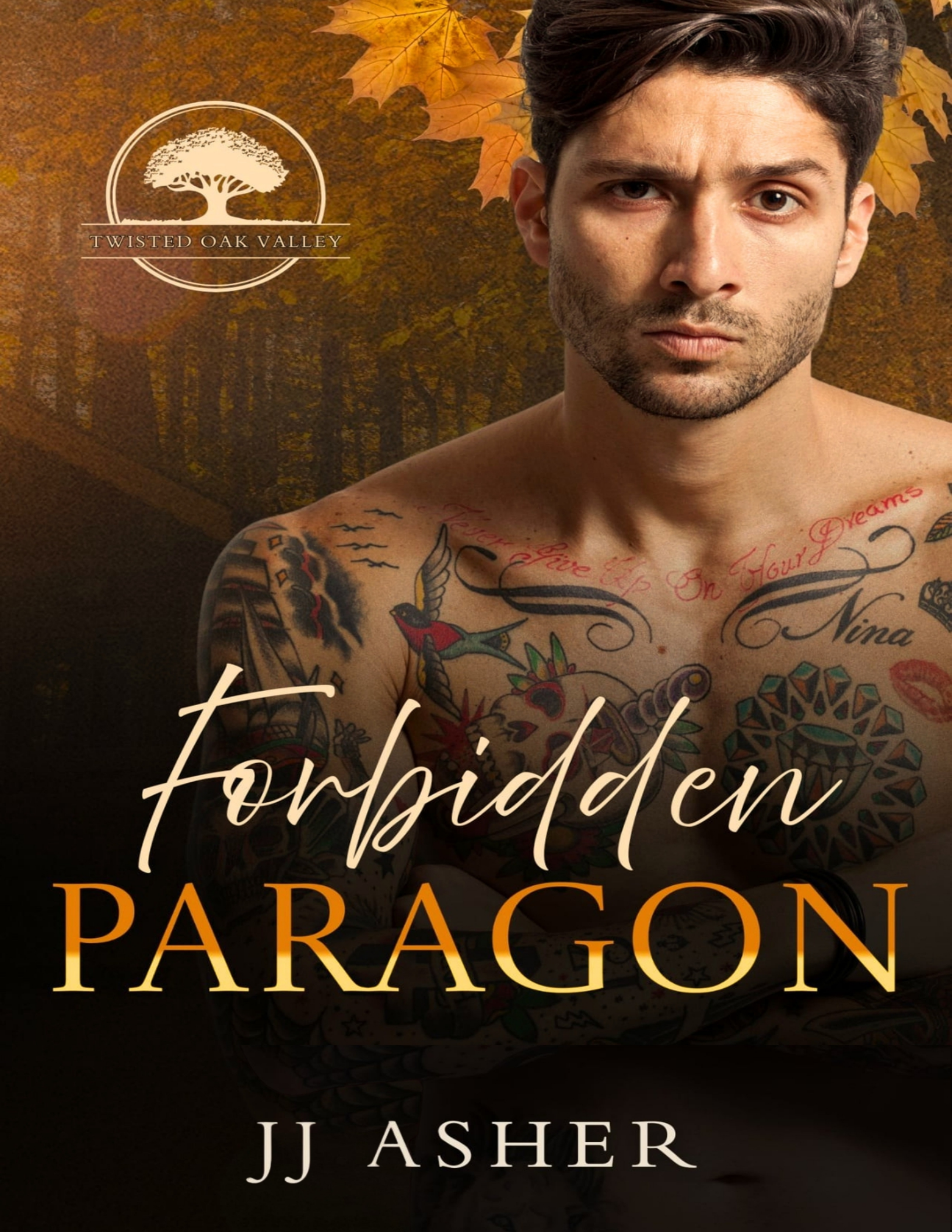


Forbidden PARAGON

JJ ASHER

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TRIGGER WARNINGS

Book is for 18+ has coarse language and sexual content
Hidden sexuality
Hidden gender expression
Compartmentalisation of one MCs true self and what they believe is acceptable to their family

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CHAPTER ONE

The Philadelphia air is colder than I expect, but really, what do I expect for midnight in November? This isn't Hawaii. I'm not five minutes from the tropical Pacific Ocean anymore.

Pushing through the hotel's revolving door, I'm greeted by artificial warmth, crisp lighting, and high ceilings. It's nice, but I'm only here for one night. Well, half a night, really.

I approach the reception desk dragging a suitcase behind me, my duffel weighing heavy against my shoulder. My suitcase wheels catch on one of the tiles and the clerk raises his eyes to me. I give him my name. He glances at my ID, then at me before handing over the keycard.

The elevator is stainless steel and coffin-quiet. I ride it up to the twelfth floor in silence, then I'm down the hall, the door to 1209 hissing softly as I push it open.

The room is warm, but as soon as I dump my luggage by the foot of the bed, I strip down and jump straight in the shower. With the water as hot as I can handle it, I stand under the stream, begging the heat to melt my muscles and seep into my bones.

I don't think I've ever been this freezing before.

I've travelled, but never in winter.

Mom moved to Hawaii because she hated the cold and Dad's people are born with the sun's rays flowing through their veins. But I need to push

myself. Step out of my comfort zone. Leave the safe, West Honolulu bubble I've spent the last thirty-five years in. If my younger brother, Reeze, can pack up his whole life and move to The Mainland, then so can I.

When the deep shiver in my chest has subsided, I towel off, turn out all the lights, and stand naked in front of the room's large window. There are no stars in the sky, just blackness with the cars and streetlights brightening the roads and footpaths twelve stories below.

I flop back onto the bed, and stare up, my eyes unfocused but wide open.

It's almost one a.m.

My body is still on Hawaii time.

I last twenty minutes before the itch starts—first in my feet, then all the way up. The room is too still, the hotel too silent, and even though I've never lived outside of Oahu I've never been one to shy away from adventure.

I dress fast with little thought; black jeans, a dark Henley, jacket and shoes my typically bare feet aren't used to wearing.

The city air slaps at my face as soon as I'm outside, and I instantly crave the thick, sticky warmth of home.

I walk it off because I have to.

I hear a heavy base over the noise of the street and follow it until I turn a corner and see a line of bodies flanking the front of a building. There's no obvious sign, but I know a club when I see one. The bouncer spots me as I approach. He's big, but not as big as me (thanks Dad), and I treat him in the exact way I'd expect someone to do to me when I'm in his position. I nod politely, ask how his night is, then slip him a twenty because that's bouncer code for *I'm not gonna cause any trouble, I just need to get the fuck inside.*

With a little grin, he unclips the velvet rope, and I step inside.

The heat and sound hit at the same time, and I feel at home. It doesn't matter where in the world you are, a sweaty nightclub is the great equalizer.

I spot the bar on the far wall. It's a beacon of flashing lights with bodies crushed shoulder-to-shoulder between me and it.

I make it to the counter and spot the swamped bartender with a sweat-glossed face. His arms work double-time as he lines up four shot glasses and pours them all in a row as he holds the payment portal towards the customers with his free hand. I slot in at the end of the bar where it's less crowded. When my turn comes I order a whiskey. The bartender pours it heavy and slides it towards me. Taking the glass, I wrap my fingers around

it and turn out from the bar to lean sideways against it as I watch the room and the people in it.

I might be five thousand miles from home, but it’s the same shit different time zone.

There are some looking to forget.

Some with glassy eyes, already half gone.

The prowlers.

The prey.

The ones on the edge of the dance floor without enough bravery to step onto it.

The music’s relentless, too loud for conversation. That’s probably why I notice them before they even land.

They vault the bar top like it’s nothing. One moment behind me, the next perched on the counter, boots thudding against the glass before landing on the mats.

Nobody reacts.

But every inch of them is built for the spotlight.

Black leather shorts cut so low and cheeky they are practically daring me to stare at the way their hip bones are jutting out. A neon tank sliced open across the sides. Boots that lace all the way up their thighs with thick platform soles. Hair that’s loose, dark, thick, and damp with sweat at the edges. And when they turn, it swings, grazing the most enticing, glitter dusted, collarbones I’ve ever seen.

They grab a glass, a bottle of vodka from the rack, pour themself a drink, and down it in one go. The bartender is occupied ten feet away, oblivious, and too busy to care.

The beautiful stranger wipes their mouth with the back of their hand, then turns to look straight at me with a smile that suggests the whole act was just to get my attention. Well, consider me locked in, because not only is this the most infatuating person I’ve ever laid eyes on, I’m also ninety-nine-point-nine percent certain they're *not* a woman.

Holding up one finger to his plush lips, he gives me the most sultry *shush* I’ve ever received, and I feel it land in my chest like an arrow to the heart. Leaning down, he helps himself to a can of something, slams a twenty on the counter, crouches, then leaps back over the bar.

Before I can even think about what to say, he vanishes into the mass of bodies behind me. No hesitation, no backward glance, the crowd

swallowing him whole. And I’m stuck, whiskey raised, eyes closed as their image burns into the back of my lids.

My brain is still running diagnostics when I realize I’m grinning like an idiot into my glass.

I have to have him.

The rest of the club fades.

Everything else is just background now.

I keep my eyes on the crowd, scanning for another flash of neon, but they’re gone.

I swallow the remainder of my whiskey in one gulp.

Game on.

The dance floor is an organism with its own pulse. I work my way in, not in a hurry, just following where the current takes me. The bass beats in my chest. My focus is laser. Then, like out of a dream, the bodies in front of me part in a perfect wave and I catch a glimpse.

The hair is the tell.

I take a step closer and the crowd ripples again, more of his body coming into view.

He moves differently from everyone else; the sway of his hips, the swish of his hair. The crowd seems to rearrange around him, and not the other way around. He's free. It's not a show, it's only for him—arms up, head back, lips mouthing the lyrics. Every few seconds the lights hit the glitter on his chest and cheeks, and they spark, as though made of untouchable fragments.

I stop a few yards away and just watch.

I could do this all night.

Then he looks at me.

It isn’t a mistake. It’s like he could sense I was there.

He takes a long drink from his can, wipes his lips with his thumb, and holds the stare. No smile this time, just a dare: *come closer if you think you can handle me.*

My brain says *yes* with no thought needed.

I slip through a cluster of guys grinding on each other, and duck past a girl in a mesh top who latches onto my arm for a second before letting go. Then it’s just the stranger and me, a foot apart.

Everything is sharp, soft, and so incredibly clear.

There’s no missing the jaw line and how it’s tensing as he bites the tip of his tongue. His nose. The flatness of his chest and how his muscles, damp with sweat, rise from under the edges of the thin tank.

He's pure androgyny, perfect in a way that makes gender feel beside the point.

My brain trips for a second—then I instantly don’t care.

If this is where my new life is going to take me, then I’m happy to follow.

His head dips to the side, as though he’s asking me if I have a problem. And without hesitation, I wrap my arm around his waist and pull him against me. He’s smaller than me, by a lot, but I can feel the force of his body as he pushes back, deliberately matching me as he fists the front of my shirt.

For a moment, neither of us moves.

My heart jackhammers in my chest.

Then his mouth quirks, he drops my shirt, and his hips grind into mine. It’s like he’s pouring fire straight into my jeans. I’ve never danced with a man before, but my body is already greedy for more friction and the way he seems to be using me for his own pleasure.

It’s insane how perfectly his body fits against mine.

My hands meet in the small of his back on the bare patch of skin, my pinkies dipping beneath the waistband of his shorts.

His fingers tug at the hem of my shirt until his nails are clawing up my spine.

He doesn’t talk. Doesn’t glance away.

He presses his chest against mine and forces a leg between my thighs so he can grind better against me, slow and filthy, with no care for the people around us or the hardness of his dick.

It makes me want to forget about the rest of the world.

He tilts his chin and leans up. I lower mine, wanting nothing more than to taste his mouth, but he bites my bottom lip then pulls back.

I wrap both hands around his waist and squeeze. I can feel how small he is under the layers of vivacity and muscle. Then I’m pulled back by his masculinity as his abs tense, and his nails dig into my flesh.

We’re at another stand off, but I’m not going anywhere.

His eyes flash, his brow raises, and I know he’s daring me again, but there’s no competition here. He’s already won.

I’m the first to move because I know it’s what he wants.

His lips are full and soft.

He tastes like cheap vodka and a tinge of grape from whatever he was drinking in that now discarded can.

His mouth is greedy, his tongue tangling with mine as I feel my own cock growing in my pants. And I'm not the only one to notice. His hand snakes between our bodies until he's cupping me—his touch dropping to take in my entire length—and I feel him smirk and hum into my mouth.

He breaks the kiss and pulls my ear down to his mouth. "I'm keeping you," he says, and I nod, because there's nothing I want more.

He grabs my hand, fingers laced, and tugs me through the crowd. Even in the dark I can see how pale his skin is against mine.

I'm not led to the exit, instead he guides me past the private booths into a barely lit hallway. There's a door at the end marked *Employees Only*. He pushes it open and drags me through.

It's a bathroom, but not a fancy one. Tiles are cracked, the mirror's edge is oxidized and bleeding inward, and the bare bulb above us is sporadically flickering. The heavy bass is still seeping through the door, but the club feels a universe away.

He wastes no time. With hands on my shoulders he backs me up against the concrete wall. For how slim he is, he's strong, and the juxtaposition rewires my brain. I've never found meek and helpless attractive. I'm not into submissive. Who the hell wants to be with a person who isn't gagging for it just as much as they are?

He grips my waist like I did to him on the dance floor, and runs both hands up my sides until my shirt has ridden up, bearing the Polynesian tattoos covering my ribs.

