the omega's lips. "Does that mean you'll say yes?"

"Of course I'll fucking say yes," Jay grumbled, digging his teeth into Luke's lower lip.

"You turned me down last time," Luke pointed out, spinning them around in a giddy circle.

"Shut up and put the ring on me."

"Sir, yes, sir," he said, making no move to do anything but kiss his fiancé, smiling the whole time.

"A w man. You couldn't have waited another week?
" Kurt asked, sweeping Jay up into a bear hug. "I had money on
New Year's Eve ."

"That's what you get for betting against Teddy. You know he's
practically psychic," Cody said, nudging Kurt with one massive
shoulder .

"Ignore them," Marcus said, smiling from where he was
juggling a pile of gifts. "Congratulations. We're very happy for you,
aren't we?" He glared at the other two, shoving a stack of boxes into
Kurt's arms .

"Right," Kurt said, grunting as more boxes were stacked on
top. "Thrilled. Congrats. Many blessings on you both ."

"Presents go in the guest room," Jay said, biting his lip to
keep from laughing .

The party wasn't scheduled to officially start for another half an hour,
but people had been trickling in all morning, starting with Cody. Jay wasn't
actually sure when the omega had arrived since he'd let himself in with his
own key and had been halfway through peeling a bag of potatoes when Jay
had stumbled into the kitchen. That had been how he'd learned that all of
the brothers had keys to each other's houses and weren't afraid to use them .

Fortunately, Teddy had arrived next. The architect made the best coffee
that Jay had ever tasted, and he didn't even mind that it was decaf .

Checking the time on his phone, Jay grabbed a sugar cookie off the
plate by the door and stuffed it in his mouth. Cody gave him a concerned

glance as Marcus and Kurt filtered back into the living room, but he shook his head. He'd give Luke five more minutes .

"Knock, knock. We're here." A stately omega with silver hair stuck his head around the door and smiled. "Jay, good to see you again. Where should we put the food ?"

"Kitchen, please, Robert," Jay said, pressing a kiss to the papery skin of his cheek. He smelled heavily of cologne, more so than the few times they'd interacted previously .

"On it," the older man said with a salute. He took a few steps into the room, and then paused, glancing around like he'd forgotten something. "One moment." He smiled tightly at Jay and stuck his head back into the hallway. "Come on, Harry. You can't hide out here all night ."

"I'm not hiding, I'm enjoying the view ."

"Of the hallway. Right, that's enough of that." Striding back into the room, Robert had one arm hooked through the elbow of a tall alpha. He didn't seem to care that everyone was watching as he manhandled him across the room and into the kitchen .

Harry Carter tried to smile charmingly, but it fell a bit flat the way he kept scanning the room. He was a handsome man, and if it hadn't been for the hefty amount of gray in his salt and pepper hair, he could have passed as Luke's older brother. Luke had his shoulders, broad but not bulky. His face was more aggressive than his son's, with a stubborn jaw and a nose that had been broken more than once. Jay wondered if that was one area Luke took after his mother, or if it was a throwback to some ancient ancestor .

As the pair disappeared into the kitchen, Jay checked the time on his phone. It was only three minutes since the last time he'd checked, and he sighed .

"I'll be right back," he told Cody, gesturing toward the bedrooms .

The omega rolled his eyes. "Good luck," he said, not even glancing at Nikolai as the alpha draped himself over the back of his chair .

"You are needing to be hired a bodyguard with ring like that," the Russian said, ignoring the elbow Cody jabbed him with as he took Jay's hand in his. "I am knowing people ."

"He doesn't need a mafia bodyguard," Cody growled. "Do not, under any circumstances, trust any of Nikolai's

recommendations unless it involves bakeries or tailors ."

"I'll keep that in mind," Jay said, slipping his hand out of Nikolai's gentle hold .

"You are not complaining when I find you best translator in Eastern Europe, but now I am never recommending trustworthy people ?"

"He tried to kill us and steal our stuff !"

"Was only test to make sure you are not sleeping. He is very sorry ."

He'd learned a long time ago that it was best not to ask, so Jay put his head down and ignored their bickering. The master bedroom looked like it had been hit by a tornado, clothes and pieces of tape-covered wrapping paper strewn all over the bed and floor. The bathroom door was open, and he could hear quiet cursing coming from inside .

Leaning against the doorway, Jay watched Luke fumble with a pair of sapphire cufflinks. He'd changed shirts again, and his hair was back to sticking up every which way. Even as Jay watched, he ran a hand through it, then cursed and tried to make it lay flat again .

"Vivian is running late, but she'll be here before the food is ready, and your dad just arrived," he said, stepping forward and swatting Luke's hands away from his shirt. "Robert's dragging him around on a tour. You didn't tell me you look just like him ."

"We don't look anything alike," Luke snapped, then took a deep breath, visibly shaking off some of his tension. "My grandmother accused my mom of having an affair when I was born, I look so different from him ."

"Maybe in the face," Jay said, sliding the cufflinks into place and straightening his collar, "but you have his build ."

Luke grunted, stepping back to check his appearance in the mirror. "What do you think ?"

Humming, he grinned and leaned up on his toes for a kiss. "I think I'm the luckiest guy in the world ."