He grinds into my thigh, and I feel his hardness again.

The electricity is instant.

He wants to be the one in charge, so I let him. I always let people show me what they want.

We kiss like we're dying. Like this is the last chance for pleasure before execution.

I can't remember the last time I wanted something this much. This fast.

He pulls back, panting, eyes blown wide, skin glistening.

He drops to his knees without warning.

He works at my belt, pops the button, yanks down the zipper, and drags my jeans and underwear down just enough. My cock bobs out, thick and

already leaking, and he looks at it with this wild, hungry focus.

Hazel eyes lock onto mine.

Strong fingers wrap around the base of my shaft to hold me just as firmly as if I were holding it myself.

He licks his lips, then drags his tongue along the underside. Slow and wet.

Then he swallows me whole.

Not gentle, or shy.

He takes me all the way, gagging once but not stopping, lips tight and shiny around the shaft. One hand on the base, the other on my thigh for leverage. The suction is perfect, just the right amount of rough.

Groaning, I throw my head back, and that's when I realize he's bobbing his head in time to the bass; every movement matched to the music.

When he comes up for air, his mouth stays open to show the spit and pre-cum stringing between his lips and my cock. He grins up at me, cheeks sparkling, not the slightest bit winded as he continues to jerk me off.

When he goes back down I feel him hum in satisfaction, like he's proud to have conquered me. Like he knows he's the first man to ever touch me like this.

My fingers weave into his hair, and—*fuck me dead*—how is it so soft?

But it's the look in his eyes that's the most hypnotizing. Daring, proud, and totally in control.

"I'm gonna come," I warn; the first words I've spoken.

He doesn't flinch. If anything, he speeds up.

His wrist twists on the up stroke.

His tongue swirls over my cockhead.

I lose it, gripping his head tight, holding him still as I come deep in his throat.

And he takes it. Every pulse. Every drop.

When I let go of him, he gapes his mouth open wide, tilting his chin up so my cock slides out slowly, showing me the cum on his tongue before swallowing it down.

He stands. Still so close.

I gulp at the sight of some of my cum streaking the corner of his mouth.

With a look that will haunt me until I die, he takes his thumb and smears the cum over his bottom lip, then grabs the back of my neck and pulls me

into another kiss. It's filthy, and slow, and my taste in his mouth has my dick twitching again.

Just when I'm about to reach for his shorts, he plants his hands on my chest and takes a step back to fix his tank top.

"What about you?" I ask as I put my dick away.

He looks at me, and shakes his head.

"What's your name?"

He pushes a finger to his swollen lips, just like he did behind the bar.

"Names will only spoil it," he says, and I can hear the true deepness of his voice, but I don't give a fuck.

He's gorgeous.

He's fucking lethal.

I want *him* again, already.

He steps away, runs his hands through his hair then rearranges his dick in those goddamn leather shorts before staring at me for a beat. "You're not from around here, are you?"

I shake my head, still trying to get my brain to catch up with my body. "First night."

He grins. "Good start."

"I still want your name."

He reaches for the door, pauses, then looks over his shoulder. "Does the straight boy really wanna know?"

I'm still reeling, but I manage a crooked smile, amazed by his wit and how well he read me.

He considers, then: "It's Mickey."

He lets the name hang there and then slips out the door, back into the chaos of the club.

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It’s only a twenty-minute trip from the train station, but my Uber driver hasn’t shut up the entire time. A little bit of chatter is fine, but this guy has an opinion about everything. I try to drown him out and rest my head against the passenger's side window, much more interested in the new world outside so completely foreign to me.

Never in my life have I seen leaves this color not on a TV screen or inside of a book.

There’s elm, cherry, and maple trees as far as I can see, swallowing the rolling hills surrounding the valley. Twisted *Oak* Valley—that means there’s got to be oaks here, too.

Hawaii is lush and the richest shade of emerald green year round, made even more vibrant against the blue sky and ocean. But there’s a haze here, and it makes me feel weirdly warm despite the cold with the gold and rust and fire sprouting out from the rich brown trunks, and floating through the air every time a gust of wind rustles the branches.

Plumes of smoke rise up from between distant trees, and I imagine the whole town surrounded by cute little log cabins.

There’s a quaintness here that I know people pay to experience. I’ve not even stepped foot on the soil yet, and I can already tell this place is genuine.

The houses grow more frequent. It feels like I’m in a movie, and for the first time, I realize what people mean when they tell me I’m so lucky to live

on a tropical island. It’s not actually about the location, it’s about the dream. It’s about being somewhere so different from what you’re used to, that it feels even more special by comparison.

We take a left onto Elm Lane then a right onto Oak Avenue—because, of course those are the names of the two main streets that crisscross each other.

The driver pulls up to the curb right out the front of The Wind’s Eye, its large front window spotless even in the harsh daylight. The name is painted over the glass, and through it, I can see the silver and green decor I remember from my application.

My stomach twists with nerves, then untwists just as quickly. This is just a job. A better job. A new place, but still a bar. Familiar. Four walls, patrons lining up, a boss to answer to. I’ve done this a dozen times before.

I thank the driver, hoist my bags onto the curb, and stand a second just looking. I’m meant to be meeting the owner at three, but it’s still twenty minutes till then. The hours printed on the bottom right of the front window say it opens at five p.m. every day, so I take a glance back down the sidewalk.

There are people strolling, a bookstore and café are open. A pub is down the street, a Chinese restaurant, a little Italian place next door, and a candy shop. Eventually, I square my shoulders and try the door to the cocktail bar. It’s much heavier than I expected, but not locked. It’s slightly warmer inside then out, with a strong scent of citrus and fresh-cut wood, with traces of whiskey. The lights are off, the whole place lit only by the sun gushing through the window. It’s silent, but calm.

No one comes out, so I leave my luggage just inside the door and do a slow lap around the bar, which is the room's centerpiece. An oval of smoky glass sits atop an apple-green tiled bench. Silver stools with low backs and white leather cushions run the whole way around it, with several cocktail tables along the walls and front. In the back right, there is a sign painted on the wall in script: Down Sails. Beside it is a roped off staircase leading downward into darkness. Moving to the opposite side of the back wall I peer along a small corridor with the men’s and women’s restrooms, and a third door at the end that says—

Hmph.

I smile to myself.

Employees only.

My mind instantly drifts to last night. To the stranger. To Mickey.

I whisper his name out loud to myself, and a half-second later the front door opens.

The man who steps in looks more handsome than any of our Zoom meetings gave him credit for. Mid-fifties, silver hair, perfectly fitted suit in midnight blue. With perfect posture, Johannes Askerlund strides towards me with his hand outstretched.

“Reen Akana?” he asks with the strong accent I remember.

I shake his hand. “That’s me.”

“It’s a pleasure to officially meet you properly.”

“Likewise,” I say, holding his eye contact because I know men like this love to scatter little masculinity tests everywhere they go. And whilst I’m far from toxic, I play along because he’s my boss, and he seems to appreciate it.

With a small, impressed nod, Johannes releases my hand. “You’re early.”

“Force of habit.” I shrug.

“I like that. Perfect first impression.”

I glance down the bar. “Sorry for letting myself in, I’m just not used to this weather yet. And the door was open.”

With a sharp intake of breath, Johannes shakes his head and ignores what I said. “How was the trip? You get in okay?”

I shrug. “Train from Philly was easy. Then the Uber guy gave me a full local briefing.”

“Twisted Oak is a small but talkative place,” he says, like he’s warning me.

“I don’t mind. It’s better to be talked about than forgotten.”

Johannes smiles again, and I feel like I’m still being interviewed. Then he swiftly changes topics for the third time. “Have you met my son yet?”

I blink. “No, sir. I just walked in.”

“He’s the general manager. Your actual boss.”

“Okay” I say, taking another arbitrary look around. It’s not like I can object. It would have been nice to know, and maybe get a chance to speak to him before I accepted the job, but it’s not like I’m going to see myself out at this point.

“He may be on a call upstairs. Come, I’ll introduce you. And show you the apartment,” Johannes says, beckoning me to follow.

I leave my luggage behind and follow him to the Employees Only door.

As I climb the stairs behind him, I notice the walls aren’t as freshly painted, and that the smell in the air shifts from lemon to much more musky and leather.

Johannes stops at the first door and knocks once before pushing it open. After sticking his head inside, he glances back at me to say—“He’s not busy. Just ignoring us”—before stepping inside.

I smile to myself and follow him through the door.

The office is at the back of the building, and the first thing I see is a large window with a leather couch below it, and the view out of it is the back lane and someone's yard. Then my eyes settle on the man sitting behind the large desk, his eyes focused down on his laptop as though making a point of his father’s interruption. He’s wearing a silver-grey suit with long brown hair tied back in a low ponytail. It takes a second, but when it hits, I stop cold.

No glitter. No bare skin. No hint of the wild animal from last night.

But there’s no mistaking him.

No forgetting those plush lips and the way they felt wrapped around me.

I stare several seconds too long, and I know he feels it, because he pauses, looks up, and pins me with those sharp hazel eyes—his recognition of me far more instantaneous.

“Mikell,” Johannes says, “This is Reen Akana. The club’s new bouncer.”

“I thought he was coming tomorrow.”

“Obviously not,” Johannes counters, gesturing towards me.

His eyes quickly flick back over to me. My perfect, beautiful stranger.

With a small huff, he plants his hands on the desk and stands.

He’s much shorter than last night without the six inches of platform below his feet.

“Nice to meet you,” he says, and I can tell he’s searching for any trace of recognition on my behalf, any evidence that I remember him and if I’ll mention it.

I give nothing away, and cross the room to shake his hand. “The pleasure's mine.”

His fingers are strong and cool. The handshake lingers, just past the point of professional, and in that extra second, he squeezes tighter, as if to remind me he’s in charge. Likewise, his face does not twitch, and his mouth stays sealed. But his eyes scream: *Don’t you fucking dare*.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from grinning, and let go first.

Johannes watches the whole exchange, waiting an almost uncomfortable amount of time before speaking again. “Mikell runs this operation day to day. He’s the point of contact. But if you have concerns that he can’t address—” he throws a quick, loaded glance at his son, “—my door is always open.”

“Understood,” I say, tucking my hands behind my back.

Mikell reclaims his seat, pulling the laptop toward him and clicking something, but his posture and tone are all warning. “Johannes mentioned you have a lot of industry experience,” he says, referring to his father by his first name.

“Started at seventeen. Worked every hospitality job there is. The past few years I helped run a spot in Kaimuki.”

Mikell’s eyebrow flicks up, just barely. “I don’t put up with insubordination. No matter how highly recommended you come.”

I look at him, hold his eye, and let the memory of his mouth on me flicker just behind my own neutral expression. “I’m good with rules. I like being told what to do.”

He blinks, and for a flash, I see the mask slip. He remembers it too. And he hates that he remembers.

Johannes’s phone rings, and with a jerk of his head he tells Mikell to, “Give him the tour,” as he answers it.

With a roll of his eyes that his father can’t see, Mikell stands, straightens his blazer, and walks out of his office. I let him stay two paces ahead as we ascend the stairs and head back into the main bar.

“So, you got a type?” I ask once we're completely out of his father’s earshot.

Mikell’s head whips around. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” I ask, as innocently as possible.

“There’s a code of conduct. I expect you to follow it.”

I raise my hands. “I haven’t broken any rules yet.”

He stares at me, his face unreadable. “Let’s keep it that way… This is the first floor cocktail lounge.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” I tease, and the glare he gives me feeds me in a way I know is going to become problematic.

“It’s open daily from five till one. Three a.m. on club nights.”

“And the club nights are?”

“Thursday through Saturday.”

He moves on, pointing out everything: the storage closet, the security panel, the walk-in fridge. His hands never idle, and whilst I wouldn't say he's nervous, it's clear he hates the loss of control. Hates the unpredictability my presence brings. It doesn't stop him stealing small glances at me when he thinks my attention is elsewhere, though.

At the velvet rope at the top of the stairs, he flicks a switch and the underground lights up. "The nightclub," he announces with a lackluster wave of his arm.

When he doesn't move I take the initiative to head down first.

"So like I said before, it's open Thursday to Saturday," I hear him continue as he follows behind.

"What's the crowd like?" I ask, stopping at the bottom step and turning around.

Mikell takes two more steps and locks his eyes with mine. He's close, just higher than I am. I want to tear his hair out of that damn ponytail and see it hang freely around his shoulders. I want to reach out and pull him close, taste those lips again and feel his dick hard against me.

"What's the crowd like?" I repeat.

"You're the one with all the experience."

I raise my foot and climb until I'm standing two steps below, but still able to look down at him. "Are you saying every town's the same?"

Mikell raises his chin and glares at me with the most sexy authority I've ever seen. "Just like everywhere else in the world, they expect a certain level of discretion."

It's not hard to read between the lines. I know he's talking about us.

I know he's begging me not to tell his father that he was dressed in the world's sluttiest shorts and a tank top so tiny his tits were almost completely out.

"Got it, boss," I reply with a wink, letting my voice drop just enough.

I stride backward then wait at the bottom of the stairs for him to hurry up and *be* a boss.

The club is about one third smaller than the bar upstairs, the cellar taking up the extra space. The smell is much less curated and a lot more spilt beer. A traditional bar runs along the furthest narrow wall, and the silver is repeated, but the apple-green is replaced with lilac.

Mikell goes over the ins and outs, detailing the specifics of my job until he reaches a point where I know he's sick of listening to himself speak. He

nods as though he’s saying, *yep, that’s enough*, then runs a hand over his hair down to his ponytail, smoothing it, and for a second I think he might pull it out. “So. Any questions?”