Warm lips pressed against his for a moment before Luke pulled back. "You don't think the cufflinks are too much? I wanted them to match the ring, but I'm not sure they go with this shirt." He picked at the crisp white dress shirt that was the sixth shirt that he'd tried on so far, that Jay knew about .

"I think literally no one is going to be thinking about your cufflinks, lover." He kissed down the edge of Luke's jaw. "I do, however, think that they're going to start wondering what we're up to if we don't get out there ."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Luke said, pulling their hips together. "We could just stay here and forget about the party ."

"Or we could go greet our guests, and you could say hi to your family," Jay said, stepping back until Luke was forced to let him go .

"I like my idea better," he said, fussing with his hair in the mirror .

"It's a good idea, not gonna lie, but mine is more in the spirit of Christmas." Taking a page from an omega that had clearly had plenty of experience dealing with Carter men, he hooked his arm through Luke's and dragged him toward the door. "You can't hide in here all night ."

"I'm not hiding, I haven't put on cologne yet," Luke said, making a grab for the doorway .

Jay bit off a laugh, feeling just a touch of deja vu. "Robert's wearing enough for both of you. I think he's nervous about tonight, so you better be nice." He didn't even slow down, pulling the alpha with him into the hall .

Luke snorted. "What does he have to be nervous about ?"

"I don't think he gets to spend many Christmases with your dad ."

"He doesn't. Dad's always off with his girlfriends, or Meredith after they were married." Luke glared at the wall, digging his heels in as they cleared the bedroom .

"How sad," Jay said, spinning them so he could push Luke along and not caring a bit that everyone would see. "It must be hard for him to be apart for the holidays ."

"Why? It's not like they don't spend tons of time together otherwise. They have drinks together a couple times a month. The holidays are for loved ones." He jumped when Jay pinched his ass, sliding a few feet closer to the end of the hallway .

Jay rolled his eyes. "So just because your dad doesn't love him back, it doesn't count ?"

It was convenient that Nikolai and Cody were still bickering, their voices blocking anyone from hearing what was going on in the hallway. Luke stopped dead, his voice rising in shock. "Uncle Robert is in love with Dad?"

The conversation in the living room fell silent, and Jay clamped his hand over Luke's mouth. "Sorry, guys," he called, trying to keep his voice cheerful and only partially succeeding. "We'll be out in a second."

"Don't hurry on our account," Marcus called back.

Luke clamped a hand around his wrist, dragging it away from his mouth. "What do you mean Uncle Robert is in love with my dad?" he said, barely putting any sound behind the words like he was afraid that saying them would make them true.

"I thought you knew," Jay hissed. "I mean, I've only met him three or four times, and even I could put that together. I thought it was just something people didn't mention because they were being polite!"

"No!" Luke gestured broadly, running a hand through his hair and making it stand on end. "I never... I mean, sure I wondered why they were best friends, but... He's..." He trailed off, staring at Jay in horror. "Oh, my God. That's why Meredith always hated him." Sliding down one wall, he sank to the ground and groaned. "Fuck. Why did I never notice that? Poor Uncle Robert."

Jay glanced at the mouth of the hallway, the only thing in view was the dark front door with its holiday wreath. Shrugging, he settled down next to Luke. "I'm sure it wasn't something he went out of his way to broadcast. Things like that can ruin friendships."

"Yeah, but... God, Dad practically paraded his girlfriends in front of Robert like a total asshole. I would have kicked his ass if I'd known." Luke glared at the floor, his shoulders tense enough to strain the tailored shirt.

"Also probably a reason that he didn't tell you," he pointed out. "He just wants you and your dad to get along."

"He's been more my dad than Harry ever was. After Mom died, Dad would just leave me with him for weeks." He growled, slamming his fist on the floor. "What a jerk, using him like that. I've always

thought so, but now... Now, you see why I didn't want him to come to the party ."

"Well, your uncle seems to have forgiven him." He nudged Luke with his shoulder. "If he's not furious about it, maybe don't call the firing squad just yet ."

Luke stared at him for a long time, his green eyes dull as he argued with himself. Jay could actually see the color change as he finally came to a decision. "So you admit," he said, falling short of teasing, "that I can call the firing squad ."

"Maybe," Jay said. "Possibly. If you promise me one thing." Luke raised his eyebrows, and Jay grinned. "Don't ask Nikolai for recommendations ."

It wasn't nearly as funny as Luke made it seem, throwing his head back and laughing loud and long enough that Marcus stuck his head around the end of the hallway in concern. Jay waved him off, getting carefully to his feet, one hand on the gentle curve of belly that was throwing off his balance .

"Come on," he said, holding out his hand. "We should really get to our party ."

Luke groaned, letting Jay pull him to his feet. "If I have to," he said, pulling Jay in for a kiss .

"No rain checks," Jay said, not even slightly sorry as he dragged Luke out to face his father .

Twenty minutes later, he was regretting that decision .

"So how have you been, kiddo," Robert asked, tension showing in the lines around his mouth .

"Fine," Luke said, not looking up from the untouched glass of cider he was holding .

"When do you start renovations? Harry, you remember the renovations that Luke is going to do?" He smiled broadly, slumping a little when he realized that Harry wasn't paying any attention, staring at his glass in an almost identical pose as his son .

Unable to stand another round of single syllable answers, Jay jumped in. "We'll probably start them in January, just as soon as the construction teams go back to work. Teddy's got the plans drawn up and ready to go, so we're hoping it'll be a quick job." He smiled tightly at Teddy, trying to

psychically encourage him to pick up the conversation. The alpha blinked at him vaguely, then jumped .

"It shouldn't be more than a few weeks. This building was constructed very logically, so there shouldn't be any surprises ."

Jay sighed in relief, sagging against Luke's side; he didn't seem to notice. Glancing at the clock, he tried to remember how long they had left before dinner was ready and if there was any possible way to speed up the process. He definitely couldn't take another two hours of this, he'd strangle his fiancé first .

Shaking himself slightly, he found he'd lost the thread of the conversation .

"I was in India last year," Marcus said, smiling even though Jay could see him stomping on Kurt's foot under the coffee table. "It's a beautiful country ."

"I've been there a few times to run a training course," Kurt said, stuffing his phone back between the couch cushions with a grimace. "Great food ."

"It's too spicy," Harry said suddenly, his voice a little too loud. "Always gives me heartburn ."

"Some people like spicy food," Luke muttered .

"You never did," Harry said, laughing awkwardly. Jay was starting to believe that rumors of his charm had been greatly exaggerated. "Could barely get you to eat spaghetti sauce when you were a kid ."

"He learned to eat spicy food when we were in Singapore," Robert interjected gently. "You remember how the food was when we were there ."

Harry shuddered. "Nice people," he said, "but I thought I'd be better off just cauterizing the inside of my mouth. We had that one dish, the little doughy things... I hurt so bad, I thought I was going to die ."

Luke opened his mouth, and Jay shoved his elbow into his ribs, disguising it as a cough .

"I always found that no matter how hot a country's food is, if you start by acclimatizing yourself to the desserts, it's easier to work your way up," Cody said, giving Jay a sympathetic look .

"Really?" Harry said, leaning forward. "I'll have to keep that in mind the next time this idiot drags me off to some third world country ."

Robert sniffed. "Wasn't it Japan where you accidentally ate the garnish and ended up crying in the washroom ?"

"Now, now. Nobody needs to hear about that," Harry said, raising his hands in surrender. "Unless, of course, you want me to tell them about the time you passed out drunk in Ireland and woke up in Monaco ."

"Oh, this I've got to hear," Kurt said, scooting to the edge of his seat .

"It's really not that interesting," Robert said .

"So we're in Ireland for a soccer game," Harry said, raising his voice to drown out Robert's objections. "Our team lost, and badly." Robert reached over to cover his mouth, and he leaned back, laughing as the omega stretched out almost on top of him. "So we hit this bar, right? But everyone is celebrating the win, and it just pisses us off... Robert, dear, you know I love you, but your wallet is digging into my hip." He caught Robert by the waist, sliding him to the side until he was tucked up under Harry's arm, a flush creeping up his neck .

"Excuse me," Luke said, shooting to his feet and stalking out of the room .

"Shit, sorry. I'll be right back." Jay scrambled after Luke. "Teddy, if you hear the timer, can you please pull the meat out of the oven. Not the potatoes, though. They need an extra fifteen minutes ."

"Meat, yes. Potatoes, no. Got it ."

He wasn't entirely surprised to find Luke holed up in the bathroom again, but he was surprised that the door was locked. "Luke ?"

"I need a few minutes," came the clipped response. "I am trying really hard not to say anything that any of us will regret. I can understand why Uncle Robert doesn't bring it up, but it doesn't make it any easier to watch ."

"It's fine," Jay said, surprised to find that he meant it. "I'll let you know when the food is ready ."

"I won't be that long," he said. "Promise ."

"No rain checks," Jay said, smiling slightly as he walked back toward the living room .

He probably should have expected someone to follow them, but even if he had, it wouldn't have been Harry .

"Is everything okay?" the older man asked, fidgeting with his tie and looking everywhere but at the bedroom door .

"It's fine. He'll be out in a few minutes." He took a few steps down the hallway, but Harry just stood there, not quite blocking the way, but not leaving a comfortable amount of space, either .

"His mother used to do that." Grimacing like that hadn't been what he'd meant to say, he sighed. "She'd hide out in the bathroom when she was mad at me, sometimes for hours." He glanced up at Jay, his eyes the same changeable green as his son's. "He takes after her, you know. Nobody ever believes we're related ."

"I do," Jay said, leaning against the wall .

"I'm not sure that's a compliment," Harry said. When he smiled, it lifted his whole face, and Jay could see a hint of that legendary charm. "He was a good kid. Great, even." His smile faded, and he slumped. "It was all her. The minute she died, everything fell apart. He wouldn't sleep, wouldn't eat. The only time he stopped screaming was when Robert was around. He lost six pounds the week after she died ."

Shifting uncomfortably, Jay debated interrupting, but ultimately he wanted to know. "I don't think he remembers that ."

"Good. He's better off not. Awful time." He turned and leaned against the wall on the other side of the hallway, leaving a wide path for Jay to escape to the living room .

He didn't move .

"Luke's mother, Sarah, she grew up in South Africa. She had property there, family. I had to go out of the country to handle it all, and I wasn't about to make Luke go through all the vaccinations to go. I left him with Robert, and he gained back every ounce he'd lost. He slept through the night again, and he looked so happy... I took him back for three days, and he cried the whole time." He shook his head. "I thought all he needed was a mother, but that went wrong, too ."