Yeah. Can we fuck?

I drop my chin to hide my smile, and shake my head.

“What’s so funny?”

I raise only my eyes. “I don’t think you’d get it.”

Defying his own rules, Mikell steps closer. “Why don’t you try me?” he asks in the exact same tone he used last night.

A pang hits my chest then settles in my stomach. “Is the couch in your office as comfortable as it looks?”

He blinks. Then he swallows before letting his lips fall softly open.

His eyes drop to my mouth, then further down my body.

We're both suspended with the memory of last night between us and this whole new world of rules pressing in on us from both sides.

I reach out, my hand slipping beneath his blazer and landing on his ribs.

He tenses, lets out a shaky breath.

“Th-there’s one more rule,” he stutters out.

I lean in and whisper, “Oh yeah?” against his lips.

His eyes flutter shut, and he rises on his toes to meet me, giving in to his alter ego.

Like a flash I’m awakened again. His taste, touch, and smell wash over me.

I reach for his cheek, cupping it as his tongue laps at mine—

“Mikell?” Johannes’s voice bellows down the stairs.

With his full force, he pushes me back. I stumble, hand to my chest where he made contact.

“Yeah-yes. We’re finished down here, just need to show him the apartment,” he calls back, marching away from me and back up to the cocktail bar.

By the time I’m back on the first floor again, Mikell’s locked back in—all business professional, and totally in denial.

“I’ve gotta run,” Johannes tells me with a thumb towards the door. “You right here?”

I give a curt nod. “I’ll have him eating out of my hand soon enough.”

That earns me a lamentable growl from Mikell and a genuine belly laugh from his father.

“Oh, before I forget. Did he mention the no fraternization rule?”

“No. He didn’t.” I dip my head forward and give Mikell a smug look. Again, his beautiful hazel eyes dart to mine before he sighs, hanging his head in shame. And in that glance, I realize that *this* is the act. The suit, the tied back hair, the tense jaw. It’s all a rehearsed performance. Mickey isn’t the alter ego, it’s Mikell.

I get another, much drier chuckle from Johannes. “He loves missing that one out. But apart from stealing, it’s my number one rule. Kylie. The girls behind the bar. They’re all off limits. I don’t need any messy breakups getting in the way of your work.”

I give him a salute and keep my feet planted until he’s outside and the door has latched behind him.

Running to the back door, I grip the frame and stick my head inside. I catch Mikell with one foot on the top step, the other on the one below, and the perfect view of his trousers stretched over his ass.

“Hey,” I call out to him.

He turns back to me, defeated.

“What about the apartment?”

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Mickey

CHAPTER THREE

I stare down at him.

At my new employee.

At the man I was happy to leave anonymously in the club last night.

What about the damn apartment?

I roll my eyes at him standing there, lingering at the bottom of the stairs, polite as a puppy begging to be loved.

“Just hurry up.”

He grins big, all teeth, then takes the steps two at a time.

I start walking, and within seconds he’s behind me… close. Both too close *and* not close enough at the same time.

I can feel him through the air as I lead him through the hallway that runs along the top of the cocktail bar. Past my office, a general staff room, storage, and finally to the studio apartment at the very end.

Reaching into my blazer pocket for the key, I fumble with it, missing the lock by an embarrassing amount. Trying again, I slide it in then turn back to Reen; his arms folded and brow cocked like he knows exactly how frazzled I am.

“Welcome to your palace,” I say, pushing the door open.

He steps past me into the studio.

The room is bare-bones. The mattress is new, but the rest is utilitarian. A queen bed with plain white linen. An Ikea chest of drawers, wardrobe, and

kitchenette with a microwave, plug-in hot plate and mini fridge. The shower is behind a pocket door; the bathroom is so small there's no sink, just the shower and the toilet, with the sink in the main space. The single window above the bed is generous, though, looking out onto the main street and the canopy of oaks, all copper now.

"Coffee machine, toaster, and dishwasher are in the staff room down the hall," I say, stepping in after him to lean against the drawers beside the bed, but he's not listening. He does two full 360 degree spins, taking everything in, then flops backwards onto the mattress, arms spread wide, legs dangling off the end. His shirt rides up, exposing a triangle of light brown skin with black, Polynesian tribal ink rising from his waistband.

My eyes travel lower, to how the zip of his jeans curves up because he really is as fucking big as I remember. He's not hard, and his legs are spread, but—*god-damn*—it sure wasn't the alcohol inflating his size in my hazy mind.

He looks at the ceiling, then at me; upside-down and grinning. "Good bed," he says.

I have to look away.

I zero in on the bathroom door and step towards it. "There are towels under the sink—"

"You didn't answer my question," he interrupts.

"What question?" I turn slowly to face him, and, big mistake. *HUGE!*

He's propped up on his elbows, his abs crunched and deliciously taunting me before his sweater falls back over them.

He watches me watching him, and I should be ashamed, but I'm really not. It's pathetic how drawn to him I am. And this is exactly why I travel to Philly to go out. I need a strict line between business and pleasure. Between what people see, and who I really am.

Reen shifts, his legs spreading out over the corner of the bed as he sits up.

Fucking hell his thighs look amazing.

"What… Ah…" I babble, trying to concentrate on his face instead of how desperately I want to be on my knees for him again.

He lets out a little smirk, clearly pleased with himself. "Is the couch in your office as comfortable as it looks?"

My mouth goes dry.

I can feel myself blushing, which is infuriating.

"That's—" I swallow. "Inappropriate."

His eyes travel the length of my body with a look that's just as indecent as the ones I've been giving him. "You sure about that, *Mickey*?"

That name—from his mouth—is nuclear.

It hits different.

It's like he's claiming me with his Island accent.

I hate how much I like it.

It's dangerous.

He's dangerous.

This whole fucking situation is cataclysmic levels of *he's gonna blow up your whole damn life.*

I clear my throat. "My name is Mikell, and you *will* respect me as your superior."

"Whatever you want," he says casually, falling back onto the bed. And for a second I think I'm free, that I can just walk out and recoup what little composure I have left. But he quickly sits up again, this time leaning forward, hands clasped between his knees, shoulders too wide to not be distracting. "You want to know what I think?"

I should just leave, but I can't. "What?"

"I don't think this is the real you."

For a second I forget that I'm supposed to be the boss, the one who sets the boundaries. "Yeah?"

"Yeah… And that you can't stop thinking about last night."

I feel my body respond, and I fight it by digging my fingernails into my palms. "That's also inappropriate." My words come out rigid as I force myself towards the door.

Reen stands, but doesn't stop me from leaving. And when I'm in the hall, I can't just let the door close behind me. Like an idiot I look back because I need to see if he's watching me, and he is. Arms folded, still grinning.

"Nice view," he says with a small jerk of his head towards the window, purposefully leaving his statement open to my brain's endless interpretations.

Leave!

Move!

Put one foot in front of the other and walk back to your office!

I scream at myself and force my body to cooperate until I'm back in my office, doing everything I can to ignore the hammering of my heart and the low, persistent ache in my stomach that I know is only going to get worse

because the apartment door one-hundred percent *did not* latch when I let it go.

I barely get my ass back in my chair before Reen has invited himself into my office.

“What do you want?” I ask, my voice sharp.

Ignoring the hostility, he flops onto the couch, arms behind his head, legs spread enticingly wide because he’s already clocked that it’s my kryptonite.

“More comfy than it looks.”

“I do have a job outside of keeping you entertained. You’ve only been here an hour, and you’ve already wasted far too much of my time.”

With a look that says, *sure, keep telling yourself that*, he pushes up from the couch and sets himself on the edge of my desk, so close his leg butts up against the arm of my chair. Leaning back on one hand, he drums the fingers of the other on the polished wooden top. Then he locks me in with a look, the same one he had in the club. Direct, challenging, and far more interested in how I’ll respond than with what I’ll say.

“So,” he says, “Is the nightlife in Philly really that much better, or were you just scoping out the competition?”

I let out a tight laugh and say, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah?” He tilts his head, not buying it for a second. “I can see how you might forget. Considering how hard you’re trying to be a completely different person.”

I lean back in my chair and try to look bored. “If you want to gossip, you’ll have to wait till four-thirty when Kylie arrives. You’ll get a far more interesting conversation out of her.”

He blinks, slow and deliberate, letting the silence stretch. Then, with a small shake of his head, he says, “I don’t see how that could possibly be true… Mickey.”

I hate the way my name sounds in his mouth.

No, that’s not true.

I hate that I’m fucking obsessed with the way it sounds.

I stand abruptly, the wheels of my chair skidding back. Even standing, I’m not as tall as he is still sitting on my desk. But I’m not about to be the smaller man in my own office.

“I’ve already told you, it’s Mikell.” My voice is stern, but my hands are shaking. “And that’s the last time I’ll mention it. You work here now, so you’re going to respect those boundaries. Is that clear?”

He leans forward, elbows on his knees, so he's eye to eye with me. His expression is soft and kind, but there's so much mischief in there I know I'm fucked. "I think the most important question is whether *you* can follow the rules."

Every muscle in my body tightens.

I want to scream at him.

I want him to kiss me until I remember what my name actually is.

"I'm your boss." All breath, no substance.

"I get it. Some of my father's rules weren't the easiest to follow, either."

"We are not the same."

"That's right. Cause when I moved out, his rules stopped applying."

I stare at him. Tingling. My balls tight, every cell desperate for him to break down the last remaining bricks of the wall still between us, because he's right. I'm still locked in by my father. To be who I really am I have to escape Twisted Oak. But this is my home. I want to be comfortable *here.*

"Look, I get it, Mikell. I get the suit. The act. But I was sick of the same. Sick of just existing. So I answered a random job ad, now here I am. And I don't believe in coincidences, because the club last night? That was the realest thing I've felt in a long time."

Reen stands, towering over me, so damn close.

For a moment, we just breathe the same air.

"I want you… Mickey."

My restraint snaps. I lunge forward and grab him by the collar, dragging his mouth down to mine. It's not a kiss so much as a collision. Teeth clash, noses mash, and neither of us tries to make it gentle. He growls into my mouth, hands on my hips, squeezing.

He lifts me onto the desk like I'm weightless. Paperwork slides off in an avalanche. I wrap my legs around his waist, hook my ankles together, and pull him in, my shoes digging into the small of his back.

He peels my blazer off my shoulders, pushing it down to bunch around my elbows. Frantic fingers unbutton my shirt so he can grab at my ribs, covetous and rough. His mouth moves from my lips to my jaw, to the side of my neck, biting as he goes.

My shame is gone, replaced with raw hunger.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asks, voice ragged.

I don't answer. I'm too busy exploring him.

My hands are under his sweater, higher and higher, exposing more of his chest until I'm so greedy I want to see the whole thing. So I tug at it, and he begrudgingly lets go of me to take it off. Then he's straight back in, unbuckling my belt and unzipping my trousers as I drag my fingertips through the dark hair trailing beneath his naval.

He tugs at my pants, and I see the sky blue of my underwear. My eyes dart up to gauge his reaction, but he's not looking down. He's staring right at me.

"Don't get shy now," I taunt.

With a devilish glint, he buries his mouth into my neck, as he pushes my pants and underwear down low enough to free and grip my cock.

I'm instantly leaking into his fist.

"Do I have to do everything?" he asks, playfully butting his nose against mine.

I run my fingers into his hair and hold him there. "You're the one who wanted me so badly. It's your turn to show me what you can do."

He smirks, unbuttons his jeans with one hand and pulls out the biggest, most perfect cock I've ever seen in real life. Deep tan with a pinkish purple head, thick and leaking. He shakes it, flicking pre-cum against my balls before sending a thick wad of spit flying at the underside of my shaft. Then he smacks his monster cock against it—my dick disappearing beneath his when he pushes his balls against mine and lets his heavy meat flop down on top of me.

Fuck, I love feeling small.

I love the sight of Reen's massive, veiny cock laying on my stomach, reaching as high as my sternum.

I want him to rearrange my insides.

I want to see him inside me.

I want him to stretch my belly.

I want him to pound my prostate with his juicy cockhead over and over until my father's rules don't mean a goddamn thing anymore.

Mouth back on mine, his tongue scoops inside—sucking, searching, gathering all the saliva he can to add to the mess he's making of me.

Spitting in his hand this time, he wraps it around both of us, and starts pumping.

My breath leaves me in a soundless gasp. I should be terrified. The front door is unlocked. Kylie isn't due for half an hour, but it's not unheard of for

her to show up early unannounced…

But all of those possibilities just make me harder.

I pulse in Reen's grip, and he chuckles in my ear. "Whatever you just thought about. Do it again."

I imagine my father walking back in. He's forgotten something, absentmindedly chatting to himself as he climbs the stairs. "F-fuck," I stutter out when I picture the look on his face, neither Reen nor I, attempting to stop just because he's there.

I pant and rock up into his grip, my hands behind me for support.

He goes slower, then faster, squeezing at the top, twisting at the base.

I feel my own orgasm building way too fast.

"I'm—*fuck*, you're so good at this," I whisper, but he just laughs.

I grit my teeth, fighting it, but when he leans in and bites my ear, I lose the battle.

I come all over his hand, hot and messy, splattering against the underside of his cock and my skin.

For a second he lets go, just to scoop up my cum then smear it over his cock like it's lube, then grasp onto us both again and start pumping. No regard for how overstimulated I am.

I moan, gripping onto his biceps in a feeble attempt to stop him—but he keeps on stroking, drawing out every after shock until I'm a whimpering wreck.