Jay chewed his lip. "Maybe," he said, choosing his words carefully, "what he needed was the love of his family ."

Harry snorted. "I figured that out twenty years too late. My ex-wife, she drags me to these marriage counselors. Quacks, the lot of them, but over the years, I've heard enough of their nonsense for the bits of truth in there to sink in." He smiled a completely different smile from before, this one making him look years older. "I was a terrible husband, a worse father, and now it's too little too late. I keep trying to tell Robert that, but he's never listened to anybody but himself. I can't stand to disappoint him, too."

"I don't think it's too little, too late." Patting the older man on the arm, he tried to smile. "I think you just have to be consistent. It took a long time to get here, it'll take just as long to get somewhere better."

"Anywhere is an improvement," he muttered. "Even if it takes me till I'm in my grave."

"Hopefully it won't be that long," Jay said, although he had his doubts.

"You have no idea how stubborn we Carters can be."

"I have a few ideas."

They smiled at each other, and Jay was just about to suggest that they went to join the others when the front door swung open with a bang.

"Harry," a tall brunette in a dark fur coat sobbed dramatically, draped against the door frame as though she'd collapse without the support. "Harry, how could you!"

"Oh, shit."

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Every time he thought about it, all the years of teasing and women, Luke had to fight the urge to plant his fist in his father's face. It wasn't like it would do anyone any good. No matter what Jay said, he knew better than anyone what an oblivious asshole his father could be .

For Jay, though... For Jay, he'd try .

Straightening his shoulders, Luke smoothed his hair down. He was going to go out there and enjoy having his brothers nearby, and nothing Harry Carter did was going to stop him .

“You son of a bitch! How could you do this to me ?”

Stopping just short of the door to the bedroom, Luke froze, every muscle in his back knotting with tension in the space of a heartbeat. This was every nightmare he'd ever had rolled up in tinsel and presented with a side of gravy .

“What the hell?” he said to the empty room. He took a single step forward, almost stomping as he peered down the hallway .

Meredith was draped across his father's chest, beating him with her handbag and weeping. Her face was artfully covered by her hair, but he would bet that stupid yacht that her eyes were dry. “I had to borrow money from Marilyn Cosgrove to pay for dinner. My card was declined! Declined. Me. In front of the entire board.” She wailed dramatically, smacking him across the cheek. “I'm never going to be able to show my face again. How could you? And at Christmas !”

“Meredith, honey, the judge notified you weeks ago that the accounts were going to be frozen.” Harry patted her awkwardly on

the back, flinching as the dainty chain strap caught the hair at his temple. He didn't make any move to dodge her hits, but she was clinging to him so firmly with one clawed hand that it would take a crowbar to pry her off .

"What the hell?" Luke said again, stomping further down the hall with each word .

Robert came into view as he cleared the arch into the living room, hovering just out of reach with his hands fisted at his sides. "Harry's accounts were frozen, too, so you may as well move along. No one here is going to fall for your sob story ."

"Robert," Harry said, glaring at the omega when Meredith sobbed into his shoulder. "I'm sorry about dinner, sweetheart. I didn't think the hold was going on until after the first of the year ."

Subsiding with a hurt look, Robert stormed toward the kitchen. "Where is that vodka?" he asked Nikolai as he passed. "I have a feeling we're going to need it ."

"I will help," the Russian said in perfect, unaccented English. He whispered something in Cody's ear before he disappeared after Robert, his eyes hard as they stared at Meredith, or maybe Harry .

She didn't notice any of it, dropping her handbag in favor of slapping Harry with her bare hand. "You selfish son of a bitch," she said, her hair briefly revealing her rage-crinkled face. "If you would have just signed the papers, this would have all been decided already ."

"I'm sure that would have worked out brilliantly for everyone," Kurt muttered, standing protectively in front of Jay and Teddy. The architect looked vaguely distressed, a red mark across his face. Luke wondered if he'd tried to remove Meredith already .

"I've already asked you once to leave," Jay said, ignoring everyone else. "If you don't get out of my house, I'm calling security ."

"Do you hear that?" she shrieked, collapsing against Harry's chest, the nails on both razor sharp hands stabbing into his arms. "How dare that little freeloading gold-digger threaten me, Harry. I can't believe you'd let him speak to me that way ."

"What. The. Hell?" Luke roared .

Everyone froze, even Meredith staring at him with a deer-in-the-headlights look on her face. It wasn't a pretty look, accentuating the lines of stress that creased her heavy makeup .

"Luke." Jay crossed the room, latching onto his arm. He probably thought he was stopping Luke from doing something he'd regret, but his warmth was comforting because it gave Luke the strength to stand up to his stepmother's glare .

"Get out of my house," Luke said, pointing at the door .

"Harry..." she wailed, sobbing loudly into his shoulder .

Luke watched his father look at him, then at her, and he grit his teeth and turned to stare at the wall .

"Meredith, you should go ."

His neck popped as he jerked back around to stare in surprise. With an air of long practice, Harry extricated himself from Meredith's deadly talons, setting her on her feet in the doorway .

She was so startled that she forgot to keep up her act. "What?" she asked, her voice cracking .

"Luke has guests, and you're making a scene," Harry said, pulling out his wallet. "Here's a couple hundred dollars. The house on Melrose is stocked with enough food to last a couple weeks, and the bills are paid ."

"You're throwing me out?" she asked. Her lip quivered artfully, but the lines between her brows were getting deeper as Harry pressed the cash into her hand. "You're throwing me out !"

"I'm throwing you out," Luke said, stepping up next to his father and crossing his arms .

"Shut up, Luke," she snapped. "Go play house with your little slut, Mommy and Daddy are talking." She turned back to Harry, her hands fisting around the money. "It's not even his house! You think I'm not fully aware that Robert owns this building ?"

"This is my house," Luke growled, reaching for his phone. Jay caught his hand, phone already pressed to his ear. "And you'd best watch your mouth when it comes to talking about my fiancé ."

"Security is on their way," Jay said suddenly. "If you don't want to cause an even bigger scene, you should leave ."

Meredith laughed cruelly. "If they so much as lay a hand on me, my lawyer can be here in five minutes ."

"Meredith, this isn't going to look good in court," Harry said, running a hand down her arm to try and soothe her. She slapped it away .

"I'm not leaving until you sign the damned papers," she hissed. "You want me to disappear so you can feed Robert's happy family fantasy, then that's my price ."

"Leave him out of this," Harry growled .

Jay tried to intercede, and Luke caught him around the waist. Cody was there a second later. "Let's go to the kitchen, okay? Nobody needs to be here for this," he said, wrapping one massive arm around Jay's shoulder .

"But..." Cody dropped a pointed look at Jay's waist, and he subsided with a frown .

"Robert will want the company," he said, pushing Jay and Teddy into the kitchen and positioning himself so that he blocked the door. He met Luke's eye and nodded .

"What's wrong, Harry? You don't want me to tell everyone how that freak has been panting at your heels for the last thirty years?" she taunted, her voice rising until Luke was very grateful that all the condos on this floor were empty .

In the distance, the elevator dinged, and Luke watched his father swallow back whatever he'd been about to say. "Go home, Meredith. It's Christmas Eve, and I don't want to argue with you ."

"I'm calling my lawyer," she said, loud enough for the security guards coming down the hall to hesitate .

"Call the police," Luke told them. "This is above your pay grade." One of the men nodded gratefully, getting on his radio .

Marcus rested a hand on his arm, leaning in as they watched Meredith dig her phone out of her coat. "Where do you want us?" he asked, gesturing at Kurt .

"Keep her out of the kitchen," Luke said. "I don't want Jay to have to deal with her ."

"Get over here," Meredith snapped into her phone before stabbing the power button .

"Don't drag this out," Harry said. "We can talk about the divorce after New Year's, but I already told you that I'm not signing away the trust fund I set up for Luke's children ."

Luke jerked, staring at his father in surprise. Harry wouldn't meet his eyes .

"It doesn't matter if you sign or not. Luke doesn't have any kids, so the fund is still in your name. I've already filed the paperwork to have it added to the settlement, along with my half of your company." She stabbed him in the chest with one long finger. "You can go to hell, you piece of shit. I'm getting what I deserve."

"If only," Marcus muttered, shifting slightly as Nikolai slipped back out of the kitchen.

"I know people," he said, draping himself along Cody's side.

"No," Cody said regretfully, the muscles of his arms bulging as he shifted.

"That company existed before you were ever married. You aren't entitled to it." Luke took a step forward, gratified when she stepped back.

"Shut up!" Meredith shrieked. "I know my rights. I never signed a prenup, and all it takes is the right judge, and I get everything."

Luke smiled, and she took another step back. "Unless all company contracts are written in such a way as to exclude you from any share of participation. Which they are," he said, satisfaction leaking into his voice. "I know because I review them every year."

She lunged at him, getting in one good swipe of nails across his face before someone dragged her back.

"For God's sake, woman. Can't you keep yourself under control for fifteen fucking minutes?" A tall, blond alpha glared down at her, his face set in forbidding lines. She didn't seem to care, but Luke felt all the blood flow out of his face.

Even after ten years, he'd never forget Victor Danville.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he growled, one hand pressed to his stinging cheek. He was grateful that Jay was in the kitchen.

Victor glanced at him without a hint of recognition. "I am representing Mrs. Carter." He offered his business card with a flourish.

Luke laughed. "I know who you are, believe me." The other man preened like it had been a compliment, and he bit his tongue to keep from saying anything he'd regret.

"Go get in the car," Victor told Meredith, his voice stern.

She ignored him completely. "Is what he said true? You said I could get half the company, Victor," she whined .

"We'll discuss it later, Meredith," he said, casting pointed glances at their audience. Luke felt like telling him that he was wasting his time; crowds only ever encouraged her to greater antics .

"I want to discuss it now," she said, her voice hitting a pitch that made all of them wince. "You promised that I would have more than enough money to live off of for the rest of my life ."

"And you will," he snapped. Lowering his voice, he bared his teeth at her in the kind of smile you'd see on an alligator. "There's still the trust fund ."

"Actually, there isn't ."

Luke winced, turning slowly to watch Jay walk across the room, his head held high .

"Jay? What are you doing here?" Victor said, his eyes narrowing. "Still sponging off people with better sense than you ?"