He presses his forehead to mine, releasing me so he can jerk himself off faster.

He doesn't close his eyes, his stare intensifying the closer to the edge he gets.

I watch him, transfixed, as he paints my stomach with his hot cum. And, fucking hell, I wish I was a contortionist so I could lick it all up.

The air is heavy with the smell of sex and sweat.

We hold the position, breathing hard, not saying anything until I finally break the silence.

"Guess you really aren't as straight as I thought you were."

Reen shrugs, plants his cum smeared hand on my desk and speaks against my lips. "I like what I like, Mickey. And it turns out I like you."

I can still feel him on my skin, and post-nut clarity rears its ugly head.

"This… This can't happen again."

The cheeky devil glint is back. "I think it can."

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Mickey

CHAPTER **FOUR**

I’ve been here since eleven this morning. There’s absolutely no logical reason for me to still be here, apart from the game of pretending not to watch Reen that I’ve been playing with myself since the doors opened at five.

He’s positioned just inside the front door at the top of the nightclub stairs, perched on the front of a stool, one foot up on the rest and the other flat on the floor. He reaches for IDs with a non-threatening charm, but his height still has him taller than most of the people who approach him. But what’s more impressive is how he manages to look like he’s been here for years, not one night.

I swear the whole damn town knows he’s here because the line is out the door. That’s not uncommon, but rare on a Thursday night. The girls from the accounting office are posted at the bar in his direct line of sight, giggling over nothing and flicking their hair far more often than necessary. Then the new kindergarten teacher steps to him, her fingers trembling as she hands him her ID. He takes it, nods, then bends down to her level with a gorgeous genuine smile, making her feel like she’s the only person who matters in the world for the three seconds she has his attention. Even Charlie’s and Walker’s regulars are making a point of stopping by to take a look at him like he’s a fucking spectacle, which—*fuck.* He really is a sight to behold.

The black uniform Polo with The Wind’s Eye embroidered over his chest fits him far tighter than it ever has me. The sleeves sit snug on his biceps, showing off his gorgeous tawny skin and tattoos. His, so dark brown it’s almost black, hair is up and back off his face, showing the fresh trim of his undercut sides. The black trousers he’s wearing are so perfectly tailored they show off his ass and thighs to perfection without giving too much away. And those thick-soled, heavy boots that could stomp the fuck out of me—

Seriously Mikell, get a grip on yourself!

“You’re staring more than usual tonight.”

I twitch in shock, then cross my arms tight to try and hide it.

“He’s hard not to stare at,” I tell Kylie with a shrug, and rest my elbows forward on the standing table I’ve been trying to hide myself behind.

Nudging up against my side, Kylie copies my position, elbows on the table, her arm pressed against mine. For almost five years she’s been by my side. First as the bar supervisor, then as the night manager when Dad finally handed the place over for me to run.

“So what’s the tally?” she asks.

“What tally?”

She leans her head on my shoulder. “How many times has he been asked if he’s single?”

For a few seconds I pretend like I don’t know what she’s talking about, but give up quickly because this woman knows me better than anyone. “Seven. Not counting the three who just skipped that part and asked him out point blank.”

Kylie grins. “Damn… Popular guy.”

“But he’s not interested,” I tell her, trying to sound as indifferent as possible.

“Good to know.” Kylie raises her head, letting it dip to the other side like the angle gives her a better view. “He's really fucking handsome.”

“Tell me about it.”

At that moment, two of the shop girls from Lagos Candies walk through the front door. Reen doesn’t even break his pose as he waves them in, but one of them does a double-take so hard she almost gives herself whiplash. Kylie giggles, having caught it too, and we both watch her go bright red when Reen winks at her, his hand gently touching her upper back as he ushers her towards the stairs.

I make a point of looking away towards the TV above the bar that plays mostly eighties and nineties music videos, and when I refocus on him, Reen is looking right at me. With Kylie as close to me as she is, there's no way she could know exactly who he's looking at, but I know it's me. He doesn't drop his gaze. He just quirks his lips into an infuriatingly sexy smirk, and holds it. I feel heat rise and flush up the back of my neck. I'm twenty-five, not fifteen, for Christ's sake. Why the fuck am I blushing?

"God damn," Kylie says all breathy, just as caught up in his orbit as I am. "So, ah… Is he free game?"

I say nothing, because there's nothing to say.

Nothing that needs to be said, anyway.

Kylie pans to me, her eyes like a scalpel, and within seconds my smirk is matching Reen's.

"Oh my god! You already hooked up, didn't you?"

I try to rein it in, but she's too quick.

"He's been here one fucking day!" The words are barely out before she's slapping my shoulder with the back of her hand.

I chuckle, too tired to dodge her hand. "He saw something he liked. And took it."

"Are you sure you're not the one who *took* something?"

I gesture that I'm locking my lips. "I'll never tell."

"Well, shit." Kylie slumps back against the table. "So he's not straight?"

I keep my gaze on Reen, watching him shoot his kilowatt smile at the next group of women through the door. "I really don't know what he is," I say, which is the honest answer.

The women linger, their heads tilted up as they crowd around him. One squeezes his upper arm, another pokes at his chest. He doesn't flirt back, but he doesn't brush them off either, he just lets their attention roll over him. And the second they move away, his gaze snaps back to me.

"Fuck," Kylie sighs, and I can hear the shit-eating grin in her tone. "He might not be interested in them, but he's definitely interested in something."

"I can't help it if I'm irresistible."

"You're something, alright." Straightening out, Kylie turns her back to Reen to look at me straight. "Johannes won't be happy."

I move only my eyes to meet her. "Johannes doesn't need to know."

"And how do you think you'll actually be able to keep it a secret? Him living upstairs might give you a month. He'll never hear it from me, of

course, but your father has eyes everywhere. And you know how this place works. If a single piece of ass that fine isn't linked to *anyone* in this town—not even for one night—then people *will* start talking."

I shrug. "Let them talk."

"So nonchalant for a man who knows *exactly* how strict Johannes Askerlund can be."

I let my hands slap down onto the table top, and as I straighten out, I drag them back towards me until they slip off the edge. "You don't need to worry about him."

"I'm not worried about him. I'm worried about you." she smiles.

Kylie's watch beeps, and after checking the time, she grabs my shoulder and points me towards the hall that leads to the stairs to my office. "You need to go home."

I turn back around, but she stops me with a finger to my lips.

"Now that I know you're only hanging around because of mister hot island man, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. You know this place is mine after dark."

I glare at her because I know she's right.

"Look. I promise I'm not gonna steal your man."

My eyes pan over to Reen, and when I find him looking back at me—just like I hoped he would be—I smile against Kylie's finger.

Her head falls back, her finger drops, and she lets out a jealous groan. "You're so fucking lucky." Then she rolls her shoulders, tucks her hair back behind her ear, and bends forward at the waist like a psychotic elf to whisper, "He's going to ruin you," before backing away.

Yeah… No shit.

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Six days in and I still can't get used to the sting of cold air in my nose.

I walk towards Charlie's Coffee Shop on the corner of Elm and Maple, past the piles of pumpkins at every storefront, hands jammed into the pockets of my jacket. Stepping around the hay bales at the door, the fake leaves, and scarecrow that seems a little more Halloween than purely autumnal, I push inside.

The shop smells like espresso and toasted bagels. A group of teenagers, clearly skipping school, are huddled over their phone in a corner booth. And Charlie himself is holding court at the register, as I've come to realize in my short time in Twisted Oak, is a very regular thing. His brown, worn skin creases into deep lines around his eyes as he shoots me a wide smile, waving me over with my to-go order already in front of him.

"Akana," he says as I approach. "You're early."

I glance at the wall clock. "So I am… And still my order's ready to go."

His laugh rumbles through the shop. "You've been early every day."

"I didn't know you were one to keep tabs, Charlie."

"Not tabs, just observations." He shoots me a wink, and when I reach for the paper bag, he moves it out of my reach and gestures towards one of the stools. "Sit, sit. Chat with an old man."

I glance back over my shoulder and back down the street to The Wind's Eye, but pull up a chair anyway, because something else I've noticed is that

nobody ever says no to Charlie.

Sliding a cup in front of me, he pours me a fresh black coffee and tops up his own, then takes a seat himself. “So how’s the new job treating you? They working you too hard at the fancy bar?”

“Not hard enough,” I say, which isn’t really a lie.

Charlie dips his chin towards his chest, and looks at me like he knows I’m full of shit.

“Fine,” I chuckle. “The first few nights have been… a lot. I think I’ve already met every woman over the age of twenty-one in Twisted Oak, and all the surrounding towns.”

“Just the women?”

“You’re right. Probably at least half the men, too.”

He takes a long sip of coffee. “You like Twisted Oak Valley?”

Unable to help myself, I look back out the front window, because all my opinions are wrapped up around a certain little finger. “It’s… weird,” I say, then face Charlie again. “But good. Just not what I thought the mainland would be like.”

Like he expected me to say just that, he nods. “And how about all these people you’ve met?”

“Is this your way of asking me if you’re my favorite?”

I earn myself another laugh. “No, no. I know there’s no competition. I just want to make sure you’re being treated well.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

He gives an all-knowing shrug of his shoulders, but doesn’t elaborate. So, pinching back a smile, I dip my head like he just did. “What are you trying to ask me, Charlie?”

“Johannes.”

“That’s not a question.”

Charlie sighs, and it sits half-way between *I hate gossiping* and *I absolutely live for it.* “He runs a tight ship, that’s all that I’m saying.”

“Yeah, I got that vibe.”

“He’s strict… Very set in his ways.”

“I thought you weren’t saying anything else?” I tease.

Charlie holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Chock it up to the jealousy of an old man.”

“I don’t think you’ve got a bad bone in your body.”

His grin widens again. “You don’t know me well enough to say that yet. But what I will say, that bar was never any competition for my place until his son took over. He’s the real talent, that boy Mikell.”

At the sound of his name, a spark flickers in my chest and I stare down into my half-drunk coffee. “Yeah, he’s…”

“He’s smart. Always moving. Sometimes I think he’s living multiple lives just to keep up with the expectation his father puts on him.” Charlie fixes me with a softer look. “You’ll see it soon enough, if you haven’t already.”

I don’t answer, but my silence is enough.

“He's always working. Always trying to please everybody else.” Charlie leans forward, his voice dropping. “If you stick around long enough, maybe you can find a way to get him to stop working so hard.”

“Are you asking me to distract him?” I ask, but Charlie just stands up like I didn’t say anything.

Reaching for my order, he slides the bag back in front of me with one hand, and takes away the coffee cup with the other.

“Go on, get,” he says with a jerk of his head. “Enjoy your lunch.”

I wave, then carry the food outside.

The wind has picked up, so I duck my head and hustle down the block.

Back at The Wind’s Eye, I let myself in, and take the stairs two at a time.

At Mikell’s office door, I knock, but don’t wait for permission to enter before letting myself in.

He’s behind the desk, laptop out, wearing a midnight blue suit. His hair is pulled back again, not a wisp out of place as he completely ignores my existence.

We’ve barely spoken since Wednesday when I first arrived, and it’s not through lack of trying on my behalf. I don't expect him here on the weekends, but he’s been MIA most times I’ve checked. And when he is here, there’s always a sudden call, or meeting he forgot about. But when the bar opens for the night, he’s always there. Always watching. Silent. Never approaching. Never saying a fucking word.

I’m not sure how long I just stand there, waiting, refusing to leave.

Eventually he sighs, still stubbornly keeping his eyes from me. “Sit down before you hurt yourself.”

Success.

I slump down onto the couch, and tug the coffee table closer.

One by one, I unpack the lunch order.

“This isn’t your dining room,” Mikell says, finally looking up at me. His eyes are tired, rimmed with red, but they're still the prettiest I’ve ever seen.

“My room’s not big enough for a dining table,” I shoot back, arranging the sandwiches, one in front of me, and one in front of the empty space to my side. “Besides. I’m sick of eating alone.”

“And why exactly are you making your loneliness my problem?”

“Don’t get it twisted. I’m not lonely. Just tired of being ignored.”

Mikell leans back, arms crossed. “You’ve hardly been ignored.”

“You’re not wrong,” I admit, unwrapping my BLT. “I’ve got a pocket full of numbers from just last night.”

“And?”

“And what?” I stare, expressionless.

“And why aren’t you eating with one of them?”

“None of them are the one I want.”

He blinks, then he sits upright again, pretending to busy himself. “So what? You just figured *to hell with it, I’ll invite myself*?”

“Good things come to those who wait is an ass backwards metaphor.”

For a second Mikell holds, then his lips crack.

Knowing I’ve won, I tap the lunch I brought for him. “I’d tell you to not let it get cold, but it’s a fucking sandwich, so just get your cute ass over here and eat it.”

Still trying desperately to hold onto the act, Mikell hesitates, but eventually stands, strips off his blazer, and walks to the couch.

Sitting on the edge of the cushion, he lets his knee brush against mine as he unwraps his food. The electricity is instant, and I know he did it on purpose. Because Charlie was right, everything he does has perfectly curated forethought—but that wasn’t how things felt the night we met. And it definitely wasn’t there when we came all over each other last Wednesday afternoon.

“Why do you put in so many hours each day?”

Mikell chews slowly, stalling for time. “It’s what managers do. Admin. Invoices. All stock orders come during business hours.”

“So why do you stick around till midnight, then?”

“I’m just dedicated to my job.”

“Really?” I nod. “So who do you plan on spending hours staring at when I have my nights off?”

His lips twitch. “I have days off too, you know?”

I smirk and take another bite of my sandwich.

After another stretch of silence, I say, “You should wear your hair down more.” Mikell glances at me, startled. “You looked so free that night in Philly. Here, it’s like you’re—” I break off, not sure how far I can push.

“Like I’m what?”

I meet his eyes. “Like you’re a caged bird. All pressed into a suit, stuck inside, like you’re waiting for permission to be free.”

He goes still. The silence between us is huge, but it doesn’t feel cold.

He looks away, but all the tension he was holding onto when I imposed myself upon him, has softened.

I finish my sandwich, then lean back, spreading out. My thigh presses against his, and I rest my arm along the back of the couch, close enough that if he wanted, he could lean into it.

He eats slower, but when he’s done he puts the wrapper aside and, almost timidly, slumps back beside me. His head falls against my arm, and I stay perfectly still, letting him get comfortable. When he doesn’t change his mind and move away, I slide my hand down to his shoulder and pull him flush against my side—and he lets me with no opposition. The only sound he makes is a content exhale.

Over the next few minutes it feels like he’s sinking into me.

Then, unsurprisingly, he’s the first to speak. “You know, professional distance is meant to be, an… *actual* distance. Like… *more* than zero.”

I gently squeeze his shoulder. “You want me to move?”

He exhales again, then shakes his head in a way that seems more for himself than for me. “No.”

He even closes his eyes, and I can’t help but take the opportunity to look down at him. His nose, the length of his eyelashes, the slight pink of his cheeks.

I clear my throat. “I miss the glitter, too.”

He hums contently. “So professional.”

“I’m not being unprofessional. I’m being honest. There’s a difference.”

For maybe two more minutes he rests against me as my fingers stroke his bicep through his shirt then move to trace over the line of his collarbone. Then, like the action dredged up his wariness, his body locks up again.

“I’m not… Look, I’m not great at this part. The—” He makes a vague gesture that could mean feelings or touching or just about anything. “If this is a joke, or a—”

“It’s not a joke.”

He tries to sit up, but I don’t let him go. So he presses his lips together, refusing to look at me. “I know I’m your first guy, so…”

I turn toward him, angling my body so he has to feel the size of me against him. “So… *what*?”

Mikell glances up, and I can’t help but feel like he’s trying to catch me lying. “Had you even considered it before me?”

“No.”

“So until a week ago you’d never even looked at another man like this, and now you want a relationship with one like you’re a fucking expert in what it means to be gay?”

“No. But I’m a quick learner.” I thumb a bit of hair away from his temple. “And I’m not gay.”

He huffs. “You’re impossible.”

“And you’re stubborn.”

His mouth twitches again, refusing to admit out loud that I’m right.

We lapse into another easy silence. I want to reach over and pull him fully into my lap, but I force myself to hold back. Instead, I watch the way his hands fidget in his lap, then twist one of the buttons on his shirt till I’m certain it’s going to pop off.

“You ever just…” I start, then trail off, not sure how to finish. “Want something so bad you can’t get it out of your head? Even when you try.”

He stares blankly towards his desk, then in a quiet, quivering voice he asks, “You mean, like… right now?”

I nod.

Mikell kicks off his shoes, pulls his knees up onto the couch, and wraps his arms around them. “It’s a bad idea,” he whispers.

“Probably.” I ease my arm further around him, then use my other hand to seek out his chin, imploring him to look at me. “But I want it anyway.”

With a slow blink, he tilts his chin and finally looks me in the face. The expression is half-defiance, half plea. “My father is gonna kill me.”

I grin because I can’t help it. “He can get in line, cause I’ll murder you myself if you don’t kiss me in the next ten seconds.”

He scoffs, but almost instantly the corners of his mouth go soft. “You don’t give up, do you?”

“Never.”

Mikell shifts just enough to give me the go ahead, and I close the distance. The second our lips touch he shudders, which does something unexplainable to me. So much of me wants the enigmatic stranger from the club, but I'm falling for the uptight and nervous version of him just as fast.

He reaches around me to grip my bicep as an anchor to kiss me back, and I let him lead because it's truly what I crave most from him—to show me that he wants this just as much as I do.

I slide my hand to the back of his neck, refusing to let him break away until his palms are pushing against me.

He's a panting mess, his rapid breath huffing against me. I want to devour him whole, now, later, and every damn day until he's sick of the sight of me. But I also need to respect his cues, so I let him pull away and change positions so he's sitting sideways with his legs stretched out over my lap.

"I'm… I'm not sure if I can do the whole boyfriend thing," he admits timidly.

"I didn't ask for one," I say, letting my hand settle on his knee. "Just a date."

"Does this not count?"

"Not even close."

His eyes roll and silence settles around us once more, so I pull him in, tucking his head under my chin where he nuzzles against my chest. He's warm and solid in my arms. My right hand finds his left one, and, for now, it's enough just to have him close.

But only just for now.

Because I *will* prove to him that we're both deserving of whatever happiness might come from this.

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Mickey

CHAPTER **SIX**

With everyone interested already having scouted out the new bouncer at ‘The Wind’, the Monday night crowd is thin. I try to convince myself it’s because the club isn’t open tonight, but we all know it’s because Reen didn’t show the slightest interest in anyone who walked through the door and threw themself at him.

Kylie is off Mondays so it's not unheard of for me to be hanging around. But I feel like an actual bar fly tonight, sitting at the table in the far corner by the hall to upstairs, pen in hand, pretending to mark off last night's receipts while I study every damn thing Reen is doing. Which, given the circumstances of the evening, isn't a lot.

He's standing, back against the wall a few yards inside the front door, arms crossed over the chest I used as a pillow this very afternoon.

It's surreal.

Three weeks ago when Dad told me he'd found a new bouncer, my brain didn't even give it a second thought. It was a job ticked off a list that I didn't have to complete. I never imagined the man who would show up would be equal parts intimidating and enigmatic. Mysterious and alluring, but also able to handle unruly drunken nonsense with ease and speed. He's like a castle guard from a fantasy book—the kind that stands at his post with unwavering loyalty. Every woman in the village wants to tame him, but he has only ever had eyes for the protagonist. Except in those stories, it

sometimes takes half the book for him to let his feelings out, not two pages. Then there's a push and pull, he takes a step back, questioning whether his motives are traitorous before love wins out in the end.

Reen Akana would make a terrible romance MMC.

But the always watching, always judging analogy still stands.

He’s always aware. Whenever I look at him, he’s already meeting my eyes, like he’s been waiting for me. It's driving me insane—in the best possible way, of course. So why can't I just break free? Bringing me lunch today was the most innocent, wholesome gesture, and I still can't believe it culminated in just a kiss. He's incredibly respectful of my boundaries. He stops when I say so, but also, he breaks every damn rule at exactly the same time.

He's unabashedly sly with his methods.

Then again, maybe he's not. Maybe he's a perfect gentleman. One with broad shoulders, tattoos, and a giant fucking dick.

Fuck you, Reen Akana. I smirk to myself.

And because you already know how it goes, he catches me.

After two amazingly agonizing seconds, he takes away eye contact to look around the mostly empty bar before returning it to me. Raising his hand, he taps the back of his wrist with two fingers, so I check my watch. It's ten-thirty, and I really don't need to be here, but I raise my hands and shrug, giving him a look that says *a boss's work is never done.*

He grins, then turns away to stick his head out the front door. After doing a slow check up and down the sidewalk, he pulls back inside, his posture shifting.

I recognize that shift.

It’s his *I’m about to fuck with you* posture.

Leaving his post, Reen walks around the bar, and even though there is music playing, it feels like one of those old Western movies where an outsider walks into the saloon and everything goes quiet. The regulars track his movement as he strides towards me until he's setting his big hands on the opposite side of my table.

"Can I help you, sir?" I ask, setting my elbows on the table and leaning forward just enough for my shirt to gape at the top where the buttons are undone.

"I really fucking love being watched by you, but you need to go home."

"You're not my father."

"No," he says, so matter of fact my balls tighten. "Because if I was, I wouldn't make you hide."

I gulp. "I'm… I'm just." *Why the fuck can't I get my words out?* "Maybe I'm waiting for you to fulfill your promise."

"Hah." His mouth pulls to one side. "And you thought work was the right place for that?" He drops his elbows to the table and leans in closer. "How unprofessional… *boss.*"

Everyone in the bar, including the other two staff, are looking at us, but—*fuck me dead*—I don't give one single shit.

"So does that mean you're ready to admit it out loud then?" he continues.

I chew on the tip of my pen. "Admit what?"

"That you're obsessed with me?"

I let out a cocky snicker. "So unsubtle."

"Says the man who can't stop staring."

I don’t respond, but I don’t drop my gaze either.

The bar still sounds silent. If this was a movie, there would be harsh violins playing to highlight the tension.

Then, without warning, Reen reaches out and takes my right wrist in his hand.

I freeze, not out of fear, but because every nerve in my body sparks to life.

He doesn’t let go. He doesn’t even squeeze. He just wraps his fingers around and holds, because he knows I won't pull away.

I set the pen down, and glare at him.

“Come,” he says, and before I can protest, he tugs me from my seat.

Within five steps we’re out of the light and into the corridor by the bathrooms. My back is instantly against the wall. He's so close the heat of his body soaks straight through me.

I try to keep my composure, but my brain is empty of everything other than the three inches between his mouth and mine.

“Is this how you treat your manager?” I try to sound unimpressed, but my voice comes out husky.

Reen looks down at me—he's so much bigger than I am—his eyes so dark it’s hard to tell where the iris ends. “You haven't managed shit since you got a taste of my cock."

Jesus–fucking–christ.

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“I’m not wrong, though.” He leans in closer and I get a nose full of his scent, then his mouth is right by my ear. "I told you this afternoon I was yours, so why do you keep worrying I'll get stolen?"

My cheeks burn.

I don’t answer, not because I don't want to, but because I can't.

He doesn’t push, not in the way I expect. Instead, he brings our joined hands up and presses my palm flat to his chest, right over his heart. His pulse hammers, as fast and loud as my own.

"You already own me, Mickey."

"I told you not to call me—"

"You've told me a lot of things."

I try to inhale, but it turns into a gasp. “P–people can see.”

The next part happens fast: his thumb strokes the inside of my wrist, his knee edges between my thighs, he leans further in and I’m pinned, not by strength but by the certainty that I won't fight it.

“I could make you say it,” he tells me.

“Say what?”

I’m too hot, too electric, and for a second I genuinely believe I might black out if he doesn’t touch me in some way that’s not gentle. But I still can’t bring myself to say the words. This is still my bar, my job, my livelihood.

My face is on fire, and I want to bury it into his neck.

My eyes roll back at the heat of his breath on my cheek as his nose traces the shell of my ear. "I think you like the danger, Mickey. You won't push me away because you need everything I can give you. You want people to see. You want word to get to your father so you don't have to be the one to tell him. And you know I'll fight for you when you don't feel strong enough to stand up to him."

My throat is raw.

My dick is hard as a rock.

It's taking everything I have not to hump his leg.

"I could wreck you right here," he tells me like a promise, and so much of me hopes that he will.

"I've never…" I say, but the rest of the sentence is lost when his teeth nibble at my earlobe. "I'm not—" I try again, but I don't even know who the fuck I am anymore.

Reen brings his face back into my field of vision. "Say it… Say that you want me."

My brains knee jerk reaction is to want to tell him to fuck off. To push him away and laugh, and keep up the ruse that I haven't spent every night since first laying eyes on him in Philly, jerking off to the most depraved thoughts about what those strong hands and monster cock could do to me.

But I don't. Because I'm sick of holding everything in.

Let Dad find out I'm gay.

Let the whole fucking town talk about it.

"Fine," I say, and Reen leans in so close our lips are touching. "I want you."

I feel his mouth smile against mine, but he doesn't kiss me. He just lets my admission float in the air, making me squirm in it as I marinate in my own desperate need for him.

His hands find my hips, his touch is deliberate, but still not enough to satiate me.

His nose flicks mine, and he pulls back an inch. "I'm proud of you."

"I'm worried," I admit, my voice trembling.

"I've never met anyone like you," he whispers.

"Me too."

That's when he finally, *finally* kisses me. It’s soft at first, more of a press than a kiss, but then he opens his mouth, I forget every rule that's ever existed inside of these walls. My hands slip under his shirt, desperate for skin. He’s hot all over, and I want to climb him, devour him, drag him inside of me until I never have to think about anything else.

He breaks the kiss, just long enough to say, “Wednesday night.”

“What about Wednesday night?” I pant, already trying to pull him back down to me.

“We’re going out. Real date.”

“You’re so sure,” I say, breathless.

He bites my lower lip, then releases it. “I always get what I want.”

I let out a half moan, half laugh. "I won't agree until you tell me where."

"Fuck you're cute when you're trying to be stubborn." Without answering me, he steps back completely. "I need to get back to work."

"So you're just gonna leave me here?"

With that damn unabashed smile, he reaches out to run his thumb over my chin. "You can go wait in my bed till two–thirty, if you like." He drops

his hand and rearranges himself in his pants. "But you should probably just go home."

He gives me one last look, head cocked, smiling—slow and molten, before walking back out into the bar like nothing happened.

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Mickey

CHAPTER **SEVEN**

So far, Tuesday has been the opposite of eventful, and honestly, I'm thankful for it.