"Hey," Luke growled, stepping forward, but Jay got there first .

"Actually," he said, leaning against Luke's side, "I have money of my own now, or did you not realize that Dad left me more of the estate than Mom?" From the way Victor's eyes widened, he hadn't. "I'm here celebrating Christmas with my fiancé," Jay continued, flashing the ring. "And this time next year, Luke and I will be celebrating it with our daughter ."

"Or son," Luke said, failing to keep the amusement out of his voice as both Victor and Meredith dropped their heads and stared in dismay at Jay's waist. The bump wasn't much, but it was easily visible in the fitted shirt he was wearing .

"No!" Meredith screamed, her face twisting with rage. "No, no no. How? Where did you even come from? I sent that other little slut to Taos, and there was no one !"

Too stunned to react, Luke tucked Jay behind him, grateful when his father stepped between them and his wife's meltdown. "You sent the invitation to Liam?" he said, his voice breaking .

"Meredith, I think you should leave. Now," Harry said. Luke swallowed hard as his father crossed his arms and loomed in the

doorway .

"The police just pulled up," Robert said, poking his head out the door of the kitchen. "May I recommend a tactical retreat ?"

"They took their time," Cody muttered, shifting aside as the older omega squeezed by .

"Christmas," Nikolai said, stepping away to stand at Robert's shoulder .

"You should go, Meredith. You don't want mugshots getting out to the ladies of the board," Robert said, more kindly than Luke would have been able to manage .

"Oh, shut up. You just want me out of the picture so you can indulge in your creepy fantasies," she snapped .

"Meredith." Victor tried to nudge her toward the elevator, but she just slipped around him like water .

"He's never going to love you back, you disgusting freak. That's why he paraded all those women in front of you for years ."

"Leave Robert out of this," Harry said, stepping forward until he was looming over her .

Unconcerned, Robert reached out and dragged him backward by the back of his belt. "Really, Harry? I haven't needed an alpha to fight my battles since I was fifteen ."

Luke watched in shock as his father subsided with a grumble. "That's not what you were saying in Cancun," he said sulkily .

"And the next time I'm being mugged, you are more than welcome to jump right in and help. Where was I?" Robert asked thoughtfully. "Right. The police." As if summoned by his words, the elevator dinged, and two uniformed officers stepped out, immediately going over to consult with the security guards who were watching like they wished they had popcorn. "And there they are ."

Victor had stepped back, separating himself from the goings-on, but Meredith didn't seem to notice. Stalking forward until she was nose to nose with Robert, she spat in his face. "Only a blind man would miss how you flaunt yourself in front of him, but you're never going to have him ."

"So you've said," Robert said, wiping his cheek with a grimace. "Unlike you, dear, I've never placed any requirements on my friendship with Harry. I'm aware that he doesn't return my feelings, and that has nothing to do with the fact that he's still my best friend."

Luke missed Meredith's reply as his father stumbled into him, their shoulders crashing together. He caught him by the shoulders, steadying him as he stared in shock at the back of Robert's head.

"What?" Harry said faintly, and Luke was surprised when he started to laugh.

"Sirs, if you'll step back," one of the officers said, stepping forward. "We'll take it from here."

"Like hell you will. If you lay a hand on me, I'll sue. I'll have your jobs," Meredith said, yanking her arm out of reach. "Victor, tell them."

"Meredith, as your lawyer, I advise you to cooperate with the officers," Victor stared down the hallway as she swung around to glare at him.

"Oh no, you don't," she hissed, swatting at the officer who was still trying to get a hold on her arm. "You don't get to abandon me now, you bastard."

"We should go into the kitchen," Jay said, tugging on Luke's arm. He was watching Harry with a concerned expression. "Let them take care of this."

"You know," Victor said, his voice pitched to carry over Meredith's, "I wouldn't invest too much into your relationship. You haven't known him long enough to realize this, but my stepson is known for his flightiness. He barely stays in one place long enough to settle down. My poor wife has been left worrying that he's died half the time."

"Hard to settle down when you're homeless," Luke snapped, trying to urge his father toward the kitchen. Harry was practically a dead weight in his arms, and he was grateful to pass him to Cody as Nikolai urged Robert further into the condo. "And you're wrong. I've known Jay for a decade. You probably don't remember, but I stayed at the lake house one summer." Victor's eyes widened, and Luke smiled tightly. "I loved him just as much then as I do now."

"Oh, and Victor," Jay said calmly, leaning around Luke's arm. "I'd worry less about Mom and more about your legal practice."

I'm sure Mr. Carter's lawyer was smart enough to hire a private detective to find out if she was cheating on him. I can't imagine what the Bar will have to say about your affair ."

Victor paled, his composure shattering for one long, satisfying moment .

"Get your hands off me," Meredith screamed, grabbing the vase off Luke's hall table and flinging it across the hall. It shattered with a crash, and one of the officers pulled out a pair of handcuffs .

"Alright, lady. That's it. You're coming with us ."

"We've got this, man." Cody shut the kitchen door in his face, so Luke didn't see what happened next, but judging from the screaming, it wasn't pretty .

"And here I thought I was going to be missing some of my family's traditions by not going to my grandmother's house for Christmas," Teddy said as they all breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm sure Kurt feels right at home, too ."