I was in no state to stick around the bar last night, so the minute my dick went down I reemerged from the shadows, and went home. As soon as I'd jerked my frustrations out in the shower, my head hit the pillow and I was out cold. I woke up this morning far more refreshed than I have all week, and I've been able to get a few solid work hours in before I started hearing faint noises coming from Reen's apartment. I don't want the distraction, but also, if he's awake and this close, I can't help but think about what he's doing.

Did he jerk off last night thinking about me too?

How about this morning? Did he do it in bed, or the shower?

What does he think about?

And… *Is he willing to get **more** physical with me?*

Getting your dick sucked is a far cry from sucking a dick yourself—

I squeeze my eyes shut and rapidly click the end of my pen against the middle of my forehead, counting each noise to ground my thoughts. But when I'm on the twenty-seventh click, I feel the air in my office change. Eyes still closed, I put the pen down and press it against the desk with my palm before looking towards the door.

Reen fills the frame with his calm, non-threatening masculine presence. His dark hair is damp, and he's dressed up. Not in a suit, or like he's got a fancy lunch to go to, but he looks good. Wide leg black jeans, a knit sweater, and an expensive looking leather jacket. And he just stands there, staring with the same intensity as last night, like he's expecting to pick up exactly where he left me.

I break first. "So?"

Reen lifts a brow. "So."

"So… what do you want?" I keep my tone flippant, but my throat is already dry.

Reen steps into my office and walks around to my side of the desk, his shadow passing over me as he moves. He's behind me now, and I can't see him, but I can feel him. I hear the soft hitch of his breath, and the way the floor boards creak under his boots as he shifts his stance.

His hand comes down, strong and warm, on my shoulder.

He squeezes, just enough to let me know he could pin me in place if he wanted.

"Get your coat," he whispers in my ear.

I gulp. "Why, exactly?"

Reaching over me, he closes my laptop. "I'm stealing you for the afternoon."

I glance up, trying to sell boredom instead of the spike of electric sexual tension in my chest. "I have work to do."

He cocks his head, unphased. "So do I," and with a tap of my cheek he tells me again to, "Grab your coat," then strolls back around to the front of my desk.

"You're not trying to force me on a date now, are you?

He grins, and the room seems smaller for it. "No. That's still on for tomorrow. This is a… prelude."

"I don't do preludes, prequels, or matinées."

"There's that stubborn streak I like so much. But I'd rather you not make my dick hard until later." He leans over my desk, eyes never leaving me. I feel the soft threat of his patience, and it does unspeakable things to me.

I last maybe three seconds before I push back in my chair. "You gonna tell me where we're going?"

He shakes his head. "It's a surprise… Keys please."

I look at his outstretched hand as I stand. Taking my blazer off the back of my chair, I put it on then reach inside the pocket for the keys to my Audi then slap them into his palm. “Let’s get this over with,” I say, my voice calm, my pulse telling a completely different story. Because even though I might pretend to hate this, to hate the surprise, to hate the unknown, the fact is, I don’t hate any of those things. It’s the loss of control I struggle with. Twisted Oak Valley is small, meaning there’s a constant threat that my father is around every corner. And when I’m in Reen’s presence, it’s like my backbone never existed.

The walk to the car is silent, except for the jangle of my keys in Reen’s hand as he swings them.

The lights to my slate gray Audi flash as it unlocks, and he opens the passenger’s side door for me. My eyes roll on reflex, but I get in quickly in the hopes he doesn’t notice. Because the gesture is sweet, I’m just really, *really* not used to it.

In the driver’s seat, Reen slides the chair back to make room for his incredible legs, then after another flash of his killer smile, he peels out of the lot behind the bar.

The ride is quiet at first, with the road humming under us and the November air blowing the occasional swarm of leaves against the windows. We leave Twisted Oak behind, and every mile is a knot unwound from my shoulders. I want to ask Reen a hundred things, but I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing how hard my brain is spinning, only adding to the conflict that’s been whirring inside me for the past week. He’s done a pretty damn good job proving his intentions to me so far, but I still don’t know why I can’t fully let go around him.

After about thirty minutes, Reen pulls the car onto the main street of another small town, just as picture-book perfect as the other two we drove through to get here.

We park out the front of a small cluster of shops; a hair salon, a bakery, and a boutique called Goldie’s. Reen gets out first, moves to the passenger door, and opens it for me.

I step out onto the curb, and instantly cross my arms over my chest because I’m not dressed for long bouts outside in this weather.

“Where are we going?” I ask, looking further down the street.

I step out onto the curb, coat zipped to my chin. “You’ve got to be shitting me.”

Reen jerks his head in the direction of the boutique, takes my hand, and tries to guide me towards the door.

I yank my hand free. “No fucking way.”

“Yes fucking way,” he responds with a look that’s all patience, but also, zero apology.

“Reen—”

“Shh.” He cuts me off, taking my hand again. For a moment we just stand here. He doesn’t force me, but I don’t pull away either. Then he takes my other hand, and there I am, standing out in the open, with other people on the sidewalk and cars driving by, holding hands with another man. Leaning down, Reen kisses me lightly on the cheek. “I’d really like to take you inside,” he tells me, and my whole body floods with his warmth. With a small nod, I agree, and he cups the side of my face with his left hand, then catches me off guard with a soft peck on my lips, and I’m so shocked I don’t even kiss back.

“So cute,” he smiles, and guides me into Goldie’s

Inside, it’s all soft light and pastels. Racks of dresses, skirts, sweaters, pants, and blouses are displayed with curated perfection. There’s a woman at the counter who barely glances up, but I can feel her watching us anyway.

At least, I convince myself she is.

Reen doesn’t hesitate. He walks straight to a display near the back, fingers brushing over the sleeves and collars. I hover a few yards away, hoping to become invisible.

“Come look” he says over his shoulder.

“There’s nothing in here for me.”

“Why? No bootie shorts and slutty tank tops? I’m sure there’s plenty in here that’ll show off your ass and tits real nice.”

Holy fuck!

I’m instantly by his side. “Would you keep it down?”

“Why?” he asks with a glimmer in his eye. “There’s no shame in how you like to dress.”

“That was…” I swallow, trying to find words to support my argument. “At the club.”

He pulls a soft blue cardigan from the rack, then moves to another row. “I don’t care what you wear. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think you looked hot as fuck in this kind of stuff.”

“Do you not care what people think?”

He stops, then turns to face me, now holding a pale yellow dress in one hand. “What I think, is that you shouldn’t have to travel hours away from where you live just to wear clothes that make you come alive.”

I want to believe him, but I can’t get my body to move.

Reen sets the yellow dress back, then ducks his head so we’re eye to eye. “Pick out one thing. Just for me.”

I look away, heart thumping. “No.”

He leans in, his voice dropping lower. “Is it because you really don’t want to, or because you’re scared I’ll like it too much?”

I glance at him, and the way he’s looking at me—it makes my knees weak, it makes the fear feel less like shame and more like anticipation.

“Where are we even going on this date?” I ask, deflecting.

“Pumpkin Valley Drive-In, though we aren't here for date attire,” he says, breaking eye contact as he moves back to the racks. “But I guess now we’ll be catching the late session, seeing as you don’t do matinées.”

I stand there, helpless, watching him pluck another dress from the rack and hold it up.

“W–what’s playing?”

“Sixth Sense.”

“I’ve already seen it.”

“Good,” he says with a pompous grin as he brings the sundress to me. Short, v-neck with a row of small brown buttons down the front, he holds it against my body.

“Absolutely not.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t wear dresses, Reen.”

He gives me that grin again. “Just try it on. For me.”

I check over my shoulder, heart in my throat, but the woman at the counter is occupied with her phone.

“It’s November,” I say, pushing it back to him.

“I’ll keep you warm.”

I’m so fucking gone for this man.

“Just put it on,” he says with authority, then continues, much softer, “If you hate it, I’ll never mention it again.”

He nudges the dress into my hands, then walks off to peruse a rack like he didn’t just ask me to do something insanely huge.

I hold the dress close, and suddenly I'm twelve again, sneaking things from my mother's closet, hoping not to get caught. The shame then was nuclear, but this is a different kind of terror.

I edge toward the fitting rooms, checking every angle for witnesses, then slip inside. I slide the curtain around as quietly as I can, my fingers trembling so hard I almost drop the dress.

For a second, I just stand there, clutching my freedom by the hanger.

When I'm ready to move, it's not for Reen.

It's for me.

For the little boy who didn't understand the things he was feeling.

And for the man who is sick of running away to the city to feel free.

I take off my blazer, then my shirt, draping each piece over the little wooden bench in the corner. The dress feels impossibly soft when I thread my arms through the sleeves, and like an awakening as it drapes against my body.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror.

The v-neck shows so much skin. A triangle of my chest is exposed to half-way down my sternum, making my collarbones a sharp focal point. The sleeves stop mid-bicep, and the hem falls on the thickest point of my thin legs, hinting at a curve I've never seen before.

I stare at my reflection, unable to look away—not recognizing the person in the mirror but also feeling, for the first time, like I might actually belong in this body.

I reach up, brushing my fingertips over the hollow of my throat, along my clavicle, then to the dip between my pecks. My heart is thumping so hard I can see it moving the fabric. I feel more naked than I ever have before, and the exposure is dizzying.

I see the curtains rustle to my side. "You okay in there?" Reen asks.

I freeze, my hand still at my chest. "Fine."

"Show me?"

"N-no," I stutter.

"Please, Mickey. Just for a second."

My knees almost buckle at the sound of my name on his lips.

"You can close your eyes so you don't have to see me."

He waits.

"Is that okay?"

I turn towards the curtain, close my eyes, and nod before remembering that he can't see me. "Yes," I whisper.

The curtain hooks rattle on their bar, then after a few seconds I hear it close again.

Opening my eyes, I see Reen inside with me, jaw slack and eyes hungry.

"You're…" he starts, but can't seem to finish.

"Don't you dare say beautiful," I warn, fighting for composure.

He wraps his lips around his teeth, and sighs. "Fine. But you look hot as fuck, Mickey."

I roll my eyes, but my voice is shaky when I tell him; "You're an idiot."

He inches closer in the small space until we're almost touching. Bringing his hand up, he gives me every chance to back away, before he reaches behind my head to pull out the elastic holding back my hair. With it grazing my shoulders and hanging loosely around my face, he tucks some behind my ear, letting his thumb linger on my cheekbone. His eyes are black with want, and he holds my gaze like he wants to burn the image into his memory forever.

"Are…" I start, my pulse pounding like a jackhammer in my ears. "Are you into me like this because… because it's easier the more I look like a…?"

Reen blinks, the question actually seeming to catch him off guard. "I'm into you in a suit. I'm into you like this. And I know I'll be into you wearing nothing at all. I'm into *you*, Mickey, because you're the only thing I think about."

The words are too much. I want to believe them, but there's still something holding me back.

He must sense my doubt, because he leans in, our foreheads touching. "You don't owe me this, you know? But I want you to be able to want this. You don't have to hide it."

A wave of relief hits me, sharp enough to hurt.

My nose starts to tingle, and I feel the stinging prick in my eyes. I close them quickly to try and stop it, but tears leak down my cheeks anyway.

"God damn it," I curse under my breath as I try to turn away.

Reen catches me by the chin, tilting me back toward him. "You're allowed to cry."

The next tears fall faster.

Then I’m shaking, all the adrenaline and shame and relief flooding me at once.

I want to say something smart, something dismissive like I always do, but I can’t form the words.

He leans in and kisses me, soft and slow, like he wants to prove a point.

I kiss him back, because if I don’t, I might collapse.

When he breaks away, he holds my face in his hands. “I just want to see the spark again—the same contagious joy you had when I first saw you.”

My vision is watery, and my breath is thin.

I lean my head into his chest, inhaling the scent of him.

He wraps his arms around me, and I let myself be held until my tears stop, and I’m filled with a new, ferocious contentment.

Big, strong hands rub circles on my back.

I creep my touch between our chests until my fingers are clasped behind Reen’s neck.

I look at him, really look, and there’s nothing in his eyes but pride and an unwaveringly truthful hunger. He meant every word.

It knocks the wind out of me.

It makes me insatiable.

I tug him down and devour his mouth.

He kisses me too, rougher, hungrier, and my whole body answers back.

I gasp, sucking in his breath like I need him to fill my lungs for me.

His palms slide down, hands groping my ass, kneading, forcing us tighter together. Then he pulls up the hem of the dress, fingers sinking into the crease below my bare cheeks until his brain catches up to what he’s feeling.

Breaking the kiss, Reen stares down at me and I feel my neck and chest flush red.

Dropping to his knees, he starts at my waist, dragging his hands down over the soft fabric covering my hips and thighs until he’s lifting the skirt.

I inhale sharply, and bite my knuckle at the feeling of his heavy breath on my skin—on the lilac mesh lace of my underwear, my cock straining against the thin fabric that I know he sees.

His eyes widen, almost in delay.

“Holy fuck,” he groans.

A wave of heat pours over me.

My shoulders slump back against the mirror.

Reen leans in, brushing his nose against the bulge in the mesh, then looks up at me, eyes full of worship. “Tell me if you want me to stop.”

I can’t speak. I can only shake my head.

He presses a kiss to my cockhead, then the shaft, then licks a stripe up the length of me through the fabric.

I whimper, then bite down harder on my knuckle.

Reen hooks his finger in the waistband and pulls the mesh lace down just enough for my cock to spring free. His eyes never leave mine as he runs his tongue from the base to the tip, then circles it.

He swallows me whole, down to the base, and I have to grab the wall for balance because of how fucking good it feels to be snug against his tonsils.

He pulls off, licking his lips, and I see that his own cock is rock hard in his jeans, the outline obscene.

Reen dives back in, his virgin mouth hot and greedy for me—the inside of his lips a perfect vise.

His tongue pushes up from beneath, then he’s swallowing around me, creating an ungodly suction as his throat strangles me.

One hand grips tight on my thigh to steady me when I start to shake.

Then there’s a pop, and he’s gasping for air as thick spit drips off the end of my dick.

He catches a drip with his tongue and wraps his fist around my base.

“Reen—” I choke out, but he just clamps his lips back around me and hums on my cock.

He alternates between slow, deep sucks and intentionally light swirls of his tongue over the tip. Then he’s flicking beneath my crown, wringing a full-body convulsion from me.

He’s so fucking good at this I want to scream.

My hips buck, and I feel my balls slap against the stubble of his chin.

I sink my teeth into the heel of my palm to stop the deep, animalistic moan from rumbling out of my chest as I clench onto his hair with my other hand.

“Fuck, fuck, I’m—” I try to warn, but he speeds up, hand working me in perfect counterpoint, until I’m coming so hard I can’t even bite back the cry.

My body jerks.

I tug at his scalp.

And he just takes it.

All of it—not stopping until I’m a spent, shuddering mess, doubled over and desperately clinging to his shoulders for support.

He swallows, then lets me slip from his mouth.

The look he gives me as he licks his lips clean is proud, sated, and utterly besotted.

I stagger back, resting my ass on the little bench, still in the dress, my cock softening but twitching in aftershocks.

Reen stands, towering over me, then crouches back down and kisses me before sweeping away the hair from my face.

“You okay?” he asks, so gentle it almost breaks me.

“Never better,” I say, my voice shredded.

He smiles, then tugs my panties down and off my legs.

Standing again, he balls them up and shoves them in his pocket.

There’s a sudden knock on the wall outside the change room, and we both freeze.

“You guys need any help?” the shop woman calls out, just enough cheer in her voice to let us know she’s *not* totally oblivious.

Reen answers for us, “All good, thanks!” and the ease in his voice is infuriating. “We’ll take it.”

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Even with the music leaking up through the floorboards from the cocktail bar below, it's too quiet in here. I've been pacing around my apartment for the past five minutes, wearing a track in the middle of the floor.

I'm not nervous.

I'm crazy restless. Jittery. Desperate to see him again.

My god. Neither of us worked today, which means he wasn't in the building—because why would he be—but it feels like I'm missing a limb.

Who even am I?

I've been single for years. Not on purpose, but I guess life just got in the way. That's the whole reason I jumped headfirst into this whole giant change of scenery. Yet, I've never been smitten like this before. I've never been starved for attention. I know what I look like. I get the appeal. But Mikell Askerlund is the kind of drug you get high on in an instant. No delay, just head swelling sensory overload, and I never want to come down from this.

I pace to the bathroom door and look at myself in the mirror again. I run my hand through my hair, straighten my collar, then check the time; just past eight-thirty.

I really should have organized dinner first.

We could have gone to Walkers' for a drink.

There's a sharp knock, and my body jerks straight.

I open the door, and Mickey is there, one hand up poised to knock again. His hair is down, the ends waving slightly as they flick about his shoulders. His face is clean, except for a dusting of highlighter on his cheekbones catching the hall light, and the faint pinkish sheen of gloss on his irresistible lips. He's wrapped in a full-length winter coat, the deep charcoal wool throwing his skin even paler, with a black leather satchel slung across his chest.

The coat is a decoy. I know it. And he knows I know.

Mickey drops his hand and looks at me for a long beat, not saying anything.

I step closer and lean against the door frame. He doesn't shift back, he just lifts his chin to hold my gaze, and there's something about the sight of his exposed neck that makes me feel like we're still in that fitting room, and he's waiting for me to do something reckless.

He tilts his head to the other side, my eyes drawn to his jaw.

He takes the smallest, unconscious bite of his bottom lip, and it's so goddamn hot it makes me want to lick that gloss from his mouth. But I hold back.

I grab the door handle. "We need to go."

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"If you want a date, we have to go. Because if we stand here for one more minute I'm gonna drag you to my bed."

Mickey smirks, and for a moment, neither of us moves. The heat between us is enough to make me want to tear my own jacket off.

"You're relentless," he says.

"You like it," I volley back.

His eyes lock on mine, and I'm convinced he might be the one to push me into the apartment and onto the bed. Then he opens his mouth to retort, and I force myself to pull the door completely closed and break the spell.

Mickey's expression pinches in a way that lets me know he would have been a willing participant, but that he's also proud that I didn't let my urges get the better of me.

"Let's go then," he says, taking a step back.

We move together down the hall. At the stairs Mickey goes first, the bar's music growing louder with each step. At the bottom, I lock the door, and Mickey grabs my wrist, trying to lead me quickly out the back. But

mischievous as always, Kylie appears from thin air with a shit-eating grin on her face.

“Going on a business trip, are we?” she asks, her eyes comically large, but her voice deadpan flat.

Doing his best not to feed into her delight, Mickey tugs me away from her, giving me just enough time to say, “Just a team building exercise,” before I’m totally out of earshot.

Outside in the street behind the bar, I let Mickey walk towards his Audi as I head in the opposite direction.

“You’ve got to be shitting me?” he scoffs when I unlock the passenger door to Kylie's 1980 silver-blue Buick station wagon.

“Your car’s back seat is practically nonexistent.”

“What makes you think you’re gonna get me in the back seat?”

I move to the back passenger door and open it, inviting him with a flourish of my arm to inspect my handiwork.

With a reluctant full roll of his neck, Mickey drags his feet towards the car. His faux attitude is short-lived, however, because he can’t hold back his smile when he sees the rug draped over the bench seat, the throw cushions, the blankets, everything we could possibly need.

“It’s an eyesore,” he says, closing the door.

“It’s a classic,” I smile back, and usher him into the front.

In less than a minute we’re on the road, passing through Twisted Oak Valley until the houses thin and the trees grow thicker on the dusty sprawl of back roads that connect the surrounding towns to each other, making the entire region feel like its own microcosm away from the rest of the world and all the bad shit that happens in it.

I should be focused on the road, but Mickey is pulling my attention. Even from the corner of my eye I notice how tightly wound he is underneath that giant coat. He’s breathing so deeply I can see his chest rising with each inhale. He keeps shifting in his seat, his thighs pressing together, his fingers fidgeting with the strap of the satchel in his lap. And when I change gears, he doesn’t even try to hide the way he stares at my hand like he’s waiting for me to reach out and grab him.

Or maybe he’s hoping I don’t because he’s terrified of how he’ll react if I do.

With each new turn and town we pass by, his posture eventually changes until he’s tapping his fingers on the worn brown leather of the seat and

happily looking out the window.

Pumpkin Valley Drive-In comes up fast, and I coast the wagon through the entrance and up to the ticket booth.

After paying, I pull into the back row all the way to the left.

I turn off the engine and kill the headlights, drowning us in sudden darkness before unbuckling my seatbelt and cracking the door. With the internal lights on, I watch as Mickey puts the satchel on the floor and starts untying his boots. Then, he twists in his seat, and with no hesitation, launches himself over the center console. The coat rides up, and for three long seconds I get flashes of bare skin—my mind immediately sparking a replay of when he jumped over the bar in Philly.

The first time I ever saw him.

The exact instant I knew I was fucked.

Taking the valuable moments to collect myself, I step out of the wagon before joining him in the back. But my composure is instantly undone by the sight of him reclining against the stack of pillows in the corner, his legs parted just enough that the coat falls apart baring one leg fully to the knee.

I force my concentration towards pushing the front seats forward and sliding them as far as they will go on their tracks. Though as soon as I settle back, he stretches his legs out over my lap, and my pulse spikes.

The drive-in screen comes to life, and I turn off the car's light.

For a few minutes, we just sit, the sounds of distant engines and the faint soundtrack of trailers filling the air.

I stretch my arms out along the back of the seat, gripping onto the draped rug to ground myself.

This is meant to be a date.

I'm meant to be showing him respect.

I can get through the next two hours without—

Mickey's hand moves towards the top button of his coat. One by one he undoes them all, revealing to me what's underneath.

—Like fuck, I can.

I have no self control around this beautiful creature.

Gripping his waist, I pull him onto my lap.

His knees part and his legs spread wide as he straddles me.

My hands are instantly at his throat.

His pulse is like a jackhammer.

I drag my touch outward over his shoulders, sliding beneath the collar of the coat so it falls off and down his arms.

A tiny, soft gray skirt sits low on his hips, the pleats only just hiding his underwear and pretty dick from me.

My touch crawls over his tremoring thighs until I'm slipping beneath the skirt to grope satin and lace.

Mickey's breath hitches, and the ones that follow remain shallow.

He lets the coat fall completely off his arms, then brings his hands to rest on my shoulders like he needs the anchor.

Jerking him forward on my lap so he's directly over my cock, I grind up against his ass once before dragging my hands up over his hips and waist until the gray fabric lifts enough for me to see his pink and white panties before it falls to hide them again.

A thin white tank top clings to his torso. The straps are delicate and the neckline is so low his hard nipples are only just covered.

"Fuck your tits look good," I breathe out.

Without a word, he drops one hand from my shoulder to trace his middle finger over the exposed curve of his pec.

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," I tell him, and mean it with every fiber of my being.

He glances away, and even in the dark I can see his cheeks flush pink.

When he looks back at me, he looks hungry, but also like he's about to shatter.

Another preview starts on the screen behind him.

He just looks at me, still silent, waiting for me to do something because he still doesn't fully trust this is real.

So I do.

I'll prove it to him every damn day.

I hook my hand behind his neck and pull him in, lips to lips.

Mickey shudders into the kiss—hands back on my shoulders, nails digging in.

He rocks in my lap and I grip his ass tight, forcing his hips to tilt so his dick grinds against my stomach.

He moans into my mouth, and the sound goes straight to my cock.

My hands roam his sides and back.

He arches into my touch and his breath pants hot against my jaw.

I reach for the straps of the tank.

“Can I—”

He nods before I can finish, and I pull them off his shoulders and drag the fabric down until it’s bunched around his waist and his chest is bare, pink and tight and begging to be touched.

I’m so hard it hurts.

The movie starts, but all I see is him, wild and hungry, half-naked in the back of a borrowed car.

I run my nose over his jaw and the place behind his ear that makes him melt.

I feel him shaking, nails in my scalp as he holds me.

I press kisses down his throat, pausing at his Adam’s apple to feel the tremble of his swallow.

I drag my mouth along the sharp ridge of his collarbone, and when I nip at it, he gasps—holding me tighter as he grinds down on me.

I suck a mark into his neck, then his chest as I roll his nipples between my fingers.

I pinch and twist.

I lap at his right nipple and scrape my teeth across it. When he bucks forward, I grip his ass and hold him still.

His head falls back in bliss.

The skirt is bunched over my arms as I knead his bare cheeks.

With my eyes as adjusted to the dark as they are going to get, I let one hand roam to the front to fully expose Mickey’s pretty cock straining beneath the pink satin.

I tease the head with my thumb until I feel his arousal trickle through the fabric.

When I cup it and squeeze, he bites down on his own fist to stifle the cry.

I stroke him through his underwear as the fingers of my other hand creep into the crease of his ass to gently trace circles over his hole through the silky thong. He shivers and presses back.

“Jesus, Mickey,” I whisper, and he rocks back harder.

“Reen,” he pants, his voice raw. “Just…”

I know exactly what he wants because I want it too. “You sure?”

“Shut up,” he dismisses, already working on my belt.

I spit on my fingers, and with one hand pull aside the thong as the other circles his bare rim with a new purpose.

Mickey writhes in my lap, coaxing me to push harder as he squeezes my shoulders for leverage.

When my first finger sinks inside, I’m confronted by his tightness.

I cup his cock again, and press another finger inside.

He jerks, hissing, but rocks back until I’m as deep as I can go.

His hole flutters, clenching then yielding when I start pumping.

He’s so hot and tight.

The car is like a furnace, the windows already foggy with condensation.

“M-more,” he begs. “Put another one in. You’ll need to stretch me real good if you wanna fit.”

My mind is a fuzzy mess of pure desire.

I’ve never felt want like this. Nor have I ever been the putty in someone else's hands.

I add a third and do my best to open him up.

When I pull my fingers free, he slumps forward.

I raise his chin. “Did you bring any condoms?”

He smirks, drunkenly, “You prepared all this and forgot the most important thing?”

“I didn’t forget,” I say, guiding him so close I can feel his lips on mine as I speak. “But this was only ever going to happen if you wanted it. If you haven't brought any, then there’s the answer.”

Mickey smirks again.

“So?”

He smiles and backs off of my lap.

Twisting around, he climbs onto the center console to reach for his satchel. Kneeling, with his backside in the air, the skirt rides up to reveal the full obscene line of his ass and balls in the stretched satin of his panties.

It’s the most beautifully filthy thing I’ve ever seen.

I need to taste him.

The urge is unimaginable.

I lunge forward, plant my hands on his hips, and bite down on his plump little cheek. He jerks, then laughs, and I tear the thong down his thighs, exposing his hole, already wet and gaping from my fingers.

I pull his cheeks wider, then spit on him, spreading it around with my tongue, rimming him until he’s begging for more. So I shove my tongue in as far as it will go, then replace it with my fingers—all three at once.

He wrings the satchel strap in his hands and his cock dribbles onto the console.

Mickey turns. “I… I need more. I need your cock inside me.”

“You sure?” I tease, with a cocky lilt.