"It's not usually that loud," Robert said, stealing the glass of what looked like orange juice and smelled like paint thinner out of Teddy's hand. He downed it in one long swallow and handed it back .

"It's fine," Teddy said. "We're used to it." He wandered further down the counter and started mixing up another drink .

"I'm never doing that again," Luke said, pulling Jay into a tight hug. "That is never happening again ."

"Agreed," Jay said, his breath unsteady against Luke's neck. He leaned up on his toes, his lips soft and swollen from where he'd been chewing on them as he stole a kiss. "You should talk to your dad," he said, barely a breath before their lips met again .

"Why?" Luke asked, frowning as he glanced at his father. Harry was propped up on the counter, his shoulders slumped as he stared at his shoes. He didn't look great, but then again, none of them did. "How did you know Victor was having an affair with Meredith ?"

"Lucky guess," Jay said, shrugging. "I actually did read those letters. Call it morbid curiosity. He used to visit Aunt Carol and bring her pictures of me. She was lonely, and he used that against her. I figured it wasn't the last time." He bit his lip again. "Go talk to your dad ."

Luke went where he was pushed, reluctantly dragging himself over to lean against the counter with his dad. "So, that sucked," he said, trying to think of something nice to say .

"What?" Harry glanced up at him, his eyes vague. "Oh, Meredith. Yeah. I'll have to tell the lawyers to get on that affair information." He glanced off to one side and jumped a little, returning his eyes to the floor .

Frowning, Luke gave his father a longer once over. He hadn't sounded even the slightest bit upset about finding out his wife was cheating on him, and he'd barely reacted to the sounds of her screaming outside the door. He looked... stressed, the lines around his mouth deep. At the same time, there was the faintest hint of red climbing up his cheeks that in anyone else Luke would have called a blush .

Across the room, Robert and Teddy were sitting at the bar laughing at something, their glasses almost empty again. "We're going to have to pour them into bed tonight," Luke muttered, watching the way Teddy's glasses slid sideways on his nose .

Harry glanced up, following Luke's gesture, and immediately dragged his eyes back to the floor. He fussed with his shirt, smoothing the buttons, and cleared his throat. "Robert can hold his liquor," he said, his voice pitched a little higher than normal .

"Teddy can't," Luke said. He looked from his father to his uncle and back again, a fragment of a thought itching at the back of his mind. In the doorway, Jay was waving his hands around under the shadow of the island .

When it hit, it hit all at once .

"Holy shit," Luke blurted. "You didn't know !"

Jay groaned, leaning forward until his forehead was pressed to the granite, and Robert and Teddy just stared .

Harry didn't seem to notice. "Of course, I didn't know," he grumbled. "Do you really think I'm that big of an asshole? I wouldn't have wasted twenty years of my life if I'd had a clue ."

Even with enough of Nikolai's vodka in his blood to tranquilize a horse, Robert picked up on their topic of conversation. "Oh, Harry. Honestly, you notice when your assistant takes an extra two minutes on his break, but you've never noticed when anyone is attracted to you until they throw their panties at your head." He shook his head fondly .

"Thirty-five years." Harry, in contrast, didn't sound half as blasé. "Thirty-five years, and you've never said a word." He stalked across the kitchen to loom over his best friend .

Luke followed, ready to hold his father back, but Teddy just caught his arm and dragged him back a few feet. "This is the good part," he said, spilling orange vodka down his chin when he missed his mouth on the next sip .

"What would be the point?" Robert asked, waving his drink nonchalantly. "You had Sarah. And then you had Vicki, and then Toni, and then Vanessa, and then Rachel, and then..." He let the sentence trail off when Harry growled at him. "And let's be honest, darling. It's not like I needed you to spell it out for me ."

"Honest," Harry said. "Ha. That's rich. Here I've been for the last twenty years wondering why, out of all the men in the world, I was the one who had to fall in love with someone who wasn't attracted to him, and everyone has known about this but me ."

"I didn't," Luke said quietly .

"I did." Teddy reached up to push his glasses up his nose and planted his thumb right in the middle of one of the lenses .

"Carter men are a bit dense," Robert said, leaning around Harry's arm to raise his glass to Jay .

"I'll show you dense." Harry wrapped his fingers in Robert's collar, and Luke would have pulled them apart if Teddy hadn't gotten tangled up with him at the wrong moment. "I'm going to make this perfectly clear, just the way I should have twenty years ago," he growled just before he lunged forward and slammed their mouths together .

"Holy shit ."

Luke wasn't sure who had said it, but he agreed wholeheartedly with the sentiment. Shock was like white noise in his brain as he stared at them, unable to process what was happening .

Robert couldn't seem to believe it either, shoving Harry off him with a hard smack on the back of the head. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" He didn't give anyone time to explain. "Whatever you're thinking, Harry Carter, you stop it right this instant. I have never, in all my fifty-three years, taken anyone's pity, and I'm not about to start today ."

"Oh, shut up," Harry snapped, rubbing his head. "Does it look like I pity you? I've been in love with you for so long that even Sarah laughed at me for it. You used to bring home those guys from the beach, and I'd get so fucking angry because I was just as good looking as they were. God knows I was a better conversationalist. But no, Robert Noble never even glanced my direction. She had a plaque made, for our third anniversary, said 'First Runner Up' on it." He shook his head. "I'll never understand her damned humor ."