“Well then, you better get over here and start fucking me.”

He glares, and even in the dark I see the same twinkle I fell in love with at first sight in that equally dark nightclub.

Like the gymnast I swear he is, Mickey twists until he’s sitting on the console. Grabbing my already unfastened pants, he shows me his strength by forcing them down my legs with ease.

I grip along the back of the seat again and watch as he dives into the satchel.

Condom wrapper on the floor, he wraps a hand around the base of my cock and expertly slides the rubber down my shaft. Lube is next, squeezed on my tip, then spread around—the excess smeared on his hole as he climbs back onto my lap.

With knees either side of me, he rubs the head of my cock against his rim.

The sight of his dick, hard and leaking, lifting the skirt and bobbing as he positions himself is pure perfection.

He is starvation personified.

Then he pauses, his eyes locking on mine.

A final shift, a flawlessly executed tilt of his hips. My cock head catches, then pops inside him. He yelps the most pure sound, and for a second, we just breathe, staring at each other.

Excruciatingly slow, he sinks down, inch by inch, until I’m halfway inside him.

He’s so tight my eyes roll back.

I can feel every pulse of his insides.

Assuming that’s as much of me as he can take, I bite down on my bottom lip as he drags himself back up again until I feel my crown straining against the clamping tightness of his rim. Then, without warning, he slams down, his balls and cock slapping against my skin as he swallows me whole.

He starts slow at first, grinding, wiggling his hips, rocking back and forth as I lose my goddamn mind. And when I don’t think I can possibly take anymore, he plants his feet flat, wraps his hands around my throat, and starts bouncing.

I grunt, raw and animalistic.

He’s so beautiful it makes me dizzy.

His face is ethereal; pain and pleasure and want all wrapped up into one beautiful expression.

The skirt flares, billowing with every bounce.

This is the best I’ve ever felt. The pinnacle. The standard set by the man of my dreams. Nothing else in the world could ever compare to this. To his moans, his control, the way he pretends he doesn’t want it until he’s begging like a bitch to be filled with me.

I take hold of his waist and thrust up, matching his rhythm, driving deeper every time.

Mickey moans like a fucking animal, but after only a few thrusts, he takes me by the wrists, and returns my hands to the back of the seat.

“You told me to fuck you. So sit there, stay silent, and let me use this cock however the fuck I want.”

“Holy fuck,” I growl and white-knuckle the leather.

He leans in to bite my neck.

He pulses around me, squeezing then releasing. Reminding me that this is happening because *he* wanted it.

“Fuck, you’re so big,” he praises me, then starts to move again. Setting his own pace as I surrender to him; his power, his rhythm, his need.

Pushing off my chest he slams down with so much force my balls bounce up to smack against his cheeks.

His hair is wild, whipped to one side, then the other as his head rolls.

I dare to move, and reach for his nipple. I pinch it, and his hand clamps over mine, pinning me there.

“Yes. Fuck. Harder,” he keens, and I squeeze with all my strength as he bounces fiercer and faster.

I gnaw on the inside of my cheek to stop praises from spilling out.

You’re so fucking pretty.

So smooth, and hard, and tight.

A perfect doll.

My doll.

My femboy princess.

Then he stretches back, reaching behind to support himself with elbows on the center console. Arching his back, he switches to short, shallow thrusts. His moans soon grow loud and desperate, and I know he’s found the spot.

I hope one day soon he can show me how I can feel this good.

I stare at him in awe as he uses me; head thrown back, mouth open, chasing his high.

With all the admiration in the world, I run my fingers up his shins and over his knees to his thighs.

“Okay. Okay. Yes. Yes—do it. Touch me now,” he demands.

I spit in my hand and grab his cock.

Jaw slack and chin to his chest, he stares at me.

I stroke faster.

Mickey starts to shake.

Every muscle locks tight.

He slams down and holds, squeezing the soul right out of my body, and then he’s coming.

Ropes of cum shoot up over his skirt and top.

There’s a wayward drop on his bottom lip.

I clench my teeth and take my reward.

Thumbs pressing into his stomach and nails digging at his sides, I raise him, hold him suspended, and fuck up into him.

“Yes—*fuck!* Use me! Wreck my ass,” he cries.

The car rocks.

The suspension creeks.

Mickey starts babbling incoherently.

With his body weakened, his elbows slip from the console and I scoop beneath him, bringing him back onto my lap.

He dives for me, his arms wrapping around my neck as he crashes our mouths together.

The kiss is brutal.

I lick the cum from his bottom lip.

“Fill me up, Reen. Make me yours,” he says.

“You’re already mine,” I tell him, gripping his shoulders from beneath his arms to force him down hard on my cock. And like the perfect creature he is, he clenches tight, strangling my shaft as I unload inside him, filling the condom.

He collapses on my chest, panting with strips of hair clinging to his sweat soaked face.

We slump down the seat together, curled into a heap, my cock still deep in his ass.

He tugs me towards him for a sweet, lazy kiss.

“I can’t believe you did this to me,” he whispers.

“Which part?”

“All of it. Every single part of the last few weeks.”

He shifts, and I feel my limp cock slip from inside him. As though suddenly overcome with embarrassment, he tries to pull away, but I don’t let him.

“Stay,” I say, and I know he knows I don’t just mean for right now.

“Okay,” Mickey says softly against my neck. “You win.”

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A month ago, I'd have never believed winter here could feel this warm.

From the moment I stepped off the plane in Philly, the cold seeped into my bones. But every minute I spend with Mickey has been like a fire of every emotion that had laid dormant for thirty-five years. Not because I didn't want to feel this way. Not because I was scared to be tied down. I had just never found my person. Nothing had ever sparked in me before. No one had ever flicked that cliché switch. My life was safe in Hawaii; small and predictable. Then my brother moved to Washington in pursuit of something greater, leaving me to question what else could be out there for me.

This job was the first I applied for. A foot in the door. A stepping stone in the lake of possibilities, leading me to a grand future on the other side.

But I only got one pace into my journey, and I couldn't be happier that I was pulled back to the shore. I don't need to know what's on the other side of the lake, because what I have already found with Mickey, is more than anything I've had before.

It's new.

It was sudden.

But right is right. I'm old enough to realize that.

Awake in bed, propped up on one arm, I look at how the winter sun is painting the top of Mickey's face. Still asleep, he's turned in towards me, mouth slack, his face half smashed into the sheets he likes to bundle in his

hands then wedge beneath his cheek. His hair is loose, a mess of brown on the pillow and his creamy pale skin. Ponytails are a thing of the past now—even in his tailored suits, he lets it hang free.

Reaching out, I gently lower the covers, revealing his bare arm and the insanely sexy PJs he wears. Pastel pink with little white flowers, the tank is cut so low it shows off the perfect hard peaks of his chest. The shorts are so tiny, so brief, it's hard to keep myself in check when I'm around him, especially considering he refuses to wear underwear beneath them.

He looks his age like this. Like an actual twenty-five-year-old who doesn't have the world on their shoulders, and I love that I can give that to him. In here, in this small studio apartment, he doesn't have to be a boss. His father's rules count for nothing. Mikell is nowhere in this bed. Here, it's just him, Mickey, however he wants to be. Which, right now, happens to be tangled in my sheets, fingers loose and relaxed by his chin.

I used to hate sharing a bed.

After sex, I'd drift to my side of the mattress. But since Mickey started spending the night, I can't get enough of it. He's the clingiest, grumpiest sleep partner I've ever had, and I'll fight anyone who tries to get between us, even in my dreams.

Even if it's his father.

Especially if it's his father.

A horn honks outside, and Mickey gives an angry little grunt. With his eyes still closed, he seeks me out until he's curled in, his nose nuzzling into my chest. I wrap my arms around him and hold him tight.

He mumbles something into my skin, and I stroke down his spine from the base of his neck to the top of his PJs.

The longer I watch him, the more I want to admonish myself for ever wishing for something bigger than this.

A few more minutes pass before he stirs again, his eyelashes fluttering against my pecs as he opens his eyes. His chin digs in as he squints up at me, but then he groans and closes them again.

I bury my nose into his hair. "You alive?"

"No," he slurs. "Too early."

I glance at the clock on my phone. "It's almost eleven."

"Too early," he repeats, shifting to flop a leg over both of mine. His shorts ride up, bearing the bottom of his ass. His strong thigh squashes

against mine as he hooks his foot. Taking advantage, I grope his ass and smirk proudly at the contrast of my tanned hand against his pale flesh.

"Is this why you were always so grumpy towards me?"

"Hmm?" he hums in question.

"I mean, have you never been a morning person, or…?"

Mickey sniffles and opens one eye. "You're the one who had us up past four."

I raise his chin with my index finger. "You were the one who said *I'll be in your bed waiting till you finish work. Then I want you to fuck me unconscious.* So I was just giving you what you wanted, boss."

He scrunches his nose, but his smile is real. "I'm not your boss in here."

"Noted," I say, and squeeze his ass again.

For a few minutes, it's nothing but us breathing with my hand drifting wherever it can reach.

He's fully awake now, but still refusing to give up the game, so I use his parted legs to my benefit, and flip him onto his back. Eyes wide, he stares up, hands gripping my biceps as I push up over him, his legs splayed beneath me.

"You're the neediest man I've ever met."

"Only for you."

Mickey whips his head to the side and presses his lips together to keep from smiling.

I lower myself over him, and trace along his jaw with my nose.

He wraps his arms and legs around me and arches his neck back so I can kiss down his throat.

"You make it too easy to want to stay in bed forever," he moans.

"So don't leave. There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

Mickey sighs contently and rolls his hips. "You know it's ten nights in a row I've slept here now?"

"You say that like it's a problem."

"It's just an observation."

I lift a hand to run through his hair, tucking it behind his ear. "Your bed is bigger, but mine has a Mickey in it."

He closes his eyes, but I see the flush on his cheeks. "You're an idiot."

"Why do you stay here, then?"

He stills for a long moment, then opens his eyes, finds mine, and holds my gaze. "I feel…safer here… Like the rest of the world really doesn't

matter.”

The way he says it, the way his voice dips and almost breaks, I know it’s not just about the walls or the bed. It’s about the way I hold him. The way I see him, even when he’s trying to hide.

“You know we could just get our own place, right?”

He laughs, but I can hear the worry in it. “Right. Let’s see how long it takes for the entire town to know we’re together.”

I run my hand down his arm to find his, then bring it up beside his head before threading our fingers together. “I don’t care who knows what. I just want to wake up with you every morning.”

Mickey squeezes my hand, but then he’s gone again, back behind the wall with a row of suits and a pile of hairbands. “One day,” he says, and I know not to press it.

Then his phone buzzes on the nightstand, popping our bubble.

He curses, reaching for it. The light from the screen pales his face even further, and he quickly says, “It’s my dad,” before answering. “Yeah?”

“Yeah?” I can hear Johannes’s aggravated voice as clear as day. “Where are you? Why is the door locked if your car is here?”

“Tell him you got lucky last night,” I say, sitting up.

Mickey slaps my chest and crawls off the bed. “I… I was here earlier than usual and didn’t want to risk it. I’ll be down in a minute.”

Hanging up, he tosses his phone onto the mattress and stares at me.

“What?” I laugh. “What’s he gonna do? Fire me? I’ll get a job at Walker’s tomorrow, then we can get that place together.”

Mickey tries to look mad, but it doesn’t work.

He knows it would be easier.

But he also knows that sneaking around is fucking fun.

Stepping back, he stretches his arms up, the tank sliding up his ribs to expose the full curve of his waist. After bending side to side, he turns and grabs his ankles, folding himself fully in half. The shorts ride up, his ass, cock and balls in full view through the loose leg holes. Then he slowly slides them down his legs bearing his hole as well.

My dick is instantly hard, but I can’t touch him.

Mickey Askerlund is a manipulative mastermind, and I will willingly worship him for as long as he lets me.

I grunt in frustration, and he glances back at me with a look that says, *that’s what you get for being a shit,* and walks to the dresser. Opening the

drawer I cleared out for him last week, he takes out a pair of blue lace panties, puts them on, then looks at me over his shoulder, daring me to say something.

And I do. Because I have no shame. “I can’t believe you were wearing those under your suits the whole time?”

Without a word, he takes his slacks and steps into them.

The underwear vanishes without a trace beneath the charcoal.

My cock screams.

I could easily come just watching him get dressed.

With his shirt buttoned and tucked in, he disappears into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

“I’m a little hurt to not see your dick in your hand,” he smirks when he reappears.

I shrug. “I can wait one more minute.”

“Fuck,” he exhales with a frustrated shake of his head.

“You’re your own worst enemy,” I tease as I follow him to the door.

“Stay away. You’re dangerous,” he jokes back.

Before Mickey’s hand reaches the handle, I sneak around him to grab onto it. Sandwiched between me and the door, I smooth his hair back over his shoulder, exposing one side of his neck. Again, I breathe in his scent and kiss the spot that drives him crazy before whispering, “Make sure you don’t have a boner while talking to your dad.”

“Fuck you!” he curses, spinning in the small space.

I lazily drag my fingers over his crotch. “Not until later, boss. Duty calls.”

Slumping against the door, Mickey fists his hands, because he’s just as gone for me as I am for him. We’re each other's world, inside, and outside of this tiny apartment.

Secrets can only be kept for so long.

Twisted Oak Valley is small.

Small towns talk.

I raise my hand and wrap my fingers gently around his throat, not to hurt him—never to hurt him—just to remind him that we belong to each other.

“I told you in the beginning Mickey. I know what I like. And I really, *really,* like you.”

THE END

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