"You got mad about the men from the beach?" Robert said, his voice rising. Luke started backing toward the door, dragging Teddy with him. "I suppose that's why you started picking up those lovely young ladies in their string bikinis the summer after Sarah died. Have you ever even slept with a man?" Harry blushed, and he rolled his eyes. "Exactly ."

"The only man I've ever wanted to fuck wasn't interested," Harry snapped .

"Oh yeah," Robert said, getting to his feet so that he was nose to nose with the other man. "I'll believe it when I see it." And then they were kissing, dragging each other closer desperately .

Eyes wide, Luke backed out of the room. The front of the condo was quiet now, a pile of vase fragments sitting in a dustpan on the coffee table. The front door was closed and locked. Cody looked like he was trying to decide whether to push some furniture in front of it .

"Vivian is on her way," Kurt said as Luke shut the door behind them firmly, holding a very quiet Jay under one arm and pouring Teddy into a chair with the other .

"The kitchen is occupied," Luke said, burying his face in Jay's hair and trying to process everything .

Jay shivered against him, laughing a little. "It's very occupied. I think we may need to scrub the counters before we use them again ."

Kurt groaned, digging out his wallet with irritated movements .

"I'm telling you, man. Stop betting against Teddy," Cody said, watching the money change hands .

"You guys had a betting pool on my dad?" Luke asked, his voice cracking. Kurt just looked down his nose, not dignifying such an obvious question with an answer. "I hate you all ."

Inside the kitchen, something crashed to the floor, and Teddy jerked upright in his seat. "Potatoes are done," he announced, then proceeded to slide out of his chair and curl up on the floor .

For a long moment, everything was quiet, and then Cody snorted. Jay giggled, high and sweet, and that was it. Luke threw his head back and laughed. He laughed until he and Jay were spread out on the floor next to a snoring Teddy. He laughed until his father and Uncle Robert came out of the kitchen looking sheepish and rumped. He laughed until Vivian showed up, so confused that she threatened to drop her casserole on his head .

Dragging Jay closer, he pressed a laughing kiss against his lips and whispered. "Merry Christmas, baby ."

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EPILOGUE

"Junior, get that out of your mouth ."

Jay rolled his eyes, grabbing the t-shirt his two-year-old daughter was chewing on. "Why don't you go see Grandpa?" he told her when she started to cry. Scooping her up in his arms, he bounced her on his hip as he headed for the back deck .

The breeze off the lake felt amazing on his overheated skin. They'd finished construction on his state of the art studio less than a month ago, and he was still trying to get everything organized the way he wanted it .

"Dada."

Biting his lip, Jay hid his laugh in her wispy hair. "Dada is concentrating, baby ."

Luke was sitting at their tiny game table, glaring at his cards as if he could change his hand with enough concentration. After Junior had gummed her way through their last pack of cards, she was banished from the game table .

Robert, watching them with a book open on his lap, snorted when Harry flipped his cards over with a grin. "I told you, Luke. Your father cheats ."

"Only at love, darling," Harry said, batting his lashes. The plain gold wedding rings that glinted from their hands were still new enough to be shiny, and Jay wasn't expecting the honeymoon period to wear off anytime soon .

"Can you watch her while I fold the rest of the laundry?" Jay asked, setting his daughter down on Robert's lap. "She's

discovered a love of poly-blend ."

"Miss Sarah Jacqueline," Robert cooed, bouncing the baby on his knee until she giggled. "Why do you have to wound your grandpa's soul like that ?"

"Because it would be so much better if she drooled her way through Jay's cashmere sweaters," Luke said, throwing down his cards in disgust. "You realize that you're the only one who doesn't call her Junior, right, Uncle Robert ?"

"It's not my fault that you gave her a name bigger than she is. She'll be in college before she learns to say it all." He stuck his tongue out at Luke. "Call me Papa, and I'll consider it ."

Rolling his eyes, Luke got to his feet and headed over to steal a kiss. Jay went up on his toes and gave it .

"She'll grow into it," he said, smoothing a hand over her hair. He knew it was a bit much, Sarah Jacqueline Roberta Collins-Carter, but there had been a lot of people he wanted to honor .

"Or she'll be sensible and drop half of it," Harry muttered. "I thought I'd handle dinner tonight. Fire up the grill, make some steaks. Luke, you always used to love it when I made grilled potatoes ."

"It was grilled turnips, Dad," Luke said, and Jay was proud that there was only a little bit of tension in his voice. He gave his husband another kiss for his efforts .

There were still times that Luke and his father got into shouting matches. Times that Robert showed up on their doorstep to get drunk. Times that Jay got off the phone with his mother and wanted to throw things. It was getting better, though, and they were all trying, for Junior's sake and their own .

And maybe the announcement that he made later would add another reason to keep trying. Smiling to himself, he leaned back in Luke's arms. "Laundry can wait," he announced. "This is a vacation. Who's up for some laying around doing nothing ?"

Junior burred cheerfully, and they all laughed .

Maybe it hadn't turned out how he expected. Maybe, just maybe, it had turned out better .

END OF BOOK 1 – PLEASE READ THIS

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TRUST FUND BABY

(FRAT BOYS BABY: BOOK 1)

Aiden Bates and Austin Bates

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